Small uncrewed aerial systems and the protection of the UK defence estate

Date: September 2026

Basis: This submission is built entirely from open sources. Every material claim is referenced to a publicly accessible primary source, listed at the annex. No classified or restricted information is used, and nothing here identifies a vulnerability at a named site beyond what the Government or its own contractors have already published.

Summary

Drone incidents near UK defence sites doubled in a year, from 126 in 2024 to 266 in 2025.[1] The Government has published the total and very little else. There is no site-by-site breakdown, no published 2026 figure, and no definition of what counts as an incident.

The threat is moving faster than the acquisition system that answers it. Radio-frequency jamming defeated more than seventy per cent of first-person-view drones in Ukraine in late 2024.[2] Within a year, fibre-optic control had gone from a novelty used during the Kursk incursion to standard front-line equipment, and onboard autonomy now lets a drone hold its target after the operator's link is lost.[3,4] A capability judged sufficient in 2024 may not be sufficient now, and a procurement cycle measured in years is being outpaced by an adaptation cycle measured in weeks.[5]

Small drones are not a smaller version of the threat the UK is preparing for. A Shahed is launched hundreds of kilometres away and can be engaged in depth. A quadcopter is launched from a layby outside the fence. The physics of detection differ too: opening a radar's doppler gates far enough to see a slow, small target floods the operator with clutter.[6] Almost all published UK investment, and almost all parliamentary discussion, concerns the long-range end.

Nothing in the public record shows a UK counter-drone system defeating a small quadcopter. The published trials at Manorbier were against Banshee target aircraft, and the one combat validation was against Iranian one-way attack drones.[7,8]

Fixed-site protection appears to rest on one unit, and beneath it on nothing. No. 2 Force Protection (Counter-Uncrewed Aerial Systems) Wing is one of five RAF Force Protection Wings and the only one holding the mission, and within four months it was committed to Belgium, Cyprus and the Middle East.[9,10,11,12,13] The standing guard force at a British base is the RAF Police and the Military Provost Guard Service, and neither organisation's published role includes any counter-drone function.[14,15,16]

Investment is concentrated on defeating drones in flight, and not on making the target harder to hit. The Defence Investment Plan commits over £750 million to short-range drone protection and a further £200 million to counter-drone technology, with no reference to aircraft shelters, hardening, hangarage or dispersal.[17] The £26 billion naval base programme announced in July 2026 contains no protective security content at all.[18]

Defence's legal authority is real but jurisdictionally hobbled, and the Government's account of it is imprecise. Service police already hold authorising powers, but only over persons subject to service law, which excludes the civilian or unidentified operator who matters.[19,20]

Preventing damage is the priority, and attribution can wait. A posture that waits for attribution before acting will not act. Bringing down the drone of a negligent operator is a modest price for the safety of aircraft and personnel.

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1. Scope

This submission addresses one question within the air domain: whether the United Kingdom can protect its own defence estate against small uncrewed aerial systems, meaning the commercially derived quadcopter and first-person-view class rather than military strike drones. It is offered as a capability and readiness question. The constraint is not the availability of technology. It is the quantity of capability held, the number of units able to operate it, the physical exposure of the assets being protected, and the clarity of the authority to act.

Judgements are labelled as such throughout and separated from the documented record. Where evidence is trade press, vendor literature or an independent assessment rather than a government position, that is stated.

2. What the record shows

The Ministry of Defence recorded **266 uncrewed aerial vehicle incidents near defence sites in 2025, against 126 in 2024**. The Defence Secretary described the doubling as underlining "the increasing and changing nature of the threats we face."[1] An in-year figure of 187 sightings to late October 2025 was given in a written answer and is consistent with it.[21]

Between 20 and 26 November 2024, drones were repeatedly observed over **RAF Lakenheath, RAF Mildenhall, RAF Feltwell and RAF Fairford**, the last then hosting four B-52 aircraft. United States Air Forces in Europe confirmed that "the number of UASs fluctuated and they ranged in size/configuration."[22] The Ministry of Defence Police held Gold Command, and the Minister told the House of Lords it remained "a live criminal investigation."[23] The Government subsequently made restricted airspace over eleven sites by statutory instrument.[24] No operator has been publicly identified and no prosecution has been brought.[25] A freedom of information response disclosed that 46 officers had worked on the operation, none full time, and withheld the number of sightings, the outcome and the cost.[26]

The Committee should treat raw sighting figures with care, and this submission does. The most widely circulated footage from that period, an object apparently pursuing a police helicopter near Lakenheath, was investigated by the UK Airprox Board and found to be a **misidentified F-15**, with 1,700 to 1,900 feet of vertical separation and no risk of collision.[27] The Ministry of Defence has never published what it counts as an "incident," so a doubling in reports is not by itself a doubling in threat.

The problem is neither new nor confined to airfields. Eighteen sightings were recorded at **HM Naval Base Clyde and AWE Aldermaston between 2019 and 2021**, some involving drones landing inside secured areas,[28] and Ministry of Defence Police recorded **25 drone incidents at British nuclear facilities between August 2021 and August 2023**, with locations withheld.[29] A civilian drone came within 250 metres of HMS Queen Elizabeth on 22 November 2024.[23] Set against 266 incidents, almost no individual incursion has been described in public. The aggregate is disclosed; the particulars are not.

3. A threat environment changing faster than the response

Russian statements about the United Kingdom are regular, not exceptional

The pattern is now long enough to be treated as policy rather than rhetoric, and it has moved steadily from British assets in Ukraine to British assets anywhere.

In October 2023 Dmitry Medvedev said British training instructors in Ukraine would become "a legal target for our armed forces" and would "be ruthlessly destroyed."[30] In May 2024 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the British Ambassador and warned that "any British military facilities and equipment on the territory of Ukraine and abroad" could be targeted, urging him to consider "the inevitable catastrophic consequences."[31] In November 2024, following the first Ukrainian use of British-supplied Storm Shadow inside Russia, President Putin stated that Russia considered itself "entitled to use our weapons against the military facilities of those countries that allow their weapons to be used against our facilities."[32] In March 2026 the Kremlin spokesman said of a Ukrainian strike on Bryansk that "the launch of these missiles was impossible without British specialists," adding "we naturally take it into account."[33] In August 2026 the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman warned that "any British military installations and equipment in Ukraine **and beyond its borders** could be targeted," and that consequences "could be unpredictable — including for them."[34]

The Government's own characterisation of tempo is comparable. The Defence Secretary changed the Royal Navy's rules of engagement in January 2025 in response to the Russian vessel *Yantar* loitering over British undersea infrastructure,[35] and in November 2025 reported that Russian incursions into NATO airspace had doubled, alongside 90,000 cyber attacks against UK defence systems.[36] In October 2025 the Director General of MI5 reported a 35 per cent rise in individuals under investigation for state threat activity, and said his teams were "routinely uncovering attempts by state actors to commission surveillance, sabotage, arson or physical violence, right here in the UK."[37]

The European incursion tempo has risen sharply

The International Institute for Strategic Studies documented approximately **144 incidents across a dozen NATO members and Ireland between August 2024 and February 2026**, with the rate rising from roughly four a month to **22.5 a month between September and December 2025**. Germany recorded 58 sightings, Belgium 25, Denmark 16 and the United Kingdom 7. The Institute assessed that drones flew with "substantial impunity across European airspace," representing "a strategic failure of allied air defence," against an architecture "not built for … relatively low-cost UAVs and deniable incursions."[38] *This is an independent assessment and not a government position.*

The operational record supports the difficulty. Across late 2025 Copenhagen, Oslo, Aalborg, Munich, Brussels and Liège closed to traffic on drone sightings.[39,40,41] Denmark's Defence confirmed drones over several military locations including Karup, its largest base, and police stated plainly, "We didn't take them down."[42] In November 2025 the Netherlands air force **opened fire with ground-based weapons** against drones over Volkel, a base that hosts nuclear weapons; the Defence Ministry recorded that "the drones left the area and were not recovered."[43] NATO launched Operation Eastern Sentry in September 2025, the Secretary General noting that "Russia's recklessness in the air along our eastern flank is increasing in frequency."[44]

The technology is changing inside the procurement cycle

By late 2024 more than seventy per cent of radio-controlled first-person-view drones used in Ukraine were being successfully countered by jamming, though jammers required constant reprogramming to keep pace with changing control frequencies.[2] Fibre-optic controlled drones, first used at scale during the Kursk incursion in August 2024, were standard front-line equipment on both sides by mid-2025, with ranges beyond thirty kilometres and no radio emission to detect or jam.[3] Separately, onboard automatic target recognition now allows a drone to "maintain their targeting focus even if the operator's signal is jammed or lost."[4] Ukrainian systems are modified "in weeks rather than years."[5]

Assessment. Two of the three defeat mechanisms in the UK's published inventory are radio-frequency effects. That is not an argument against them. It is an argument for assuming they will be designed around, and for asking what remains when they are.

On attribution

The United Kingdom has never publicly attributed any drone incursion over its own territory to any state, and uses the actor-neutral term "rogue drones."[1] The Government's caution may well be right, and this submission does not argue that it is wrong.

The operational point is different, and it is the reason attribution should not be the organising question. A posture that waits for attribution before acting will not act, because on this record attribution does not arrive. Every practical decision taken during the November 2024 incursions was taken without it. Attribution is a matter for the investigation that follows an incident, and by then the aircraft is either intact or it is not. Bringing down the drone of a careless hobbyist is a

modest price to pay for the safety of aircraft, munitions and personnel, and the framework for handling that consequence already exists in every other area of aviation and site security.

4. Why small drones are a different problem from Shaheds

Public discussion of UK air defence is dominated by the long-range end: cruise and ballistic missiles, one-way attack drones, integrated air and missile defence. The attack on RAF Akrotiri on 2 March 2026 was by a Shahed-type aircraft.[45] Sky Sabre and DragonFire are the systems most often named. The quadcopter class is a different engineering problem in at least four respects.

Detection. The Royal United Services Institute states the mechanism precisely: small drones are "small, often slow, numerous, relatively cheap, and often operate at low altitude," and "opening the doppler gates to be able to see slow-moving UAS with small radar cross sections leads to a very cluttered display with a large number of false positive returns."[6] The filtering that makes air-defence radar usable against aircraft is exactly what discards a quadcopter. Parliament's own science office notes separately that ground-based radar "is limited in detecting low-altitude threats."[46]

Engagement depth. A Shahed can be tracked and engaged across hundreds of kilometres of approach. A quadcopter launched from a public road a kilometre outside the wire offers seconds. RUSI's recommended approach to point defence is to "defeat a salvo over a significant distance, using dispersed capabilities."[6] *That logic has no purchase when the launch point is already inside the engagement envelope, and this submission offers that observation as its own inference rather than as an attributed finding.*

Cost. Parliament's briefing puts it plainly: "It is so cheap to attack and so expensive to defend; for example, a million-pound interceptor could be used to destroy a thousand-dollar drone."[46]

Evidence of effectiveness. Nothing in the public record shows a UK counter-drone effector defeating a small quadcopter. The Rapid Sentry trials at Air Defence Range Manorbier were flown against **Banshee target aircraft**, which are fixed-wing.[7] The one publicised combat validation, in March 2026, was against **Iranian one-way attack drones**, and the reporting contains no statement differentiating performance against small drones from performance against larger platforms.[8] The RAF's own description of its soft-kill layer is candid: success "is not guaranteed in every case," and depends on "the type of drone, how it is controlled, [and] the operating environment."[47]

5. What the United Kingdom actually has

The systems

Fixed-site protection rests on **ORCUS**, the UK military variant of Leonardo's Falcon Shield.[48] It was procured in response to the December 2018 Gatwick closure through **Project Synergia, a research and development programme**, and transitioned to in-service delivery in **March 2023**.[49] The RAF describes ORCUS as combining "radar and RF systems" for detection and tracking

of low-level drones, an ultra-long-range electro-optical and thermal imaging system for identification, and electronic warfare systems able to interfere with a drone's communications.[47] Trade reporting describes a layered architecture in which ORCUS provides detection, **NINJA** provides radio-frequency disruption, **Guardian** jams command links and satellite navigation, and **Rapid Sentry** provides kinetic engagement using the Lightweight Multirole Missile, a 13 kg laser beam-riding weapon with a range beyond six kilometres.[13,50]

Two cautions. That inventory rests substantially on trade press rather than official statements, and one item commonly listed alongside it, Shadow R1/R2, is a crewed intelligence-gathering aircraft rather than a counter-drone effector. **No detection range, crew size or set-up time for ORCUS has been published** by the Ministry of Defence or by Leonardo, and the only cost-per-shot figure in circulation, roughly $50,000 for the Lightweight Multirole Missile, is a trade estimate.[51]

The Ministry of Defence has never published how many counter-UAS systems it holds and has refused to say when asked. In March 2026 the Armed Forces Minister replied to a question on ORCUS numbers: "I am withholding the information requested as its disclosure would, or would likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces."[52] Effector numbers were withheld on the same basis,[53] and the Government has declined to identify which or how many sites are protected.[21] The only quantity in the public domain is a disclosure that four complete baseline systems had been delivered by September 2020, which describes a research programme six years ago and must not be read as a current holding.[49]

One unit holds the mission

No. 2 Force Protection (Counter-Uncrewed Aerial Systems) Wing at RAF Leeming comprises 34 Squadron RAF Regiment, 63 Squadron RAF Regiment and 609 Squadron Royal Auxiliary Air Force Regiment.[9] The RAF's published structure lists five Force Protection Wings, and only No. 2 carries the counter-UAS role.[10] The model is explicitly a surge model: ORCUS "can be rapidly deployed anywhere in the country in support of emergency services in the event of a drone-based crisis."[9] Trade press describes the wing as "the only fixed-site counter-drone capability for UK defence," and nothing located in the official record contradicts that.[50]

That single wing is in concurrent demand. It deployed to **Belgium** in November 2025 at Belgian request,[11] was in the **Sovereign Base Area of Akrotiri** before the March 2026 attack,[12] and has operated in the **Middle East**.[13] The unit that is the United Kingdom's homeland counter-drone reserve is also NATO's counter-drone reserve of first resort.

Base-level security is a separate question, and the answer is thinner

A specialist wing that surges to a site is not the same as a base holding a standing capability, and this is where the public record is at its most revealing.

The Government's own answer on who guards RAF Brize Norton is that "the Royal Air Force Police and Military Provost Guard Service are responsible for security" there.[14] Neither organisation's published role includes any counter-drone function. The RAF Police's five stated specialisms are

law enforcement, counter intelligence, protective security, military working dogs and aviation security.[15] The Military Provost Guard Service, which provides armed security at **more than 120 sites** across all three services, describes its primary role as countering the terrorist threat to military bases, with duties covering entry control, control rooms and perimeter patrolling. Its only drone-related duty runs the other way: "Small Uncrewed Air System (sUAS) Operator" roles at selected sites.[16] The guard force flies drones. It has no published role in defeating them.

The Ministry of Defence Police holds Gold Command for drone incidents, and the Minister's phrasing in the Lords was that the force "has the ability, knowledge and expertise to deal with **some** of the threats."[23] The MDP's own published list of specialist units, updated in June 2026, covers operational support, rope access and protester removal, marine policing, dogs and central support. **There is no counter-drone unit on it.**[54] What the MDP is acquiring is surveillance drones rather than counter-drone equipment, with funding approved "for eight high-priority sites, with an intention to invest across a further 31 priority sites."[55]

Two points of precision follow. The upgraded "automated track-and-detect system" at RAF Brize Norton, sometimes cited as counter-drone infrastructure, is described in the Government's own statement as feeding a control room to improve the Military Provost Guard Service's response to unauthorised access, alongside a "self-contained CCTV system designed to detect, track and deter unauthorised access."[56] **It is ground-intrusion surveillance introduced after the Palestine Action break-in, and should not be counted as counter-drone capability.** Separately, the restricted airspace made over 40 defence sites is a **pilot** ahead of wider rollout.[56] It creates an offence. It neither detects nor defeats a drone, and forty sites with restricted airspace is not forty protected sites.

No fixed-site counter-UAS unit or capability equivalent to No. 2 Wing was identified for the Army or the Royal Navy. RUSI's assessment is that counter-UAS is "absent in any structured sense from the British Army and from most other NATO land force elements," and describes it as an urgent operational requirement.[6]

The question has been put in the House. In September 2025 a Member asked "what efforts are the Government making to ensure that we have **permanent** counter-unmanned aircraft systems capability at **all operational flying bases**," observing that "if RAF Brize Norton can be breached by civilians on scooters, it can be easily breached by a swarm of drones."[57] *No answer to that question was located in the record, though that may reflect a limitation of retrieval rather than evidence that none was given.*

Directed energy and ground-based air defence

DragonFire became a programme of record in November 2025 under a **£316 million** contract for **four Royal Navy Type 45 destroyers from 2027**.[58] It is a maritime capability and no land or base-defence variant has been announced. The Radio Frequency Directed Energy Weapon remains a **demonstrator**, and no procurement decision has been published.[59] Low-cost interceptor work stands at **£3.16 million** of trial contracts.[60] POSTnote 751 records that Sky Sabre "is primarily for point air defence and is designed as an expeditionary asset, rather than for UK-wide air defence"

and is "limited in number."[46] The Defence Committee concluded in November 2025 that the lack of clarity on integrated air and missile defence "is an area of critical importance that requires urgent action."[61]

Money

The picture is more balanced than the headline figures suggest, and it is set out here in full. The Defence Investment Plan commits **over £750 million to short-range drone protection for homeland and deployed forces** and a further **£200 million to counter-drone technology**, against **more than £5 billion for drones and autonomous systems**, whose named programmes are offensive and intelligence-gathering.[17,62] Counter-drone spending is described as quadrupled since the Government took office.[1]

Three observations. The baseline against which "quadrupled" is measured has not been published, so the claim cannot be audited. What the money buys has not been published either: the announcement names no system, no base and no delivery date. And **no National Audit Office or Public Accounts Committee report on counter-drone procurement exists**, so no external body has ever verified what this spending has produced.

6. Force protection by design

The preceding section concerns defeating a drone in flight. This one concerns the other half of force protection, and it is the half the published record barely addresses: making the target harder to reach and less rewarding to strike.

UK doctrine already contains the concept. Joint Doctrine Publication 3-64 defines passive force protection measures to include "physical protection, including Force Protection Engineering, platform hardening and individual protective equipment," "camouflage, concealment and deception," and "dispersal and redundancy."[63] That publication is from 2010 and predates the small-drone threat entirely, but the categories are the right ones and they are the Ministry's own.

Current investment does not reflect them. The Defence Investment Plan contains no reference to hardened aircraft shelters, hangarage, hardening, dispersal or passive protection of airbases.[17] Project Royal Oak, announced in July 2026, commits approximately **£26 billion across the three naval bases over a decade** for docks, jetties, berthing systems and submarine maintenance infrastructure, with **no protective security content**.[18] The Strategic Defence Review identified attacks on the armed forces in the UK as a threat and committed to a Defence Infrastructure Recapitalisation Plan, framed around underfunding and the value of the estate rather than protection.[64]

The response to the Brize Norton breach was surveillance, not shelter. On 20 June 2025 Palestine Action activists entered RAF Brize Norton and damaged two Voyager aircraft with paint sprayed into engines. This was a ground intrusion and not a drone attack, and the distinction matters, but the exposure it demonstrated is the exposure a drone would exploit. The Government's response, set out in September and November 2025, consists of an "upgraded and

automated track-and-detect system covering all operational air frames," a self-contained CCTV system at multiple main operating bases, restricted airspace over 40 sites, additional surveillance drones, guard force recruitment and £20 million of digital security transformation.[55,56] Every measure is detect, deter or observe. Not one is a passive or structural protection of the aircraft. The Defence Committee, for its part, addressed the incident under protest and sabotage within a chapter on industrial resilience, alongside attacks on defence manufacturers, and drew no connection to drones, hangarage or hardening.[61] *Categorising it as a policing and proscription matter rather than a force protection design matter is itself part of the problem.*

The published record does not establish how UK aircraft are stored. No Ministry of Defence statement was found on whether combat and transport aircraft at Marham, Coningsby, Lossiemouth or Brize Norton are routinely parked under cover, which Cold War hardened shelters remain in use, or what the position is at the US-operated bases. No minister appears ever to have been asked. **That the question has not been put or answered is the finding, and no inference either way should be drawn from the silence.** What can be said is that the Government's own phrasing, a camera system "covering all operational air frames," is language about observing aircraft on open surfaces, and that the Minister's account of post-incident measures referred to security "on aircraft and airfield-operating surfaces."[55,65]

The wider argument is well evidenced. RUSI has found European NATO air forces "concentrated in a small number of main operating air bases with limited hardened shelters," and that remedying this "will require a combination of dispersal, hardening and ground-based air defence protection."[66] The United Kingdom has invested in the third of those three. A secondary benefit is worth naming: aircraft under cover cannot be counted from orbit, which removes commercial satellite imagery as a planning input for an adversary. That argument appears in specialist commentary and has not, so far as could be established, been made by any UK official.[67]

Naval assets alongside are the least addressed case. A warship in harbour cannot remain closed up indefinitely, since maintenance requires equipment shut down or isolated, and a ship's own air defences are not the answer alongside. Portsmouth and Devonport share their water with hundreds of leisure craft and have no physical barrier at the harbour entrance. Specialist analysis reports no visible dedicated counter-drone provision at any of the three naval bases, while noting that classified measures may exist, and draws the contrast with Russian practice at Sevastopol, where layers of netting, floating barriers, guard boats and short-range air defence were installed.[68] *This is informed observation rather than official disclosure.* **No Royal Navy publication, ministerial statement or committee evidence addressing protection of ships alongside against small drones was located.** The one confirmed data point is the Minister's reassurance that a drone near HMS Queen Elizabeth "got no closer than 250 metres."[23] For an aircraft of that class 250 metres is a comfortable margin. For a first-person-view drone it is a few seconds.

One event makes the case better than argument does. When the Shahed-type drone struck RAF Akrotiri on 2 March 2026 it hit a hangar, and the Minister confirmed it caused "minimal damage."[69] The active defences did not stop it. A structure absorbed it.

7. Authority

The Government's public account of the legal position is that armed forces personnel cannot act. The Ministry of Defence states that existing law "can only be used by the police and certain other agencies,"[1] the Armed Forces Bill explanatory notes record that "only civilian police have the power to protect Defence property and activities,"[70] and the Minister told the Bill Committee that "the increase in drone activity around defence sites means that defence cannot rely on local police forces."[71]

That account is imprecise, and the Committee should test it. Under Part III of the Police Act 1997, as amended by the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021, the list of authorising officers already includes the Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police and the Provost Marshals of the Royal Navy Police, the Royal Military Police and the Royal Air Force Police. The power extends to authorising action "in respect of wireless telegraphy," which is the jamming limb, and section 92 provides that interference so authorised is not unlawful.[19]

The real constraint is narrower and more interesting. Section 93(6A) defines a Provost Marshal's authorising jurisdiction **by the status of the person rather than by the location**: it reaches property or spectrum use by "a person who is subject to service law or is a civilian subject to service discipline."[19] A hostile or unidentified civilian operator outside the wire is neither. The Government concedes the point in its own Lords-stage explanatory notes: "Service police can only routinely authorise actions in response to persons subject to service law."[20] The Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police, by contrast, has a place-based jurisdiction covering defence land, but that is a police authority exercised on the estate rather than a military one.

Two further matters the Committee is well placed to resolve, which open sources do not.

First, **neither section 92 nor section 93 appears on its face to restrict who may carry out authorised action**; the restrictions found relate to who may apply for an authorisation. Whether RAF Regiment personnel may lawfully operate an effector under an authorisation granted by the Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police could not be established from published material, and the Government has not explained its position by reference to the statutory text.

Second, the lawfulness of jamming as a **spectrum** matter appears to rest on Crown immunity rather than on any counter-drone authorisation. Ofcom states that "the WT Act does not bind the Crown, so Crown bodies do not need authorisation from Ofcom in order to install or use radio equipment,"[72] and the public sector spectrum framework says the same.[73] *No government document was found stating in terms that MOD counter-drone jamming is conducted under Crown immunity, so this is offered as a question rather than a finding.*

Clause 4 of the Armed Forces Bill supplies a defence-owned regime, inserting a new Part into the Armed Forces Act 2006. An authorising officer of two-star rank or a designated senior civil servant may authorise the use of "approved equipment," approved in writing by the Secretary of State, where a drone has been or may be used in a relevant offence and authorisation "is appropriate in the interests of national security." Action so authorised is "for all purposes lawful,"

expressly including interference with, and the seizure and retention of, an uncrewed device.[74] The definition of defence property extends to property used for the defence of a foreign country, which brings the US visiting-forces bases within scope. At the date of this submission the Bill is at **House of Lords committee stage and has not received Royal Assent**, the clause having passed Committee of the whole House on 2 June 2026 without substantive debate.[75]

Two limits deserve attention. The power is **United Kingdom only**, confined to "any place in the United Kingdom (including in, above or below the territorial sea)."[74] It does nothing for overseas bases, and the position at the Sovereign Base Areas, which have their own legal order, is governed separately. **The Akrotiri attack therefore cannot be used to illustrate a domestic legal gap**, and this submission does not use it that way; it appears above as a capability illustration only. Second, the scheme is only as useful as the equipment the Secretary of State approves under it.

Assessment. The United Kingdom is legislating faster than it is fielding, and describing its own legal position less precisely than the statute allows. Both matter, but neither is the binding constraint. A drone over an air station is not deterred by an offence it is already committing, and the authority to engage it is of limited value without a system present, a crew to operate it and something between the drone and the aircraft.

8. Consequences

The following are illustrative scenarios, not predictions, and none describes a vulnerability at a named site beyond what is already published. Each is built only from methods that have been used in Europe or against a NATO-relevant target, and each is included because the consequence is disproportionate to the effort.

A dispersed launch against a single-point capability. Operation Spiderweb, on 1 June 2025, concealed roughly 150 short-range quadcopters in modular cabins on flatbed lorries driven by unwitting hauliers, opened the roofs by remote command and launched from positions immediately outside Russian airfields, including fuel stations and roadside laybys, with control over 4G and LTE. Independent satellite imagery analysis and US and NATO officials assess **ten to thirteen strategic bombers destroyed and a comparable or greater number damaged**, against a Ukrainian claim of 41 aircraft hit; conventional Pantsir and S-300 systems "were unable to detect or intercept the low-flying small drones."[76,77,78] Applied against a base holding a small, concentrated and irreplaceable fleet, the arithmetic is unforgiving. The RAF's air-to-air refuelling and strategic airlift capability sits at a single station whose perimeter was penetrated on foot in June 2025. The loss of two or three of nine tanker aircraft would not be a security incident. It would be a reduction in the United Kingdom's ability to deploy and to sustain allied air operations, lasting years.

A single deniable strike timed to a political moment. The Leipzig attack of 4 August 2026 is the European template. A first-person-view quadcopter about the size of a microwave oven struck the wing of a Ukrainian An-124 near the fuel tank at a NATO airlift hub. It carried roughly 800 grams of explosive and **failed to detonate**. Approximately ten minutes earlier an explosion occurred near an abandoned village close to the airport, where an antenna was found taped to a tree and

assessed as a signal relay: a short-range drone controlled from immediately adjacent ground.[79] Germany formally attributed the attack to Russia on 1 September 2026, and the United Kingdom endorsed that attribution.[80] Note what it achieved even though the warhead did not function: a consulate closed, an ambassador summoned, and the security posture of a G7 state altered. The purpose is not attrition but coercive signalling at a moment of political decision, and the deniability that makes it attractive is exactly what the UK's own non-attribution record shows is available.

A warship alongside. A vessel in harbour is stationary, its position published, its air defences unavailable, and its approaches shared with unregulated small-boat traffic. A drone has already been recorded within 250 metres of an aircraft carrier in UK waters.[23] Damage to a carrier or to a submarine in refit is not repaired in weeks. Against a two-carrier navy and a continuous-at-sea deterrent, the consequence of a single successful strike is strategic rather than tactical.

Concurrent demand engineered deliberately. The scenarios above assume a single event. The more likely design is several, because the surge model has a visible single point of failure. An adversary reading the same open sources as this submission would understand that low-cost, low-risk activity at two or three sites at once, or an allied request arriving at the same moment, fixes the one wing in place. Nuisance incursions need not achieve anything themselves to be worth mounting.

9. Assessment against the Committee's questions

Strengths

The United Kingdom holds genuine and internationally respected expertise in this area, and the evidence for that is not rhetorical. No. 2 Wing was the unit Belgium asked for when its bases were overflown in November 2025, and the wing had already deployed to Denmark earlier in the same wave.[11] The RAF made an early institutional decision, in 2022, to give the counter-UAS mission to a named formation with a permanent home, which is more than most European allies have done, and it has since accumulated operational experience across three theatres.

The equipment is real and layered rather than notional, and the combat validation in March 2026 against Iranian one-way attack drones was described as the most effective defensive result achieved in a single night to that point.[8]

Legal reform is in train and is well designed. Clause 4 creates a proportionate scheme with a named authorising rank, a responsible person required to be satisfied of necessity and proportionality, urgent oral authorisation for time-critical cases, a 72-hour limit on retention of a seized device and an express carve-out preserving the Investigatory Powers Act.[74] It is a serious piece of drafting rather than an emergency measure.

Counter-drone funding has risen materially, and the Government has been more candid with aggregate incident figures than several allies, publishing a year-on-year comparison that invited unfavourable coverage. That deserves acknowledgement, and this submission asks for more of the same rather than less.

Limitations

Capability is concentrated to a degree that a single competing demand can exhaust. One wing of three squadrons, one of them a Reserve squadron, holds the fixed-site mission for a defence estate of hundreds of sites while also serving as NATO's counter-drone reserve of first resort. The number of systems is undisclosed and, on the only public figure of any age, likely small. There is no published concurrency assumption, and the last twelve months have tested it in practice without any account of how it held.

Beneath that wing, the standing arrangement at an individual base does not appear to include counter-drone capability at all. A capability that must travel to a site is not available at the moment an incursion begins, and small drones do not give notice.

The evidence base for effectiveness against the specific threat is absent. Every demonstrated engagement in the public record involves a large target, and no independent assessment exists: there is no National Audit Office report and no Public Accounts Committee treatment of counter-drone procurement, so the system numbers, the site coverage and the performance are all simultaneously unpublished and unaudited.

The published defeat mechanisms are weighted toward radio-frequency effects at exactly the moment the operational environment is moving away from radio-frequency control. This is not a criticism of the equipment, which was well chosen for the threat it was bought to meet. It is an argument that the refresh cycle, not the initial procurement, is the thing to get right.

Passive protection is largely absent from investment decisions, and the Ministry's own doctrine names hardening, dispersal and concealment as force protection. Ground-based air defence is expeditionary by design and limited in number, and directed energy is funded for four ships and not for bases. The authority for service personnel to act, while less absent than the Government's own description suggests, remains genuinely constrained and will not be settled until the Bill commences and the approved-equipment list is published.

Readiness

On the public record the honest assessment is that the United Kingdom can detect and report drone activity over its defence estate, can surge a single specialist unit to a site of national priority, and cannot presently do either at scale or simultaneously at home and abroad. Below that specialist unit there is no evidence of a standing capability at individual bases, and no evidence that the assets being protected have been made harder to damage.

Two absences bear on readiness more than any equipment number. Parliament has never completed an inquiry into the domestic drone threat: the Defence Committee took evidence three times in 2019 and never reported.[81] And when a single drone defeated the defences of a British base at Akrotiri on 2 March 2026 with the counter-UAS wing already deployed there, the Minister was asked directly whether an investigation into that failure had been launched and gave **the identical answer to two differently worded questions**, listing assets deployed to Cyprus since

January. Those questions were tabled on 3 March and answered on 29 April, a gap of 57 days, while the narrower factual question tabled the same day was answered in six.[82,83,12] The absence of any public account of a capability failure at a British base forecloses the learning that should follow it, and that is a readiness finding in its own right.

10. Recommendations

Publish a counter-UAS force structure statement. Not system numbers, which are properly withheld, but the number of units able to operate fixed-site counter-UAS, the number of defence sites holding a physical capability as distinct from restricted airspace, and the concurrency assumption. Without these Parliament cannot assess readiness in this area at all.

Establish a base-level counter-drone standard, and say which sites meet it. The specialist wing is the right answer to a crisis and the wrong answer to a Tuesday. Define a minimum standing capability for a main operating base, covering detection, warning and a trained response by the guard force already present, and report against it.

Commission an assessment of demonstrated effectiveness against small quadcopters, and publish its unclassified conclusions. The trials record is against fixed-wing targets and the combat record is against one-way attack drones. Neither answers the question this inquiry is asking.

Bring passive protection back into force protection. Require that estate investment decisions, including the Defence Infrastructure Recapitalisation Plan and the naval base programme, state explicitly what physical protection is being provided for the platforms on the site. Hardening, hangarage, dispersal and concealment are already in UK doctrine. They are not in the spending.

Commence the Armed Forces Bill counter-drone provisions as a priority and publish the approved-equipment list. In the meantime, ask the Department to set out precisely who may act under a Police Act authorisation granted by the Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police, and on what basis defence jamming is lawful as a spectrum matter. The Government's public description of its own powers is less accurate than the statute, and clarity would serve everyone.

Establish a second counter-UAS wing, or an explicit reserve-based surge structure. One wing cannot hold the homeland mission and meet allied requests concurrently, and the past year has demonstrated both demands arriving together.

Direct a published, unclassified account of the RAF Akrotiri engagement failure. A lessons-identified summary, without technical detail, would do more for readiness than any single procurement.

Fund a land-based directed energy line, or state that base defence will be met by other means. The current position invites the inference that DragonFire answers base defence. It does not.

Treat counter-drone research and procurement as an industrial opportunity rather than a cost. The Government's case for defence spending rests on jobs, skills and growth, and counter-drone is unusually well suited to that argument. The systems are software-defined and iterate quickly, which favours a domestic supplier able to update them in months. The market is a NATO-wide one that twelve allies have already committed more than $40 billion to over five years, and the United Kingdom starts with the operational experience allies are asking for.[84] A deliberate national counter-drone line, built on a standing programme of small competitive contracts against a published requirement rather than a single large award, would build capability, sustain skilled jobs and let the refresh cycle keep pace with a threat that changes in months. On present evidence, £3.16 million of interceptor trial contracts is not that programme.[60]

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