

Amazon unveils plan to deliver packages by drone in UK and Italy

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Amazon has announced plans to start delivering packages via drone for the first time in the UK and Italy as it attempts to get its ambitious airborne delivery program off the ground. The American technology giant said on Wednesday that it will introduce autonomous aircraft delivery in Britain and Italy “in late 2024”, a decade after first publicly setting its sights on the skies. It hopes to be delivering 500m packages via drone each year by the end of the decade. The announcement came as Amazon unveiled its new generation of drones at its headquarters in Seattle. David Carbon, Amazon’s vice-president for Prime Air, said: “We are excited to announce the expansion of Prime Air delivery internationally, for the first time outside the US. “We have built a safe, reliable delivery service and have partnered very closely with regulators and communities.” The company’s drone-based service is currently only available within two small sites in California and Texas, where it launched less than a year ago. Amazon intends to add a third American location next year. Amazon first outlined plans to use drones for delivery in 2013, stoking expectations of a new era of even faster package delivery. “It will work, and it will happen, and it’s going to be a lot of fun,” founder Jeff Bezos told 60 Minutes on CBS at the time. But progress has been slow. The company launched its Prime Air service – in Lockeford, California, and College Station, Texas – late last year, and CNBC reported in May that its drones had conducted just 100 deliveries. It had previously set an internal target of 10,000 this year. Activity has since ramped up, according to Amazon. Amazon drones have delivered “thousands” of packages, said Carbon. “And we have thousands of customers.” The company did conduct a small-scale drone delivery test in the UK in 2016. While delivering to customers via drone outside the US will amount to a significant breakthrough, Amazon’s announcement was light on specifics. The company pledged to “start with one site” in the UK and Italy and “expand over time”, but executives declined to comment on where in each country they would launch first. Under a “mapped-out plan”, Carbon told reporters during a briefing that the tech giant would ultimately dispatch drones from a string of locations across the US, UK and Italy. “We will open more facilities over time,” he said. “This is not a market test. Our customers, and frankly our communities, need this type of sustainable service.” The service will “start slow”, Carbon added. “We’re really starting the commercial service. The testing’s been done. We know the drone has been proven.” In comments provided by Amazon, Baroness Vere, the UK transport minister, said: “Amazon’s announcement today is a fantastic example of government and industry coming together to achieve our shared vision for commercial drones to be commonplace in the UK by 2030.” Amazon is far from alone in trying to crack drone deliveries. Other key players in the market include Walmart, the US retail giant, and Alphabet, owner of Google. Strict regulatory requirements have forced operators to climb a steep path. In the UK, the Civil Aviation Authority sees Amazon’s first launch as an opportunity to learn how drones can safely function in the country’s airspace. A “best-case”

adoption scenario laid out in a government policy paper last summer raised the prospect of more than 900,000 drones operating above Britain. Amazon opened the doors of its drone factory on the outskirts of Seattle to the media for the first time on Tuesday, and showed off a new model – the MK30 – which it plans to bring into service in time for 2024's launches in the UK and Italy. Unlike the current drone in use in Lockeford and College Station, which requires a dedicated delivery pad with a QR code to drop off goods to customers, the MK30 does not need such a marker. The aircraft will also be able to fly in light rain, heavier winds and evening, unlike its predecessors, according to Amazon – although how soon it does so is a matter for regulators. In the UK, as it is in the US, the group will be required at first to use observers and ensure its drones do not travel beyond their line of sight – although it hopes this will change before long. Av Zammit, an Amazon spokesman, said: "Our hope and aim is that, hopefully, by the time we get to operating [in countries like the UK], there is a framework to essentially make sure that we are getting to be beyond visual line of sight very quickly." The company is keen to address the safety concerns of regulators and customers. Carbon claimed that ordering an item delivered by MK30 drone would be "hundreds of times safer" than driving to a shop to buy it.