



Ministry
of Defence



Telephone 020 7218 9000 (Switchboard)

JEREMY QUIN MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE PROCUREMENT

MSU/4/8/1/2/ap

28th February 2022

Dear Thomas,

Following the update on the F-35B Lightning (Ltng) Programme in June 2021, I believe you are well informed of the recent achievement of the Initial Operational Capability (Maritime) milestone which has resulted in the successful Carrier Strike Group (CSG) deployment last year. Despite the loss of one aircraft on take-off which is currently being investigated, this deployment of the F-35B front-line unit, 617 Squadron, witnessed the completion of over 1000 Ltng deck landings and over 2000 flying hours alongside the United States Marine Corps (USMC). 617 Squadron also executed operational missions in the Middle East in support of Operation SHADER, flying alongside our Typhoons as part of the coalition effort against Daesh. While in the Far East, the Squadron engaged in Exercise PACIFIC CROWN - a joint airborne exercise with Japan and other regional allies, further demonstrating intrinsic international interoperability offered by the ever-expanding F-35 global fleet. This was further highlighted with Italian F-35Bs landing on HMS Queen Elizabeth during the deployment.

Marking the first simultaneous deployment of UK F-35Bs to both Queen Elizabeth Class Carriers, the UK Ltng Operational Conversion Unit (207 Squadron) deployed to HMS Prince of Wales while the CSG was also underway. Whilst operating from both carriers simultaneously is an impressive demonstration of our capability, we are closely monitoring the impact of deploying the Operational Conversion Unit in this manner prior to the creation of our second frontline squadron. Our priority subject to operational requirements remains training our people within our growing Force.

As we move towards delivery of Full Operating Capability, Lightning Force (LF) growth remains the biggest concern in the Programme. LF growth is slower than planned due to pressures within the RAF and RN workforce coupled with the complexity of qualifying our personnel on Lightning, which is delaying LF expansion to generate a second Front-Line Squadron. Work is ongoing to establish the optimum point for the LF to deliver this second unit as a result of this slower LF growth.

The Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood MP
Chair, Defence Committee
Committee Office
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Synthetics

Linked to the RAF's ambition to improve training while also reducing financial and environmental costs through the increased use of synthetic training devices, the LF embarked four scaled-down flight simulators on HMS Queen Elizabeth for the CSG period. This exciting first allowed RAF, RN and USMC pilots to train to all Lightning mission sets in a contained, simulated environment. This is a novel way to use synthetics and ensures that our pilots do not lose a significant amount of skill and expertise in executing challenging mission sets when deployed.

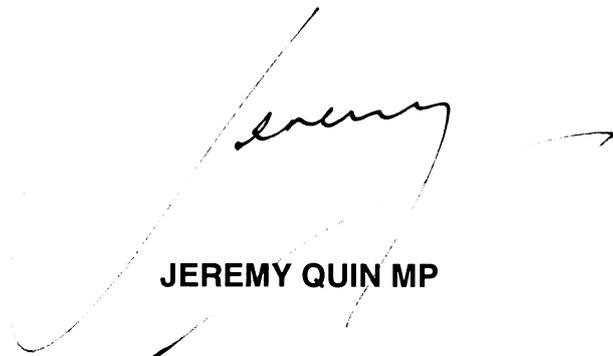
Programme Costs

This year has been no exception to the ongoing pressure on Programme costs within Lightning. The United States F-35 Joint Program Office (JPO) in consultation with the UK Programme has been implementing cost control measures for all Partner Nations to address cost growth in the forecast, and concurrently, MOD is pursuing even greater cost reductions to achieve a more balanced 10-year profile. This work is ongoing and is aligned with the Defence Secretary's direction that Programme costs must reduce.

Furthermore, following the Defence Secretary's statement to the Committee in June last year relating to UK weapon integration on Lightning, the JPO has since released a revised Air System Delivery Schedule that has realised improved integration timelines for UK weapons, specifically Meteor and SPEAR Cap 3.

Finally, Headquarters Air Command have continued to analyse the direction from the Integrated Review to further invest in the F-35 Programme beyond aircraft 48. Development of a viable option for 'Tranche 2' acquisition is underway to ensure we achieve optimum value for money whilst preserving the long-term capability ambition that is aligned to the Carrier Enabled Power Projection Programme.

With best wishes



JEREMY QUIN MP