



Ministry  
of Defence

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Dear Hywel,

It was a pleasure to see you, albeit virtually for the Westminster Hall debate on '*Noise Pollution and Military Aviation*' on 10 March. Further to your Parliamentary Questions and other correspondence I undertook to write with more information on issues raised during the session.

You asked a number of questions, which I will try to address in turn:

**1. What proportion of Texan flights take place respectively over northwest Wales, the Isle of Man and the Lake District)? Is that proportion as planned?**

While there will be variations based on weather conditions or aircraft availability, on average, approximately 67% of Texan flights from RAF Valley will usually take place over northwest Wales or transit through Northwest Wales while heading to train over other parts of the UK, 18% around the Isle of Man (IoM) or Lake District and 15% specifically in the vicinity of RAF Valley. This proportion is as planned.

You will know that there was a period when all 67% of flights over northwest Wales were over land. Currently the NW Wales traffic is roughly split 2/3 over land and 1/3 over water. The proportion of over water flights will grow further as the Universal Water Activated Release System (UWARS) is fitted to all aircraft but, as you know, there will always be residual flying over land traffic to meet essential training requirements or when occasional rough seas force us inland.

**2. Is there any way of lessening the noise from the Texan further in the short term, for example by varying the height at which the aircraft are flown?**

Flights from RAF Valley are normally between 5000 to 15000 feet above sea level, driven by the weather and the exercise being performed: as an aircraft climbs higher, aircraft performance decreases, which restricts the training we can safely perform.

Noise levels at ground level do not vary as much with the height of the aircraft, as they do with lateral displacement from the observer, but I can assure you that RAF Valley already takes a number of measures to minimise disturbance on the local communities –

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these include mandating that pilots avoid flying aerobatics over built up areas; active planning to spread the use of airspace as widely and equitably as practicable; and conducting flying in waves, whereby Texans are only airborne from RAF Valley for 50% of the flying period.

It is not possible to apply noise suppression methods to military aircraft without incurring flight safety penalties.

**3. What are the possibilities of halting, varying or even reducing the manoeuvres performed in training, including the ‘dive and climb’?**

Manoeuvres performed in training will always be determined by the training requirement, ensuring our pilots are prepared for any eventuality they may face on operations. As I said in the debate, MOD will always seek to act as the best possible neighbour to the communities we serve. When planning its daily flying programme RAF Valley will always strive to honour the ‘good neighbour’ commitment: for example, they will usually programme Hawk Fast Jet Basic Fighter Manoeuvre training by multiple aircraft (colloquially known as ‘dogfighting’), and which involves high power settings and dynamic manoeuvres, into the overwater areas to minimise disturbance, as far as practicable.

**4. Whatever changes are made to the operation of the Texan aircraft, can assurances be made that such changes would not lead to a reduction in work for ground staff at the Valley?**

Any changes to the operation of the Texan aircraft would be carefully assessed on a case-by-case basis, against a range of factors. The MOD is proud to support hundreds of skilled jobs at RAF Valley, and many thousands more across Wales and the rest of the UK, and remains committed to a long-term presence on Ynys Môn.

**5. What progress has been achieved so far on the improvements to the Texan? Is there an end date?**

As you know, improvements are being made in three areas: to the harness, the life preserver and life raft. Full fleet embodiment of the UWARS for the harness is underway. This work began in January 2021. We aim to have it completed by the end of this year, but are working closely with the contractor to identify opportunities within the supply chain to expedite this work as far as possible. As per my letter of 26 February 2021, a modification to integrate a water activated light on the Mustang Life Preserver is now fully embodied on all life preservers, enabling night flying over the sea, and the current life raft remains safe in all but the roughest seas (sea state 5 and above with waves greater than 2.5 metres). Challenges remain on the assessment of life raft options for flight over the roughest seas, but this work continues as a priority.

**6. What was the process of approval for the purchase of the Texan aircraft?**

The Military Flying Training System (MFTS) programme, including the adoption of the Texan T1 aircraft, was the subject of the Ministry of Defence's usual approvals processes, including consideration by the Department's Investment Approval Committee. Ascent Flying Training was selected by the MOD as training system partner for the UKMFTS in 2008; and in 2014, Affinity Flying Training Services was selected by Ascent as preferred bidder to provide fixed wing aircraft service, including the Beechcraft T-6C Texan as the aircraft for Basic Flying Training. Affinity was then formally selected by Ascent in Feb 2016, which confirmed the role of the Texan.

**7. Why was the safety problem not foreseen before the aircraft were acquired?**

As part of the tender process the MOD made clear its requirement to acquire airframes already cleared to meet certain requirements – as is the case with the Texan. In accordance with Military Aviation Authority (MAA) requirements, aircraft that are to be placed on to the military aircraft register must comply with specific articles, one of which is the achievement of a Military Type Certificate (MTC), with the holder of the issued MTC being a Crown Servant. MTCs can only be issued once the MAA is satisfied that the aircraft type has been positively assessed against the default 'Defence Standard design airworthiness code' as cited by the MAA regulation.

While the initial MTC basis for all MOD aircraft acquisitions, including UKMFTS, is established early in the procurement process, access to the detailed technical, and sometimes sensitive, information required can only be granted once a contract is in place. This evidence is then independently assessed by the Type Airworthiness Authority, against the default design code, with justification for compliance assured by the MAA and validated by the issuance of the MTC.

**8. Has the cost of the modifications been budgeted for? Was that budgeted for in the initial costings of the Texan or is that an additional cost? If it is an additional cost, who is paying it?**

Yes, full provision for the improvements for the Texan has been made in MOD's budget. Funding for the modifications was not included in the initial programme costings, as the modifications themselves had not been identified; they, therefore, represent an additional cost. The cost of the modifications falls to MOD.

**9. What assessment was made at the start of the acquisition process of the health and wellbeing effects on local populations that would be overflowed? Is there a standard procedure? What assessment was made of the possible effects on wildlife and tourism in the region? And whether any such assessments were public documents?**

All MOD investment decisions are subject to a thorough investment approval process that ensures decisions are based on strong evidence. The MFTS Fixed Wing Element contract was for a system of training covering three different aircraft types selected by the bidder to provide Elementary Flying Training, Basic Flying Training (BFT) and Multi-Engine Flying Training, along with associated qualified instructors, infrastructure,

course-ware, advanced simulation and aircraft engineering support across a multiple training RAF Stations. Alongside the procurement contract, the collocation of BFT with Texan alongside the advanced training on Hawk T2 at RAF Valley provided additional benefits of shared infrastructure and support efficiencies, alongside use of the existing Valley Aerial Tactics Area airspace.

The decision followed a thorough and detailed basing assessment for the entire MFTS programme, which examined a number of options against a range of operational and enabling criteria. The MFTS Basing Study (2009) has been publicly released.

On your specific point around national parks, while MOD is of course sensitive to the aim of the UK's national parks. The need to conduct low flying training in less populated areas, means that the effect of avoiding national parks would simply be to concentrate low flying in even smaller rural areas, considerably increasing the potential impact for those areas and communities instead.

**10. When and if these aircraft are modified so that they can fly over the sea, should we assume that they will continue to be flown over the land? Could an indication be given of the proportion of overland and oversea flights, or even their number, and whether the number of flights would increase or decrease.**

I must stress that the Texan aircraft has always been cleared to operate over the sea, and has done so routinely and safely from the outset. The modifications identified are to further enhance the protection for our aircrew, enabling training over the roughest of sea states.

We will always have the need to conduct essential training flights over land to ensure pilots receive training for all scenarios they may face when on operations. Factors such as the weather can also play a role in determining where pilots can train on any given day. In determining the ratio of flights over land to water, our primary responsibility is always to operate efficiently and safely within available airspace and to deliver military training course aims. However, we aim to train over water whenever we can and where it meets the training requirements; the proportion of flights over-water will continue to increase as the number of flights increases, and will in due course account for around 2/3 of Texan flights.

**11. Will there be changed safety procedures for oversea flights? Will that lead to increased flights over other areas, such as the Isle of Man and the English Lake district? Will the distribution of flights from RAF Valley be different?**

On current plans, the distribution of Texan flights from RAF Valley will remain broadly consistent, but we will continue to use all available training areas as efficiently as possible. For example, given the distance, Isle of Man airspace is more often used by our Hawk aircraft, which are twice as fast as the Texan and can therefore get there and back more quickly and efficiently.

As I explained previously, the RAF has already completed a comprehensive review of airspace usage which has more fairly distributing training throughout the Valley Aerial Tactics Area. It has also completed a series of further internal risk assessments and developed additional processes for risk management and flight authorisation. Therefore, the biggest changes have already been achieved and **overwater flight for the Texan is now normally and routinely authorised**, except for periods when the roughest sea states exist.

We hugely appreciate the warmth of reception the RAF receives as a local partner and employer and I appreciate that some of your constituents may continue to experience noise disturbance, which I regret. But in making its vital contribution to our national security, a level of local flying around RAF Valley remains I am afraid essential. I hope that this additional information is helpful, and I look forward discussing this issue with you again.

I am copying this letter to your parliamentary neighbours, Liz Saville-Roberts MP and Virginia Crosbie MP, and placing a copy in the Library of the House.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Quin', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**JEREMY QUIN MP**