

Drones could deliver medical supplies under UK travel watchdog plans

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Drones could be used for critical medical deliveries, as well as for inspections of railways, power lines and roads, under proposals put forward by the UK's air travel watchdog. The proposals, set out in a consultation published on Monday by the UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), would allow operators to fly their drones safely beyond the line of sight. While some drones have been flying beyond visual line of sight in the UK for several years, these flights have been primarily trials under strict restrictions. Instead, the proposed measures could enable beyond line of sight operations of drones by having them remain at low heights and close to buildings or infrastructure. This means drones can fly where it is anticipated there would be fewer aircraft operating. Kevin Woolsey, the head of remotely piloted aircraft systems at the CAA, said: "Our proposals are a positive step towards unlocking the next stage for drone flying in the UK. Allowing drones to fly beyond the sight of the remote pilot, without placing restrictions on other aircraft in the area, will be a major achievement for UK drone operations. "Safety comes first in everything we do and so we have identified sensible mitigations on where drones can fly using this proposed concept to make sure we maintain levels of safety." The announcement aims to move UK drone operations one step further towards the next stage of beyond visual line of sight flying – potentially paving the way for a future with online shopping deliveries provided by drones. It is also proposed to allow drones to be used on private property, without permission, as long as they do not fly above 15 metres. Industries involved in inspecting infrastructure such as railways, power lines and roads would benefit, as well as farmers and site security, the CAA said. The consultation is one of a number of initiatives from the CAA as part of its UK future flight programme. The programme aims to allow drones to safely share more of the skies with other airspace users. The CAA is working with industry to enable the developments for drones and other new forms of aerial transportation. The consultation will be open for six weeks from Tuesday and is available on the Civil Aviation Authority's website. The proposals include allowing drones to fly in what is called an "atypical air environment". An atypical air environment is a volume of airspace where it can be reasonably anticipated there will be a reduced number of conventionally piloted aircraft due to the proximity of ground infrastructure such as buildings. It is understood that operating within such an airspace is not risk-free and it is proposed that it will be up to the operator to propose how they intend to mitigate other areas of risk, including seeking any relevant approval.