Dear Gavin,

Thank you for your swift response of 14 January to my letter on drone activity at civilian airports.

The Committee was very much surprised and concerned to learn that Defence has no contingency plan to respond to such incidents. The point is taken about the responsibility of airport operators and indeed other Government departments. Nonetheless, the Gatwick incident is a clear demonstration of the disruption which individual actors can create in mass transport and major national infrastructure systems, and the speed with which such disruption is able to take hold.

The fact, as you describe, that Defence officials have been involved in counter-UAV work for a number of years, but that a national counter-UAV response is only now being contemplated, suggests that cross-government awareness of the importance of this issue has been poor. It says little for bodies such as the National Security Council and the Civil Contingences Secretariat, which are supposed to sit at the centre of government to co-ordinate these activities.

On the issue of the vulnerability of military airfields and other Defence installations, we would have thought that the incident involving a drone being landed on the deck of HMS Queen Elizabeth in 2017 would have led to robust counter-UAV measures being in place to deal with this threat, rather than options only now being explored after a major incident elsewhere.

In an age of renewed state-based competition and continuing terrorist threat where critical national infrastructure is a primary target, a more proactive approach to contingency planning is needed. We hope that there will be a renewed focus on this in Defence, and in the appropriate cross-Government structures.

I would be grateful if you could indicate how you propose to take this agenda forward in the case of your department and in co-operation with other Government departments. This will be a matter of
interest to the Committee at the oral evidence session we will be holding with you on 22 January, so a response prior to that session is requested.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

[Name]