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Defence today took the first step in realising a major White Paper initiative with the release of the Request for Tenders for Army's new Armed Reconnaissance Helicopters.

"Less than two weeks after the White Paper, the release of the Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter Request for Tenders demonstrates a strong commitment by Defence to implementation," said Under Secretary Defence Materiel Mick Roche.

"The Request for Tenders incorporates a range of acquisition reform measures agreed earlier this year.

"Four consortia from the USA and Europe have been invited to submit competitive tenders based on advanced helicopters already in service with other nations, and innovative proposals, including options for private funding, are being encouraged."

A streamlined process using commercial contracting practices will achieve contract signature within 12 months.

Tenderers will have four months to lodge their tenders, and within a further four months the most competitive tenders will be identified.

In the final stage of the process, the best of these tenders will be optimised jointly by the individual tenderers and Defence, with the contract being awarded to the tenderer that offers best value over the 30-year life of the helicopters.

Mr Roche said the helicopters would be used for reconnaissance, surveillance, fire support and escort missions.

Between 20 and 25 helicopters and supporting infrastructure will be acquired, with the aircraft entering service with the Army by December 2004.

"With their enhanced capabilities, these helicopters will become a critical resource for the 21st Century Army," Mr Roche said.

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