Britain and Afghanistan today agreed to continue their Defence relationship long beyond the end of combat operations in 2014 with the signing in Kabul of a Statement of Intent by Defence Secretary Philip Hammond and his Afghan counterpart.

Mr Hammond and Afghan Defence Minister, General Abdul Rahim Wardak, met at the Afghan Ministry of National Defence for talks. They agreed the establishment of a British-inspired and led Officer Academy for the Afghan National Army.

Modelled on the British Army's highly respected officer training college Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the new institution will play a key role in developing Afghanistan's next generation of military leaders – those who will lead crucial, ongoing work to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven for international terrorism.

The UK will provide approximately 75 per cent of the non-Afghan mentoring staff at the new academy, which will be located in the Qargha area of Kabul.

"The Prime Minister announced last summer that the UK will lead the coalition support to the Afghan National Army Officer Academy through the provision of training and planning expertise and mentoring of the Academy leadership and instructors," said Mr Hammond

"I am delighted to have travelled to Kabul to meet President Karzai and General Wardak. Signing the formal agreement brings this great vision a step closer – something that will further cement the already close working relationship between our two ministries and Armed Forces.

"Today, our vital mission supporting and developing the Afghan security forces in Helmand remains the priority. But as we look ahead to 2014, our support to the Afghan forces will change to see the UK assisting in the delivery of high quality training that meets their requirements to produce professional officers and leaders of their own."

As well as holding talks with General Wardak, the Defence Secretary met with President Karzai and held other meetings with senior military personnel, including Commander ISAF, General John R. Allen (USA), and British Deputy Commander of ISAF, Lieutenant General Adrian Bradshaw.

The engagements in the Afghan capital followed a visit to British troops in the southern province of Helmand. Mr Hammond travelled out to Forward Operating Base PB2 in Nar-e Saraj where he joined soldiers on a foot patrol and took part in a local shura with Afghan police commanders.

At Task Force Helmand's HQ in Lashkar Gar he received briefings from senior officers including outgoing Task Force Helmand Commander, Brigadier Patrick Sanders, who has led 20

Armoured Brigade over its six month tour which is now drawing to a close. The Defence Secretary also met with Helmand's Provincial Governor, Mohammad Gulab Mangal.

He visited the scene of Monday's incident at Lashkar Gah. Later the Defence Secretary attended a vigil at Camp Bastion to pay tribute to the three service personnel who recently lost their lives and who today were repatriated home to the UK.