Dear James,

Thank for your letter dated 2 April seeking further clarification on my statement to the House on 6 March 2014 and my letter of 31 March on the decision to refuel HMS Vanguard.

I should first clarify that the decision to refuel HMS Vanguard was not made on the basis that fuel was being used more rapidly than previously planned: the rate of consumption of the fuel is not the issue. The decision was taken because the prototype reactor core at the Naval Reactor Test Establishment at Dounreay has a very small area of cladding around the nuclear fuel that is not operating as well as it should. We do not yet know the root cause of this issue. Until we have more information, it is prudent to assume that it could be age-related and therefore that the operating life of the core might be shorter than previously assumed.

This led to my decision to refuel HMS Vanguard, as it has the oldest core in an operational submarine, during her next deep maintenance period, which starts in 2015. This is a precautionary decision that mitigates risk to deterrent operations by avoiding disruption to the submarine programme. I stress that there is no evidence of any similar issue with the reactors on board HMS Vanguard or any of our submarines.

On the subject of decommissioning the reactor at the Naval Reactor Test Establishment, we will shortly make a decision about whether more will be learned by continuing to run the reactor at Dounreay until its intended decommissioning date in 2015, or by shutting it early and thus being able to examine the core earlier than we otherwise would. That decision will be made on the basis of the best scientific and technical advice. As I said on 6 March, I will alert the House once that decision has been made.

The Rt Hon James Arbuthnot MP
Chairman
House of Commons Defence Committee
I hope this answers your questions and further clarifies the MOD's position.

I am copying this letter to the Shadow Defence and Scotland Secretaries.

THE RT HON PHILIP HAMMOND MP