Dear Julian,

The House of Commons Defence Committee's observations and recommendations following the review of the F-35 Lightning Programme highlighted the need to provide reassurance and build support for the programme within the public. As we move in to an exciting period for the programme, this is a good opportunity to provide you with an overview of how the programme is progressing and the upcoming milestones. These underpin a public communications plan being developed by the Directorate of Defence Communications (DDC).

In general terms, the Programme has again achieved a huge amount in the last Quarter. The Lightning Operation Centre building is complete and in use, flight clearance for a fourth UK airframe to undertake operational test has been granted, and our 15th airframe (BK-15) has been received. Despite a taut schedule, the Senior Responsible Owner, Air Commodore Taylor, remains confident that progress is being made at an adequate pace to not threaten achievement of Initial Operating Capability in the land-based operational role in December 2018.

I know you are aware that the Lighting Force has been building up alongside the US Marines at Beaufort in South Carolina. Royal Air Force and Royal Navy personnel have been operating UK Lightning in the USA for more than five years. That plan is on track and I am very pleased to inform you that 617 Squadron (the famous Dambusters) will very shortly stand-up on 17 April 2018 as our first frontline F-35 Lightning Squadron. An event in Washington DC is planned to mark the Squadron formation, coordinated with wider RAF Centenary celebrations in the US.

617 Squadron will initially continue its work-up alongside the US Marines in South Carolina for a short time while final infrastructure preparations are completed and delivered at RAF Marham. We are also actively considering further engagement opportunities for the Lightning Force during the Summer in this the RAF100 Centenary year.

The Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP
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617 Squadron are planned to formally arrive into their permanent Squadron Accommodation at RAF Marham during the first week of August 2018. I am certain that you and the general public will quickly welcome the Squadron. 617 Squadron will be manned jointly by the RAF and the Royal Navy. In all around 130 Service personnel with over 170 of their dependents will be returning from the US to RAF Marham.

It is planned that the Squadron will then continue their operational work-up in the UK and will achieve Initial Operating Capability for land-based operations by the end of the year. Separately, in August 2018 the Lightning Integrated Test Force will start flying trials on HMS Queen Elizabeth. As the most appropriately equipped aircraft, 2 F-35B Lightning aircraft from the F-35 Program Integrated Test Force (ITF) at Naval Air Station Patuxent River will be utilised to ensure that all test requirements are met. The ITF is a combined US, UK and industry team that owns and operates the F-35 Program test aircraft. This is a vital test and integration period to develop and test operating procedures that will be a major step towards Initial Operating Capability (Maritime) for the Lightning Air System in 2020 which will support declaration of Carrier Strike Initial Operating Capability in the same year.

It remains our plan that a proportion of trained personnel and UK aircraft will remain embedded within the Marine Corps training squadron at Beaufort, until the formation and subsequent return to the UK of 207 Squadron, the Operational Conversion Unit during 2019. With the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review we accelerated the purchase of Lightning aircraft to generate the second front-line squadron 809 Naval Air Squadron from 2023, delivering a carrier strike capability.

DDC, the UK and US Programme teams, along with industry partners, continue to work up a robust communications plan which features a regular drumbeat of information about the Lightning platform. These are centred upon the key milestones and events outlined above. Within these events there will be an opportunity for yourself, and members of the committee, to understand that the F-35 Lightning programme is addressing previous areas of concern and making every effort to communicate the many positive aspects of the programme to the British public as it enters onto an operational footing.

Yours sincerely,

Guto Bebb MP