



Department for
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The Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP
Chair
Science and Technology Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

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Dear Norman

Thank you for your letter of 22 February 2018 to my colleague the Minister of State for Security and Economic Crime regarding undersea communication cables (subsea cables). The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is the lead department for telecoms policy, including the security and resilience of the UK's networks and subsea cables and I am responding on his behalf.

You have asked for the Government's assessment of the report published by Policy Exchange, 'Undersea Cables: Indispensable, insecure', specifically its analysis of risks and the feasibility of the recommendations it proposes. The Government recognises the essential role that subsea cables play in a successful internet based economy and the potential risks that may impact that. As the report outlines, around 97% of the world's communications are transmitted via subsea cables, the locations of which are publicly available. Subsea cables face risk at sea, on land and in cyberspace and the report makes an important contribution to discussion of this issue. The Government shares some of the concerns outlined in it and ultimately some of the report's findings and recommendations will help to inform them of our work.

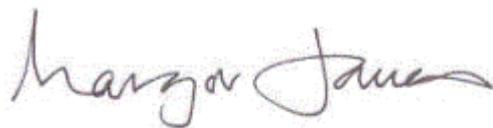
You also ask for details of which government departments are responsible for addressing each of the main issues involved and the work they are undertaking in this area. My Department works collaboratively with industry and other government departments including the Cabinet Office, Ministry of Defence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Home Office, the National Cyber Security Centre and the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure in leading a programme to improve the security and resilience of the UK's Telecommunications sector, including the Submarine Fibre Optic Cables infrastructure. Telecoms is one of the UK's 13 critical sectors and across all of those there is ongoing work to track current and evolving threats and improve our ability to withstand them. This includes work to mitigate the impacts of an incident against critical communication infrastructure and to identify any vulnerability in that infrastructure. We also engage with our international partners, where appropriate, to mitigate risks and enhance resilience.

With regard to the technological aspects of the cables' vulnerabilities, it is worth highlighting that there is considerable resilience in the UK's network of undersea cables and this is kept regularly under review. As the Policy Exchange report outlines, there are a number of incidents per year in the UK of subsea cables being accidentally damaged, with little, often zero, impact on internet or telephony services to the end customer. The UK is well served by undersea cables meaning that there is sufficient resilience in the network should any be damaged. There are established mechanisms in place to monitor and protect subsea cables from incursion by seabed users. There are also established mechanisms in place to repair cables where any incursion – accidental or otherwise – may occur. We are also actively working with industry to develop tools to enhance incident reporting of cable incursions.

All states are well aware that any deliberate attempt to interfere with cables infrastructure would have wide repercussions, including for their own interests, and would be regarded as a hostile act. However, we are not complacent. The National Security Council looks at all threats to the UK's infrastructure and we continually assess options to boost the resilience of subsea cables in close cooperation with the cable operators themselves.

I am grateful to the committee for its interest in this issue.

Yours ever

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margot James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

MARGOT JAMES MP
Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries