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James Gray MP  
Chair, Environmental Audit Sub-Committee  
on Polar Research  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Date: 18 August 2023

Dear James,

I am writing as Minister responsible for the Polar Regions, to follow up on questions raised during the Environmental Audit Sub-Committee on Polar Research's evidence session with Jane Rumble, Head of FCDO Polar Regions Department, on 17 July 2023.

As I said in the House during FCDO oral questions on 2 May 2023, the Government very much welcomes the work of the Sub-Committee. Since the launch of the new UK Arctic Policy Framework earlier this year, we have been working across the whole of government to strengthen the UK's international engagement on the Arctic.

I understand my colleague the Science Minister has written to you separately, including in response to questions regarding the impacts of Arctic climate change for the UK, and the levels of funding for UK scientific research (separate from logistics and infrastructure) in the Arctic and Antarctic.

Anna McMorris MP asked about the appointment of a **Special Representative for Climate Change** in the FCDO. Whilst an immediate successor to the Special Representative has not been appointed, our resource and senior representation within the FCDO on climate and environment has grown significantly in recent years. Climate change remains an area of utmost importance to this government and to the Foreign Secretary.

You asked about the possible implications of changes in Norwegian environmental legislation for the conduct of scientific research in **Svalbard**. The UK is committed to working with our Norwegian partners to ensure the most effective protection of Svalbard's environment and the continued delivery of environmental research of the highest quality at Ny-Ålesund.

While we understand the rationale for the proposed amendments to the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act, we share many of the concerns raised by the NERC Arctic Office in their response to the 2022 consultation process. This includes the practical impact which the regulations may have in making it more difficult to carry out scientific research from Ny-Ålesund, when this is already carefully and closely managed.

We have raised these concerns at senior level through our Embassy in Oslo, both with the Norwegian government and the authorities in Svalbard.

Barry Gardiner MP asked about **UK cooperation with Russia** on the Arctic. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the UK Government has suspended all engagement with the Russian authorities unless absolutely necessary to preserve vital UK foreign policy and security interests. The UK Government is clear that there can be no normalisation in our relationship with Russia while it threatens our allies. We do, however, need to maintain a diplomatic framework that allows us to: keep open a channel for crisis communication and space for diplomacy; defend our values; and fulfil our responsibility to communicate on international security issues with a fellow P5 member.

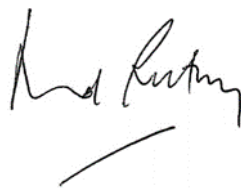
Barry Gardiner MP also raised the question of rights of passage in the Arctic under **the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**. The Government set out in the Integrated Review Refresh 2023 that the UK will maintain an active role in upholding freedom of navigation and reinforcing the centrality of UNCLOS.

Under Article 234 of UNCLOS, a Coastal State has the right to adopt and enforce laws and regulations for the prevention, reduction and control of marine pollution from vessels in ice-covered areas within the limits of its exclusive economic zone, where particularly severe climatic conditions and the presence of ice covering such areas for most of the year create obstructions or exceptional hazards to navigation, and pollution of the marine environment could cause major harm to or irreversible disturbance of the ecological balance. Such laws and regulations must be non-discriminatory and have "due regard" to navigation and the protection of the marine environment.

The UK recognises that, as an Arctic State, Russia has a significant presence in the region, but we expect Russia to comply with international law. The UK will continue to work with our partners and Allies to protect our interests.

I wish you well for the remainder of the Sub-Committee's inquiry, and I look forward to reading your report in due course.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Rutley', with a horizontal line underneath.

**David Rutley MP**  
**Minister for Americas and the Caribbean**