



Ministry
of Defence

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
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JEREMY QUIN MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE PROCUREMENT

Our ref: D/Min(DP)/JQ MC2020/04506e

12 May 2020

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your email of 9 April 2020 in which you raise several issues on behalf of your constituents regarding use of and access to the Defence Estate. Given our previous correspondence I was keen to reappraise myself fully on this issue as I appreciate this is a matter of concern for a number of your constituents.

Ash Ranges have long been a valued feature of the area for both the military and local residents. There are no rights of way over the Ranges, but the Ministry of Defence (MOD) grants permissive access when the Ranges are not in use under two sets of Byelaws which were last updated in 1976 and 1983 respectively.

The MOD has, for some years, been conducting a rolling programme of ensuring its Byelaws are up to date and fit for purpose. This is a wide exercise covering all three Services and over 100 such Byelaws have been, or are expected to be, addressed.

As part of this process the Byelaws relating to Ash Ranges are being reviewed. Before any changes are implemented the proposal will be put out for consultation. The legally prescribed channel of notification is the London Gazette, but you will be reassured that we will be advertising the consultation through local media and will ensure the Parish Council is aware so that hopefully all interested residents will be informed and have the opportunity to comment.

May I however make absolutely clear that there is no intention whatsoever to prevent ongoing access to Ash Ranges.

Ash Ranges, as you know, consist of over 3,000 acres of open space which has been preserved for military training (and permissive public access) since the 19th century. The Estate, which is managed by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), is an invaluable training area which was used on 254 days in 2019.

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
House of Commons
London
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When Ash Ranges is in use it is essential that we prevent access for safety reasons. A four-strand safety fence erected in 1980 for this purpose (to prevent access other than through established gates where information on firing could be posted and which could be closed to prevent access) proved inadequate and was replaced by a more fit for purpose wire mesh fence in 2014-2016.

Ash Ranges contain eleven ranges at three sites which can be used for small arms training from pistol to automatic weapons. The 'floor complexes' pertaining to these sites contain firing points, target apparatus and sand stoppers. The last conducting the critical task of stopping live rounds. These floor complexes account for 12 per cent of the total Ash Ranges area. Their lay-out and dimensions are critical for maintaining a safe environment. They are subjected to daily inspections (on firing days), monthly inspections, independently conducted annual checks and further checks by the Defence Safety Authority on a rolling three-year basis.

As you will note from the above the layout and maintenance of these floor complexes are taken enormously seriously, and rightly so.

Protecting these floor complexes and ensuring they are useable for military training when required is a priority. Unfortunately, public access to these particular parts of Ash Ranges has presented a range of ongoing difficulties and concerns. These are not restricted solely to vandalism: though the costs associated with this have been increasing and damage has recently caused a disruption in military training when the range had to be closed.

We also have a concern on the safety of the general public when accessing a live firing range (albeit on non-firing days) on an unchecked and unmonitored basis. For these reasons the MOD does not intend to re-open access to the Ash Range Floor Complexes. These are already clearly demarcated and hard to access without using the gates. No new fencing is planned in or around the ranges.

Residents will continue to benefit from full access to the remaining 88 per cent of Ash Ranges on days when the Ranges are not being used for training purposes.

Attempts are being made to consolidate training to allow public access into the Range Danger Area on an increased number of days.

While I appreciate that no restrictions on the use under the existing Byelaws will be welcomed, and I am sorry that local residents have been upset by the changes, I am sure it will be recognised that Ash Ranges remains a MOD estate, and that training and safety requirements must take precedence. Within those safety requirements the Army will continue to facilitate public access to what I know is a highly prized area for leisure and recreation.

Your constituents have also raised concerns regarding access to Porridge Pot Hill/Deepcut. This area on the Deepcut Defence Training Estate is one of the most heavily used training areas in the South East. As one of few completely enclosed Defence Estate areas it allows units, especially recruit training units, to conduct training without any disturbance from members of the public.

While I acknowledge that some of your constituents may prefer the MOD to stop all military exercise during this pandemic, a cessation would generate an unacceptable impact on military operations and national security tasks. The MOD has a duty of care to prepare Service personnel deploying on operations; therefore, training will continue albeit at a lower level than normal.

I hope this response provides the assurance that your constituent's need regarding the MOD's commitment to maintain safe public access to the Defence Estate.

Yours sincerely,

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

JEREMY QUIN MP