Thank you for your letter of 19 December 2012. Our intention was to provide the Committee with a written brief in the summer of 2013 to cover the interim findings of the Air ISTAR Optimisation Study, our work examining the usefulness of hybrid air vehicles and other developments in maritime surveillance. In light of your request, we will now ensure that update also includes details of cross-government activity, such as the work being done to develop a wider assessment of maritime risk, the role of the National Maritime Information Centre and the consideration of a National Strategy for Maritime Security and the effectiveness of JFC in supporting maritime surveillance. Some of the information provided will necessarily be classified, so a written response will enable greater openness. If the Committee has further questions, we would be happy to provide an oral briefing as well.

With reference to your question on search and rescue (SAR), Defence has provided advice to the Department for Transport during the requirement, bidding and transition process, to make sure that military experience is not lost during the transfer to civilian-led arrangements. The bidding process for the new civilian contract, which has benefitted from military advice at all stages, is in progress, with a final decision expected by the end of January 2013. For the Falklands, Defence will maintain responsibility for SAR in the long-term and the review for its provision after 2016 is being coordinated by the Air and Littoral Maneuvre Capability area, although responsibility is about to transfer to Joint Forces Command. We expect that the User Requirements Document – which is being written with input from the current Falklands support helicopter contractor, the users and deployed Service personnel – will be completed by the end of February 2013 and the process is on schedule.

You also asked for further details on the provision of the airborne early warning capability provided by the Sea King Airborne Surveillance and Control (SKASaC) system and its replacement by the Crowsnest system operating from Mk 2 Merlin helicopters. Following decisions in the last Planning Round, Crowsnest is in the core programme, but its introduction has been deferred. It is therefore planned to come into service in 2020, with a deployable capability following shortly afterwards. In the meantime, the increased risk we will be carrying can be mitigated to some extent by a ship's own
sensors or embarked maritime helicopters (such as Lynx or Merlin). These can provide a modest area of surveillance and warning time of incoming threats, though at a reduced level relative to the capability to be provided by Crowsnest. Land-based aircraft, such as the E-3 Sentry Airborne Early Warning aircraft, have some limitations in terms of range and are not optimised for the role SKASaC fills, but they could also provide long-range radar surveillance in the air environment.

You will appreciate that we do not usually comment publicly on the planned in-service dates of equipment before they have reached their main investment decision. However, I recognise the sustained interest that you and your Committee have taken in this issue and the wider speculation there has been on this point and wanted to confirm the position to you in advance of any public comment by the Department.

THE RT HON ANDREW ROBATHAN MP