Dear Chair

PROVISION OF AIR CADET GLIDING

Thank you for your letter of 18 February 2019 on the provision of Air Cadet Gliding. The facts as you lay out in your letter are correct. The Ministry of Defence has been open and honest with Parliament, the wider Air Cadet community and the general public on the challenges which both the RAF and Industry have encountered in the Glider Recovery Programme since April 2014. The department has had to make some tough decisions as a realism measure and these have been fully communicated to Parliamentary through Written Ministerial Statements and a Westminster Hall Debate. However, it is my firm belief that, as I will detail below, the revisions of the Air Cadet Aerospace offer which we set out to Parliament in December 2017 are now delivering clear benefits for our Air Cadets. The new offer provides an appropriate balance of gliding, flying, simulation, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and front line air experience, making best use of the assets that the RAF have to offer, whilst also looking to the future.

You asked for additional clarification on a number of points, which I will address in turn below. Many of these are already a matter of public record, as I will detail.

- **Why the glider fleet was allowed to get into such a state that it had to be taken out of service and what action, if any, has been taken with those responsible?**

The Ministry of Defence’s openness in our reporting means that the airworthiness issues with the glider fleets discovered in 2014 are fully a matter of public record. At the time thorough analysis of how and why the fleet was allowed to degrade to such an extent was undertaken, which included taking advice from MOD lawyers. This analysis found that the degradation of the fleet was not attributable to one individual or organisation; it had slowly deteriorated over many years across the whole enterprise, both in MOD and with our maintenance
organisation, Serco. As you note we fully acknowledged that among the factors identified was a lack of an effective quality management system over many years. You may be aware that in 2009 the then Secretary of State for Defence fully accepted the recommendations of the Haddon-Cave Review into Airworthiness Management across Defence. It was as a result of the lessons learned from the Haddon-Cave Review that a new Continuing Airworthiness Management team was formed within our gliding headquarters in early 2014. It was that newly-formed team which conducted the thorough audit of airworthiness practices and oversight processes that had been in place over many years and which discovered the complex airworthiness issues.

However, as the contract with our maintenance organisation was to provide the Air Cadet Organisation with serviceable airframes, a sum of £1,130,321.42 was withheld against the Serco contract for failure to provide aircraft to fly. This was broken down as follows:

- £591,447.32 for contract year 7 (01/04/14 – 31/03/15)
- £538,874.10 for contract year 8 (01/04/15 – 31/03/16)
- Total: £1,130,321.42

This withheld amount was formally captured as an amendment within the pricing schedule to the contract. Serco signed their acceptance of this on 14 March 2017.

- **The progress of the glider recovery programme**

While gliders can be seen as very simple basic airframes, their Glass Reinforced Plastic (GRP) construction makes maintenance and repair requirements far more complex than many of our larger aircraft fleets. For aircraft made of metal, if damage occurs you can usually replace the affected panel without any impact on the wider structural integrity of the airframe. GRP is moulded into complex shapes and its structural integrity is evenly distributed across the whole airframe. Consequently, where damage occurs, a technical query need to be staffed through the full airworthiness chain. Usually an individual and unique repair scheme needs to be designed by the original equipment manufacturer (Grob Gmbh) to ensure the new GRP is bonded and cured to seamlessly maintain the wider airframe structural integrity. This leads to complex and time-consuming processes to enact individual repairs which remains the case now. We faced many challenges with Industry’s capacity to undertake a task of this scale early on in the programme but have since invested in an efficient and consistent recovery programme for the Viking fleet.

Throughout Europe glider maintenance and airworthiness advice is undertaken primarily by very small and medium enterprises and our 2014 fleet of 146 Viking and Vigilant was by far the largest fleet of gliders in Europe. When the glider recovery programme started, Serco employed fewer than 40 people to deliver it, from management and oversight roles down to the shop floor. This has since been uplifted. While Southern Sailplanes, who were subsequently contracted, are one of the European leaders in civil glider maintenance they
had a total company manpower of fewer than 15 people. Additionally, Grob Gmbh stopped manufacturing gliders in the mid-1990s and technical queries and repairs were handled by a very small group of company archivists. To this day recovery remains a labour-intensive task for a small cadre of very specialised maintenance personnel. As a result of this compact market, and as published in our Written Ministerial Statement of 10 March 2016 (HCWS605), “operational, technical and commercial negotiations with a range of aerospace leaders in this field failed to find a value for money approach to successfully repair and recover all 146 gliders. Consequently, a comprehensive Air Cadet Organisation review has proposed restructuring this activity.”

As of today, there are ten Volunteer Gliding Squadrons (VGS) and six Aerospace Ground Schools (AGS). Since the pause on glider flying in 2014, six VGS have returned to flight and are training cadets in the air and with Ground School elements: 621VGS, 622VGS, 632VGS, 637VGS, 644VGS and 661VGS. These units and the Central Gliding School flew 14,235 launches with the Viking fleet during 2018. In addition, the Vigilant fleet flew 138 hours in 2018 before being retired from service in May. A seventh Squadron, 645VGS, has returned to flight but is currently undertaking Instructor Conversion Training to the Viking glider having previously delivered cadet training on the Vigilant motor glider.

The three remaining Squadrons, 614VGS, 615VGS and 626VGS, are awaiting return to flight. Despite that, and along with the six AGS, they are continuing to train cadets in ground school elements and Part Task Trainers (simulators). The Glider recovery programme is due to complete on 31 March 2019, which will enable these remaining VGS to begin their return to flight programmes including Instructor training requirements.

- An explanation of the arrangements for the move of 614VGS

In line with the other VGS, all flying activity ceased on 614VGS when the glider fleet paused in 2014. The aerodrome at Wethersfield, then home to 614VGS, has not been actively operated from since. On 07 November 2016 the MOD announced that the Wethersfield site would be disposed of and the primary users of the site, the Ministry of Defence Police, moved to Bassingbourn Barracks.

It was originally anticipated that 614VGS would remain at Wethersfield until the estimated date for site disposal in 2020 and would restart operations from there. To support that intent DIO conducted a full survey of the aerodrome condition which highlighted a number of issues with the condition of the aerodrome. The survey indicated that the runway required immediate substantial investment in the region of £2M to resume flying activities and that key buildings, including the hangar and operations building, would need refurbishment. It also determined that the overnight portacabin accommodation for cadets was not compliant with new child safeguarding regulations and would have to be replaced with permanent accommodation. The estimated costs of these works, when balanced against the imminent disposal of the site, meant that the investment was not considered to be value for money by
Air Command and an alternative site for 614VGS was identified at Robertson Barracks Swanton Morley. This aerodrome remains suitable for glider operation and is inside the regional footprint catchment area for the Air Cadet units it supports.

There are always mixed views when a unit has to move to make more efficient use of the Defence Estate, especially for those units manned by valued volunteers. Many of the 614VGS volunteers will have longer journeys to the new location while many of the cadets, especially those based in Norfolk and Suffolk, will have dramatically reduced travel times to the new location. It has been repeatedly shown that the adult volunteer cadre of the VGS is flexible and resilient to overcome the challenges of establishing at a new location and that, when carefully managed, they continue to provide high levels of professionalism and leadership for the benefit and inspiration of generations of Air Cadets.

- What plans the MOD has to ensure that the RAF has effective provision for attracting and developing Air Cadets in the future?

On 14 December 2017 we set out in a Written Ministerial Statement (HCWS350) our strategy to attract and develop Air Cadets under the ‘Air Cadet Aerospace Offer’. This set out that alongside gliding and flying, in line with wider RAF transformation, we are modernising to provide wider aerospace and STEM experience and qualifications that benefit both cadets and industry in emerging aerospace technology areas.

This strategy has received considerable investment and sponsorship and is being very well received by staff and cadets alike. In addition to improved aerospace-focussed annual camps and changes to the cadet syllabus in space and cyber to bring in exciting opportunities to undertake practical training, the RAF is partnering with the Aviation Skills Partnership to support the development of state-of-the-art Aerospace Academies. The first of these, the Aaron Aerospace Academy, is due to break ground at RAF Syerston later this year. This facility will be partnered by academia and business to provide young people with the opportunity to study practical aviation-related subjects from GCSE up to degree level; students will be primed with accepted industry qualifications to take up jobs in the aviation industry ranging from pilots and air traffic controllers to engineers and cabin crew. The RAF Air Cadets will have access to the facilities and programmes with a view to inspiring them in STEM and career choices.

I hope this information has been useful.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

STEPHEN LOVEGROVE