

Statement to parliament: Drones: consultation response, 7 January 2019

I should like to make a statement about the action the government are taking on our future policy on drones.

The disruption caused by drones to flights at Gatwick airport last month was deliberate, irresponsible and calculated, as well as illegal. It meant days of chaos and uncertainty for over 100,000 passengers at Christmas, one of the busiest times of the year. Carefully planned holidays were disrupted, long-expected reunions between friends and relatives missed. Families were forced to spend hours at an airport, not knowing if or when they would reach their destinations – completely unacceptable and utterly illegal. I pay tribute to all at Gatwick and other airports who worked very hard to make sure people did get away, albeit belatedly, for their Christmas breaks, and I thank all those in the defence world and the police who worked hard to get the airport back together again, and of course Sussex police are now leading the investigation into this criminal activity.

I am clear that, when caught, those responsible should face the maximum possible custodial sentence for this hugely irresponsible criminal act, and I want to assure the House that my department is working extremely closely with airports, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Civil Aviation Authority and the police to make sure our national airports are fully prepared to manage any repeat of what was an unprecedented incident. I spoke personally to the heads of the major UK airports before Christmas, and later this week the aviation minister, Baroness Sugg, will meet them again for an update on progress. In the meantime the Ministry of Defence remains on standby to deal with any further problems at Gatwick or any other airport if required.

This incident was a stark example of why we must continue to ensure drones are used safely and securely in the UK. Today (7 January 2019) I am publishing the outcome of our recent [consultation, "Taking flight: the future of drones in the UK."](#) We received over 5,000 responses to that consultation reflecting a broad range of views. Those responses underlined the importance of balancing the UK's world-leading position in aviation safety and security with supporting the development of this emerging industry. The government are taking action to ensure that passengers can have confidence that their journeys will not be disrupted in future, aircraft can safely use our key transport hubs, and criminals misusing drones can be brought to justice.

The UK is where technology companies want to build their businesses, invest in innovation and use science and engineering to bring immense benefits to this country. Drones are at the forefront of these technological advances and are already being used in the UK to great effect. Our emergency search and rescue services use drones on a regular basis. Drones can also reduce risks for workers in hazardous sectors such as the oil and gas industries, and this technology is also driving more efficient ways of working in many other

sectors, from delivering medicines to assisting with building work.

However, the Gatwick incident has reinforced the fact that it is crucial that our regulatory and enforcement regime keeps pace with rapid technological change. □We have already taken some big steps towards building a regulatory system for this new sector. It is already an offence to endanger aircraft. Drones must not be flown near people or property and have to be kept within visual line of sight. Commercial users are able to operate drones outside of these rules, but only when granted CAA permission after meeting strict safety conditions.

Education is also vital to ensure everyone understands the rules about drone use. That is why the CAA has been running its long-standing [Dronesafe campaign](#) and Dronecode guide – work that is helping to highlight these rules to the public. And on [30 July last year \(2018\) we introduced new measures that barred drones from flying above 400 feet and within 1 km of protected airport boundaries](#). In addition, we have introduced and passed legislation that will mean that from November all drone operators must register and all drone pilots complete a competency test.

However, we now intend to go further. Today's measures set out the next steps needed to ensure that drones are used in a safe and secure way and that the industry is accountable. At the same time these steps will ensure that we harness the benefits that drones can bring to the UK economy.

A common theme in those 5,000 consultation responses was the importance of the enforcement of safety regulations. The government share that view. The majority of drone users fly safely and responsibly, but we must ensure that the police have the right powers to deal with illegal use. We will therefore shortly be introducing new police powers. These include allowing the police to request evidence from drone users where there is reasonable suspicion of an offence being committed, as well as enabling the police to issue fixed penalty notices for minor drone offences. Those new powers will help to ensure effective enforcement of the rules. They will provide an immediate deterrent to those who might misuse drones or attempt to break the law.

My department has been working closely with the Home Office on the legislative clauses that will deliver these changes. It is of course crucial that our national infrastructure, including airports and other sites such as prisons and energy plants, are also adequately protected to prevent incidents such as that at Gatwick. We must also ensure that the most up-to-date technology is available to detect, track and potentially disrupt drones that are being used illegally, so we have also consulted on the further use of counter-drone technology. Those consultation responses will now be used by the Home Office to develop an appropriate means of using that technology in the UK.

Of course, aviation and passenger safety is at the heart of everything we do. While airlines and airports welcomed our recent airport drone restriction measures, they also asked for the current airport rules to be amended in order to better protect the landing and take-off paths of aircraft. We have listened to those concerns, and we have been working with the CAA and NATS to

develop the optimum exclusion zone that will help to meet those requirements. It is important to stress that any restriction zone would not have prevented a deliberate incident such as that at Gatwick. However, it is right that proportionate measures should be in place at airports to protect aircraft and to avoid potential conflict with legitimate drone activity. We will therefore introduce additional protections around airports, with a particular focus on protected exclusion zones from runway ends, alongside increasing the current aerodrome traffic zone restrictions around airports. Drone pilots wishing to fly within these zones must do so only with permission from the aerodrome air traffic control. We will amend the Air Navigation Order 2016 to implement these changes.

I want to address some of the rather ill-judged comments that have been made by Labour Members. Let me remind them of three things. First, the event at Gatwick airport was a deliberate criminal act that can carry a sentence of life imprisonment. We can pass new laws until the cows come home, but that does not stop people breaking them, and the law is as tough as is necessary to punish the perpetrators of an attack such as this. Secondly, this was an entirely new type of challenge. It is noteworthy that, since the events at Gatwick, we have been approached by airports around the world for our advice on how to handle something similar. Thirdly, the issue was solved only by the smart and innovative use of new technology. For security reasons, I am not going to give the House details of how this was achieved, but I want to extend my thanks to the Ministry of Defence for moving rapidly to put a new kind of response into the field.

There is no question but that lessons have to be learned from what happened at Gatwick. Passengers have to be able to travel without fear of their trips being disrupted by malicious drone use. Airports must be prepared to deal with incidents of this type, and the police need the proper powers to deal with drone offences. We must also be ready to harness the opportunities and benefits that the safe use of drones can bring. The measures I have announced today in response to the consultation will take us forward on that front, and I commend this statement to the House.