Many thanks for your letter dated 16 January 2019 regarding drone activity in the UK.

As mentioned in my previous correspondence Defence does not have a specific contingency plan to respond to drone incursions at airports in the UK, as the responsibility to respond to such incidents falls to individual airport operators and the relevant regional police force. As you would expect, however, we have mature and effective processes in place to ensure the timely provision of Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) in circumstances where the Civil Authorities feel they do not have the necessary capability to respond effectively. This mechanism, known as the MACA process, was enacted on 20 December following a request from Sussex police to support their response at Gatwick airport. Once the request was received, we were able to deploy and have operational relevant capability within 6 hours.

The Home Office, as a matter of priority, are driving forward a cross-Government work programme on Counter Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (C-UAV). This work programme will consider inter alia the national requirement for C-UAV and how this capability can be most effectively maintained and employed within the UK. It will also consider how to most effectively provide adequate UAV protection to fixed sites of Critical National Infrastructure (CNI), as well as the potential requirement for deployable platforms to provide protection to large gatherings.
Over recent years Defence has invested significant effort into identifying the best C-UAV capability for our military requirements. Following extensive research, development and field testing orders were placed in 2018 to provide a robust and highly effective deployable C-UAV capability which, once received, will provide significant protection to our Armed Forces operating overseas. However, it must be noted that a capability that has been selected to best fit Defence’s deployed needs may not be the optimal solution for commercial airports operating within the UK. With regards to the specific incident involving HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH, please rest assured that a protective capability is in place; however, I know that you will appreciate that the specifics of the capability cannot be discussed in this correspondence.

I would be happy to discuss these issues with you further at the Defence Committee oral evidence session on 22 January 2019.

THE RT HON GAVIN WILLIAMSON CBE MP
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]

[Signature]