



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Land Acquisition, HC 978

Wednesday 11 January 2023

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Robert Courts; Dave Doogan; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar.

Questions 1 - 137

Witnesses

I: Alex Chalk, MP, Minister for Defence Procurement; David Williams, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence; Lt. General Sharon Nesmith, Deputy Chief of the General Staff; and Major General Darren Crook, Director Land Equipment, DE&S, Ministry of Defence.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alex Chalk, David Williams, Lt. General Nesmith and Major General Crook.

Chair: Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on Wednesday 14 January 2023. We are delighted to be discussing land acquisition today, which we have broken down into three themes—the Army requirements, the Army’s acquisition, and then we will be looking at lessons from Ukraine.

I am pleased to welcome Minister Alex Chalk, the new Procurement Minister; welcome to our discussions here today, and happy new year to you and your colleagues. David Williams, welcome back as well—the permanent secretary at the MoD—and we have Lieutenant General Sharon Nesmith, who is the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, and Major General Darren Crook, who is the director of land equipment at DE&S in the Ministry of Defence. Welcome to you all.

As I mentioned in our private session, we just have a few short and sharp questions to begin with, then we will go into the main body of our questions. I invite Mark Francois to kick us off.

Q1 **Mr Francois:** Thank you, Chairman. Minister, this is an all-party Committee; we are all very concerned about the distressing reports we have read about the failure of the FDIS contract to provide the maintenance of service family accommodation. It is simply unacceptable.

Ministers have been hinting in public for some weeks—including you at the Dispatch Box—that you might be actively considering junking that contract and looking at some other solution instead. Now that you are here, briefly, can you please give the Committee an update on that, and say whether that is a real prospect or not?

Alex Chalk: Thank you, and thank you for raising the issue with me personally, as you have done, and on the Floor of the House. I know that the FDIS contract is something that you have taken a particular interest in, so thank you, and thank you to other members of the Committee, who I know take this extremely seriously.

You are right; it is completely unacceptable. I do not want to go over old ground, but we have talked about Pinnacle, Amey and VIVO, and their performance has not been anything like what it should be. As I said in the UQ, all options, of course, are being considered. Act 1, scene 1, if I can use that expression, is to ensure that the immediate issue is being addressed.

As you would expect, and as I said at the Dispatch Box, we have been getting daily updates on the specific problems; I am thinking particularly about hot water and heating. Anticipating, of course, that you might ask this question, Mr Francois, I have looked at the figures from 16 December, and the position then was that the total without heating was 389. The position in the latest figures I have is 65.



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Now, I have to break that down a little bit, because, of course, heating does occasionally break down. The key issue is whether people are being left without heating or hot water beyond the 48 hours, which, of course, is the service requirement. The position, at present, is that the total number without heating for more than 48 hours is down to 18. It was previously 163, so it has gone from 163 down to 18, and I am assured that, by the end of this week, it will be down to single figures.

So, you ask the specific question, "That is all well and good; what are you going to do about this contract?" The short answer is that we will keep all matters under consideration. What I can tell you is that, even within this contract, by 23 January, we will be in a position, under the terms of that contract, to see what we should or should not do, in terms of withholding profit. That is a matter that, I hope this Committee can take from me, is receiving the most anxious consideration.

Q2 Mr Francois: Just quickly, Minister, because we are always tight for time, by 23 January, you are deciding whether or not to withhold some payments to the contractors—

Alex Chalk: Correct.

Mr Francois: But that is not the same as changing the contract.

Alex Chalk: Correct.

Q3 Mr Francois: You are right that it is unacceptable. FDIS is fatally flawed and will never work, so what is the likelihood, on a scale of one to 10, that you will actually abandon that contract and do something different? Is it nine, or one, or something in the middle?

Alex Chalk: I don't want to be evasive, but we have to take this in stages. The counter-position is this: what is much more important than the structures is the service that these guys are receiving. The thing that has been moderately encouraging—it is no more than that—is that it seems that some of the things that should have been sorted out at the beginning are now working. For example, what was being received by Pinnacle was not being properly communicated to Amey and VIVO because the IT systems were not working. It seems that there are aspects of this that are improving. However, although we have been talking about heating and water, we have not been talking about damp, for example. One of the things I am commissioning this week is to see where we are at in respect of some of those issues. The short answer is that all options are open and we will consider them. I do not want to give you a steer that would be unhelpful, but I meant what I said at the Dispatch Box: everything is being considered.

Q4 Mr Francois: Minister, just lastly—look, we call our service personnel heroes, and they are. But we don't treat them like that, and then we wonder why they leave. I'm afraid all you have given is a classic Minister's dead-bat answer; you have not really told us anything about what your future intentions are. I am sorry, but it is a really disappointing answer. Our service personnel deserve better. You are the Minister in the



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hotseat. Try harder, would you, please?

Alex Chalk: Nothing is from lack of effort; I can tell you that absolutely clearly. Every single day, we are absolutely on this, and I want to know the precise figures every day. There have been repeated meetings with these people and I can indicate that the conversation was—I hope you would agree if you had been there—commendably robust. There is absolutely no short selling on that. We do have to ensure that it is actually delivering what we want it to deliver. It is ultimately that which matters more than structures, but I am not ruling anything out.

Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Q5 **Dave Doogan:** Very quickly on the back of that, Minister, I can hear how frustrated you are about this, but it is catastrophic failure. We are not talking about quite a bit below target; we are talking about a monumental failure of the contract or the contractors to deliver acceptable accommodation. I just want to give you the statistics for the failure to prepare properties for moving in the year to date, up until November 2022. Amey managed to prepare only 41% of homes for moving, and VIVO managed only 60%. Amey missed 10,500 urgent repairs, and VIVO just over 4,000. It is not even close, so what is the Department going to do? First, I would like to hear you accept that it is catastrophic. Secondly, what is going to be the extraordinary effort to turn this disaster round?

Alex Chalk: The performance that we have seen is not just a little below what was acceptable or, indeed, what was contracted for; it is far, far below. That is why, as I said at the Dispatch Box in answer to a question from Mr Francois, we will consider all options—including, by the way, the very option that he himself talked about in his paper in advance, because he made certain warnings that I accept—and I absolutely meant it.

I would also say, in answer to your specific point, that yes, in terms of the proportion of homes that have been of a required standard, it is far below what we expected. It has now, by the way, ticked up to about 80%, but it is still not at the acceptable level of performance. The question that someone in the hotseat, as was described, has to decide is, if you rip the whole thing up, is that a great thing that gets you a headline—sorted—but actually makes the experience worse? Or is the situation that, in fact, you are quite close to things being significantly better for the service personnel who we all we want to do right by? That is the judgment that we have to make.

Q6 **Dave Doogan:** What is your judgment?

Alex Chalk: The situation at present is that, by the end of this week, there will be single figures who have not got heating or hot water within 48 hours.¹ If that had been the position at the beginning of the contract, you would say, "They're a little bit in breach of this contract, but it's not

¹ As at 13 January, the total number without heating for more than 48 hours was 111.



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catastrophic,”—to use your word. But at the beginning, it was much closer to that adjective.

We have to make a judgment. By the way, Amey and VIVO have recruited loads more people, and Pinnacle has as well. It has new IT systems, new protocols and so on—all the stuff that should have been in place at the beginning but is now in place. The question is: what do you do at this stage? That is the judgment we have to make.

Q7 Chair: Okay. The purpose of flagging this up—you have heard the tone, concern and passion here—is simply to ensure that you are aware that this needs to be detailed, and I hope that you will come back to the Chamber in due course to say what progress has been made.

We have three other very short questions, and the answers will need to be a lot shorter than you have just given. I am looking at the Defence Equipment Plan. Very simply, on Boxer and Challenger 3, can you tell me when the in-service date will be for both those vehicles? Have they been costed? What are the overall costs?

Alex Chalk: Certainly. These are not short points, but let me go through them. Do you want Boxer first?

Q8 Chair: They are very simple questions. Given the fact that Challenger 2 is a couple of decades old, this is simple to understand. As I say, I cannot pluck it out from the Defence Equipment Plan. When will Challenger be operational? How much will it cost?

Alex Chalk: The cost of Challenger will be £1.4 billion, but it is right to say that there will need to be additional funding in respect of the active protection system. I can get into the detail of that.

Chair: Is that funded?

Alex Chalk: No—the active protection system, not yet, but the £1.4 billion is funded. In respect of the arrival date, the first 18 are scheduled to arrive in March 2027 with the IOC in November 2027. IOC is defined as one squadron at readiness.

Chair: Sorry—18?

Alex Chalk: IOC—November 2027. Yes.

Chair: So 18 vehicles will arrive.

Alex Chalk: Yes, that’s right.

Chair: We can’t go to war with 18.

Alex Chalk: No, of course, but it is not just Challenger 3, because at that time, you still have Challenger 2s as well, so it becomes a blended fleet.

Chair: That is an obsolete tank. My question was very clear cut: when will the British Army have its full complement of Challenger 3s?

Alex Chalk: I thought you asked about IOCs; I gave you that date.



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Chair: The in-service date—yes, that’s correct, but I wasn’t expecting the answer to be just 18. If that was our requirement, we could celebrate, but I hope that we are seeking to build more than 18 of them.

Alex Chalk: The FOC is 2030. The IOC is 2027, as I have indicated.

Q9 **Chair:** What are the total numbers?

Alex Chalk: The total number is as per the letter that we wrote to you—it is 148. We have 227 Challenger 2s at the moment and 148 Challenger 3s.

Q10 **Chair:** And do you expect these to be in service by 2030? Is that your target date?

Alex Chalk: That is right—specifically, December 2030.

Q11 **Chair:** Can we do the same arithmetic for Boxer?

Alex Chalk: Certainly, one moment please.

Mr Francois: It is 2025.

Alex Chalk: I think what I heard sotto voce from Mr Francois is right. The IOC remains on schedule for 2025. That is defined as a company group of vehicles equipped with trained crews. The FOC is 2032.

Chair: And the numbers again.

Alex Chalk: In 2025—27 vehicles. The FOC in 2032—I think 523 were originally ordered, with a further 100 being confirmed and contracted for earlier this year.

Q12 **Chair:** So 2032 is when we will have the full complement of Boxers.

Alex Chalk: The total order is for 623—Mr Williams?

David Williams: Yes.

Q13 **Chair:** So you are expecting the Warrior to continue until Boxer is brought in.

Alex Chalk: Absolutely, so there will be a blended fleet of Boxer, Warrior, Ajax, Challenger, Apache—

Q14 **Chair:** And you think the Warriors, which are, again, a couple of decades old, will last that long and that we will be able to keep them going. Bear in mind that we spent £140 million on looking at upgrades but did not do the upgrade.

Alex Chalk: That is specifically something that I have asked about and that we have looked into. I am very happy to answer, but would you prefer to, General Sharon?

Lt. General Nesmith: If you are comfortable—

Chair: Please.

Lt. General Nesmith: At the last Integrated Review, as the Committee will remember, we took a decision to delete the Warrior CSP—the



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sustainment programme. We then extended our Warrior fleet to see us through the period until we delivered our Ajax. Of course, we have not yet concluded when the IOC of Ajax will be, but at the moment the Warrior is extended to from 2025.

Chair: We have the little nugget of Ajax to come on to later, so we will leave that for the moment. It is important to recognise the Committee's concern about the huge delays that there will be in our land force capabilities—the dates are coming into the 2030s—before this equipment, which has been around for a couple of decades, comes into service. It should not take that long to procure.

Q15 **Mr Jones:** Challenger 3 is ambitious. I say to the new Minister that he needs to look at this and can it, frankly, because this has all the hallmarks of every equipment programme that we have done where we have tried to retrofit things. It is like trying to turn a 1989 Ford Escort into a modern electric vehicle with everything on it.

On interoperability, it is difficult in terms of NATO. If we are going to spend £1.4 billion, those dates will not be met because you will find problems in trying to retrofit these things. We should be going through them and scrapping them—deciding we don't need them, which I don't agree with—or going down the route of looking at the new Leopard or Panther, because otherwise this is going to be another example of "jam tomorrow", which will keep moving on and on and on. I say that now; I hope I'm wrong, but if we are here in five or six years' time, I'm sure I'm not wrong.

Chair: Okay.

Alex Chalk: Can I respond on that briefly?

Chair: Very quickly.

Alex Chalk: I think I take it from that question that you think we should have tanks, you're just saying not this one. The only thing I would gently say is that one of the most valuable things that I read in order to prepare for this is your own report, "Obsolescent and outgunned", which, if I may respectfully say so, was an excellent document.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: We agree.

Alex Chalk: Fancy that!

Just to that point, if I may, this Committee did not recommend one way or the other, but said in paragraph 38: "We do not propose to recommend which course the Ministry of Defence should take"—that is to say, whether we should go for Leopard or Challenger 2—because these are balanced judgments. But the advice I have received is that Challenger 3 would be a considerably more capable—

Mr Jones: Can I just say, Minister: it's wrong.

Alex Chalk: The report is wrong?



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Mr Jones: No, the advice you are getting is wrong. This will lead one way, and you can see it happening. In every programme where we try to retrofit things into old kit, however well intentioned—I am not making any suggestions about the advice you have been given by individuals for alternatives—there has been optimism bias to a degree that never works, and my fear is that that is where we are going on this programme. You will get there, you will throw money at it, but the important thing is capability, and that will not be there for the Army.

Chair: Okay, we will come back to this in the meat of our discussions. Sarah, do you want to take us on to the more topical issues of Challengers today?

Q16 **Sarah Atherton:** We read that we are going to provide Ukraine with between 10 or 12 Challenger 2s. You obviously project that we can spare those, so what is the reasoning and purpose behind that donation?

Alex Chalk: I have to be clear: no decision has been made about that. That, I know, is something that will be being considered, but I do not want to lose this point, which is that, of course, we have already provided a number of vehicles—200 or so—which I think is a point that has almost been lost—not by this Committee, but certainly beyond that. Whether we provide 10 or 12, or indeed any, that is a decision that has not yet been made. I just need to be moderately clear about that. But certainly, were they to be provided, notwithstanding the points that have been made, I think a lot of people would recognise that actually committing a main battle tank would not just have a symbolic value but would also give an additional capability. I do not know whether any colleagues want to follow up on that.

Lt. General Nesmith: From our perspective, we are very clear: the granting of a western tank, Challenger 2, is demonstrable in itself. Of course, our highest priority is that we support Ukraine in the defeat of Russia, for the obvious reason of helping Ukraine to restore its sovereign borders, but also to make us safer at home today. As part of any of that decision making, we will be really clear about the impact on our readiness and how we sustain our readiness, and also the feeding in to the Challenger 3 upgrade programme.

Chair: Sarah.

Sarah Atherton: Can I just ask, then—

Mr Francois: If we can't spare 12 tanks, we may as well go home.

Chair: Let Sarah complete her question.

Sarah Atherton: What consideration has been given then, in the equipment that is donated, to the secret or sensitive information on it? If you look at the Challenger 2, what about the armour? I think it has Dorchester, or Chobham, armour. That is very secret.

Q17 **Chair:** I suspect that, because you say this is all speculation and you are



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waiting for the Ramstein meeting, I think, of Defence Ministers, to make these big announcements, it will be politically charged: there will be bigger consequences, touching on the supply chain, support and so forth—the whole effort to keep just 12 tanks working. Can I invite you, Minister, or the Defence Secretary to make an oral statement to the House if this decision is made, so that we can probe further the wider consequences?

David Williams: If I could just provide some reassurance, every category or piece of equipment capability that we have given to the Ukrainians since February last year has been accompanied by an assessment of the risk of diversion, the risk of exploitation by potential adversaries in the future. That assessment forms part of the advice that goes to Ministers before the gifting of lethal aid is agreed, so it is very much part of the decision-making process.

Chair: That is very helpful. Is that okay, Sarah?

Sarah Atherton: Yes, thanks.

Chair: I think Kevan wants to come in.

Mr Jones: Yes. You wanted rid of the equipment you have given so far anyway. You were getting rid of things like Mastiff anyway. I am not suggesting that that is not being added to the capability in Ukraine, but it was not key stuff.

In terms of Challenger, let us be honest: this is for the birds. It is just a PR story. On the idea of delivering 12 Challenger tanks to Ukraine, how on earth are you going to do the training? What about the spare parts and the ammunition, which will be different from what the Ukrainians are using? Given the rate at which they are getting through ammunition, have we got enough ammunition to supply 12 tanks, even if these survive? Honestly, Minister, it is a great PR thing. It gets you a headline, but it is going nowhere, isn't it?

Chair: Right. I am sure you can take all those questions away with you. We look forward to the oral statement.

Alex Chalk: Thank you.

Chair: The final point that we want to touch on, which I mentioned to you outside, is to do with Protector and Reaper.

Q18 **Robert Courts:** Protector has been reported as slipping both in financial terms and in delivery date, such that we now expect it—if the *Telegraph* is to be believed—to be five years late cumulatively and half a billion pounds over budget. Why is that, and can we confirm what we are now hearing?

Alex Chalk: I will make three initial points and then maybe others will want to come in. First, the idea of its coming into effect in 2018 is not a date we recognise. It was always the case that the in-service date was going to be 2021, never 2018. That's point one.



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Point two: it is correct that it was pushed back from 2021 to 2023 and that a cost came with that, which I am happy to explore. A deliberate decision was made so that that budget could be focused on the immediate pressing priorities in that year. I pause to note—the Chair mentioned it sotto voce—that this works together with Reaper; it is a replacement for Reaper. So the decision was made: we have Reaper and, actually, it is better to push this back to 2023.

Q19 Robert Courts: Can I pause you there to explore the reasons why that decision was taken?

Alex Chalk: Yes, of course. At that time—others in the Department then will be able to speak to this in greater depth—there were specific priorities, whether that was P-8 or anti-submarine warfare, or whatever was the particular priority at that stage.

The third point I wanted to make is this: the figure of half a billion that you have indicated is not one that is recognised. There was a cost—that is perfectly true—but it is important to also recognise that a significant element of that cost was because the delay meant that there was an upgrade to the very thing that we are getting, which would have avoided the in-service upgrade. In other words—this was to do with a main visual sensor—by doing it and paying for it then, we would not have had to pay for it later and, indeed, take it off the line later.

Q20 Chair: But you are upgrading something that they are already designing. You are also upgrading the Reaper because that needed to have its life extended. Is that not correct?

Alex Chalk: Yes, there is an extension to Reaper; that is absolutely right. But, for the avoidance of doubt, that extension comes at no additional cost, because that comes from the overall Protector budget, as I understand it. Perhaps David Williams can come in on that specific point. On the issue of the upgrade—

Chair: Sorry, but your Protector budget has just gone up by about half a billion. What is the increase in budget? Sorry, Robert, I will hand back to you.

Q21 Robert Courts: I was going to ask that. What is the specific increase in the budget?

David Williams: It is not the £500 million figure; it is around £300 million.² I can let you have a precise number after the hearing.

Q22 Chair: That is still significant.

David Williams: It is still significant, but the decision was taken in light of the Integrated Review, as part of the spending review 2020 settlement,

² Protector programme costs have increased by some £326 million, as outlined in the Accounting Officer's Assessment sent to the Public Accounts Committee Chair on 5 November 2019.



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that in order to create the headroom for investment in capabilities that we wanted to prioritise—

Chair: P-8s.

David Williams: It was not just P-8s, but the full range of capability that we have in our equipment plan. Some decisions were taken to retire capabilities. In other areas, a decision was taken to defer future programmes. In this particular case, given that we have Reaper and a capability that is working for us at the moment, the decision was taken, but the financial headroom in the early years created by a deliberate decision to push this back was a price worth paying.

Q23 **Chair:** It is a familiar story: there is not enough money and, therefore, in order to keep the P-8 programme going, you have then had to rob another programme.

David Williams: We would say it is a balance of investment decision to defer the portfolio.

Chair: Thank you for being candid about that.

Q24 **Robert Courts:** Given that that is a familiar story, can we count on this in-service date, or is it going to slip further?

David Williams: I am not expecting, through deliberate programme action, that we will look to change the dates. The programme and the budget are now baked in.

Q25 **Robert Courts:** I have one more point on this. These are systems that are going to have greater endurance, greater sensors and greater weapons, but we are only getting 16. When we look at the immediate preliminary lessons of Ukraine—at least according to RUSI—we see a massive amount of attrition from these systems that are being used there. The initial conclusion, at least as far as RUSI is concerned, is that they need to be cheap and attritable; this is neither. Are these going to be able to defend themselves in a contested airspace?

David Williams: I think there is a conflation of—

Robert Courts: Different systems, I accept that.

David Williams: The principal lesson for us from Ukraine—I think we will be coming on to these later in terms of UAVs—is really on the cheap mass tactical drone. These are high-end strategic systems, so the way in which they would be operating would be—

Q26 **Robert Courts:** Sorry to interrupt, but you have two choices, don't you? I accept that there are two different types of systems: you either have cheap, attritable, essentially throwaway ones, which are the little things that we are talking about, or this, which is much bigger. But the essence of my question still stands: are these going to be able to defend themselves in contested airspace?



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David Williams: I think where we will end up is that, actually, we want both, and then we will operate these in a way that means we are preserving them for future missions.

Q27 **Robert Courts:** So out of contested airspace.

David Williams: Not necessarily. How they are used is—what you are seeing in Ukraine today is not equivalent.

Robert Courts: It is not so much how they are used; it is where they are used that I am interested in.

David Williams: Okay. Well, perhaps we can come back to that.

Chair: You are, I think, teasing us to suggest that we have further questions to ask, which we are not going to be able to do justice to here—Robert, I hope you are happy with that. You can see where we are going with this: it needs to be expedited as quickly as possible. If nothing else, Predator is allowed to operate in civilian airspace, which I think is the crucial part, whereas Reaper cannot. Therefore, even in looking after our own domestic interest—top cover here in the UK—that is why we need to get this sorted.

We will move on to our main substantive. Colleagues, we have a vote imminent, but we also have about an hour and a half left. That is about 30 minutes for each section. Kevan, start us off and see how we get on before the vote.

Q28 **Mr Jones:** Can I ask what the Army's ambition is? Does it remain what was in the Command Paper in 2021, which was a warfighting division optimised to fight a peer adversary within a NATO context?

Alex Chalk: Yes, is the answer.

Lt. General Nesmith: What we laid out in the last Integrated Review under Future Soldier, as you will recognise, is the most significant transformation programme that we have embarked upon to deliver a core warfighting capability to enable us to fight and win wars on land. Everything we see from war in Europe amplifies our core purpose, so that remains the case.

Q29 **Mr Jones:** On what date will you actually be able to deliver that capability?

Lt. General Nesmith: We deliver against all that is asked of us today, in terms of our NATO commitments.

Mr Jones: That is not the question.

Lt. General Nesmith: We recognise that there are shortfalls against some of the broader NDPP targets. I think that has been a well-documented shortfall—indeed, internally to our own Department, this has been recognised in our capability assessments. That is why we have an investment plan of £34 billion in the Integrated Review, to address some of that.



Q30 **Mr Francois:** When?

Lt. General Nesmith: I think we laid out in Future Soldier that it was a decade of delivery.

Q31 **Mr Jones:** Wait a minute, though. Since 2010, the Army has burned through something like £12 billion of public money. Twenty per cent. of that was obviously on Ajax and Warrior, and you have delivered no new capability in those 10 years. How much faith have we got in the fact that you will deliver these ambitious programmes in the next 10 years, or are you just going to keep burning through money?

Lt. General Nesmith: I recognise that we have not delivered some of the programmes in the way that we would have wished to. We have learned a lot of lessons from those programmes.

Mr Jones: But they are very expensive lessons, General. It is £12 billion of public money. There are those of us who are arguing that defence budgets should increase—having been a Minister at the Ministry of Defence, I know that the Treasury sit on your shoulder—but, frankly, if I was in the Treasury and you came to ask for more money, I would say no. The Treasury would be quite right to do that.

You cannot really give us a date when the capabilities are going to be achieved. Is there not a serious issue for the Army—it has an issue about its relevance—in terms of not being able to deliver this? I accept that some of these are political decisions, but a lot of them are decisions that have been taken in the Army itself. My task when I retire is to write a book on FRES, because that would be a fascinating subject, given the amount of money it wasted. They are Army decisions on these things, not ministerial ones. Can you understand why politicians and the public—and perhaps the Treasury—are pretty sceptical about your capability in the Army to deliver anything?

Lt. General Nesmith: There are a number of things there. The first thing I would say is that the Integrated Review was a decade of delivery. We were very clear about that at the time. We took some capability risks at that point, and we knew that it would be a decade before we modernised the Army in the way we wished. Of course, some of that now feels very uncomfortable.

I also recognise that we needed to up our game on how we would deliver some of those programmes. I had been out of the Army headquarters for a couple of years. I have come back to Army headquarters, and we have done a lot to address some of the specific lessons that have come out of those equipment programmes.

I see values as an example of where we have been perhaps found wanting in some of our programme delivery, and how we have professionalised—with a small p. We now have dedicated SROs against all of our GMPP programmes so that the requisite amount of time is dedicated to the programmes. We have identified the suitably qualified and experienced personnel that we need to resource the SROs with so that they are professionalised programme deliverers. As recommended by the IPA, we



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educate and train them. We are building a network inside the headquarters—a community.

- Q32 **Mr Jones:** General, I have been hearing this for 20 years. Some of this is about delivery. Let's look at what we are trying to achieve. We have to deliver Ajax—we will come back to that. Warrior has written off £400 million of public money, and the Boxer dates that the Minister gave us earlier mean it is going to have to be extended even further. You know my views on Challenger; that is another one waiting to happen, frankly.

Is it not time for the Army to do some serious thinking? If it is going to deliver that—that is the ambition—it has to start either cutting programmes or making some realistic assessments. Otherwise, this Government and any future Government are going to ask the question, "What is the relevance of the Army?" You have a difficult problem now, because there is a CDS from the Navy. You had good years during Afghanistan and Iraq because money was flowing in, and you got loads of things. Since 2010, things have changed. You now have a CDS from the Navy and that puts the focus on other things. You have a serious relevance problem as an Army, haven't you?

Lt. General Nesmith: The third thing I was going to say was that we are starting to deliver the programme now. We have some success stories that we can already point to, in terms of the AH-64 Echo. I accept that we have not delivered in the way we might have wished to in the past.

- Q33 **Mr Jones:** But £12 billion of public money is a lot of money to be wasted, isn't it?

David Williams: Can I come in on that? First, I am always loth to speak for the Chief of the Defence Staff, but I think if he had been here, he would be emphasising the centrality of NATO to our security. There is a real importance to the land component of that. We are engaging with NATO colleagues on the new force model. We are engaging with SACEUR on the regional plans and his strategy for the run-up to the Vilnius conference. I do not think that saying there is a naval CDS is a fair attack. On our future equipment programme, we have £41 billion allocated over the next 10 years to the modernisation of the Army.

My main point is that the implication of your question is that there is a binary state, in which we do not have a division now, but will get a warfighting division at some point in the future; whereas in practice our warfighting capability today is based on Challenger 2, Warrior, AS90 and AH. We have a programme in which, over the next decade, a range of those major platforms will be upgraded or replaced, but it is a decade's driving journey; it is not a binary position in which first there is nothing, and then this comes.

- Q34 **Mr Jones:** No, but you have some huge capability gaps in that period, which means that you cannot deliver this. We will come back to Ukraine in a minute. I understand why the Army wants to deliver a divisional capability—because it is tanks, and what the Army has traditionally done—but it begs the question: should there be a rethink, especially



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when talking about NATO? Are we looking for tomorrow's contribution to the more agile forces that are needed in Europe? I accept that this has been fixed, and this is where we are at, but there will be a huge capability gap throughout the period. With some programmes, we are looking to find out when they will come in. We will come back to Ajax—Mark's favourite subject—in a minute, but you cannot deliver effect if you do not have the capability.

Lt. General Nesmith: We have credible capability today. Everything that we have seen play out in Ukraine exemplifies that if you have capability that you adapt and exploit, the adversary that adapts the quickest prevails. The fact that Challenger 2 is one of those armoured fighting vehicles that is sought after indicates that it is credible capability.

Q35 **Mr Jones:** It is not sought after at all. Talk to our NATO colleagues. You know that is not true. A tank is sought after, but not Challenger 2.

Lt. General Nesmith: A western tank is sought after, but we have credible capability today. What Ukraine also indicates, of course, is that there remains a very hard edge to warfighting capability in the land domain, and that is still centred around the combined arms manoeuvre of an armoured fighting vehicle fleet, but it is not the combined arms manoeuvre of yesteryear.

Chair: We need to make progress, and we are also cutting into John's sandwich time, but Mark, quickly.

Q36 **Mr Francois:** Very quickly, General, I am not about to say anything that the Russians do not know. We have a fighting division, 3 Div. If we crash that division out of barracks at 5.30 tomorrow morning, half of it would not get out of the tank park, because so many of the vehicles are obsolescent. Many of them are 25, 30, 40 or even 50 years old. We would be lucky to get a brigade to Estonia in 60 days. How can you possibly say that we have a credible deterrent effect when our warfighting division is so old, and so full of obsolete vehicles that you have had 20 years to replace? You have replaced none of it. How can you say that we can credibly contribute to deterrence with an Army that is clapped out? That is the truth. What is your answer?

Lt. General Nesmith: We credibly contribute to deterrence today. Our USP as the British Army is very much about highly qualified and competent combat arms, some very professional skilled trade personnel and enablers, and conceptual leadership. We contribute all that today, as we work, train and educate alongside our friends.

Mr Francois: With respect, although our soldiers are arguably—man for man, woman for woman—as good as those of any other Army on Earth, if their vehicles do not work, and do not even start, they cannot fight, can they?

Q37 **Chair:** Mark, you've made your point. You are coming back after John.

You talked about contribution. Jens Stoltenberg said at the Madrid NATO summit that NATO's new strategic concept moved the size of the rapid



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response corps from 40,000 to 300,000. What is our contribution to that now?

Lt. General Nesmith: We are working in support of Defence, looking at the options for our proposition for the new NATO force model.

Chair: Okay, but we have no numbers. For 40,000, it is easy to say: 16 Air Assault Brigade, 3 Commando Brigade and as Mark suggested, perhaps as many tanks as we can muster, but 300,000? If that is what the NATO Secretary-General says is now required because of the heightened threat level, we need to confirm what we are able to get out of the park.

David Williams: It is a live debate with SACEUR as part of the NATO planning process; it is live right now. That will lead to consideration and presentation of various plans and agreements at the NATO summit in Vilnius in the summer. It is a substantial increase. It also needs to be seen in the context of a substantial increase in NATO membership itself, given the accession—

Q38 **Chair:** Okay. You have the Integrated Review coming in before Vilnius. I presume that there will be an answer as to what our contribution will be to this 300,000 force, given that people will be looking to us, as a senior member of NATO, to be a significant contributor to that force. Maybe you could write to the Committee with more details.

David Williams: We would expect to be a significant contributor to that force.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Williams.

Q39 **John Spellar:** If we have this heavy armour available, why are we pulling back from Estonia?

Chair: Two battalions down to one—or battlegroups, sorry.

Lt. General Nesmith: What we have committed to is support to our forward presence in Estonia and we have committed to having an armoured brigade combat team doing that. That remains the case. The fact that they are not forward is correct, but, over time, we will pulse capabilities as appropriate.

Q40 **John Spellar:** Given the international tension at the moment, particularly the tension on those countries that border on to Russia, why are we pulling back?

Lt. General Nesmith: I don't think we are pulling back—we remain committed.

Q41 **John Spellar:** Well, we are reducing our commitment.

Chair: By half.

Lt. General Nesmith: The commitment is the same; it is just not forward present, but we are at readiness in support of the battlegroup.



Q42 **John Spellar:** But why are we doing that?

David Williams: Our presence and activity both in land and air and other domains on NATO's eastern flank is substantially higher today than it was in February. We took the opportunity of the planned roulement of Army units into Estonia to double up on our commitment on the ground. We have forward deployed a range of enablers and other equipment. We had Challenger 2 out for a while; it spent a bit of time in Poland and a bit of time in Finland, and it is now back in the UK. We are being quite dynamic and flexible in the way in which we are providing visible presence as well as active engagement in NATO tasking, day in, day out.

Q43 **John Spellar:** Let's move on to Warrior. Does the cancellation of the upgrade programme create a capability gap?

Lt. General Nesmith: You are right that in the Integrated Review we made a decision to delete the CSP. What we have in our Future Soldier transformation programme is delivering a core warfighting capability based on three AFVs: Challenger 3, Ajax and Boxer. What we see as the future of our new combined arms manoeuvre is how we exploit the different levels of mobility protection and lethality of those three platforms.

Q44 **John Spellar:** Let's go back to the basic question. Does that create a capability gap? We know Boxer is several years late, and Ajax, after all the money we have spent, we have not yet got one of them, so we have a real shortfall. We have now cancelled the upgrade of Warrior. Surely, by definition, that creates a gap in the capability.

Lt. General Nesmith: We have extended Warrior for a period of time until Ajax is coming into service. If you like, that is the surrogate platform for the Ajax capability. At the point at which Ajax is in, Warrior will go out.

Q45 **John Spellar:** How long will that extension last for?

Lt. General Nesmith: It is from 2025.

Q46 **John Spellar:** How many of Ajax do we anticipate coming in to fill that gap? In other words, we are projecting a sizeable gap in this capacity.

Lt. General Nesmith: As we understand how Ajax will be delivered, we will absolutely be able to mitigate any gap.

Q47 **John Spellar:** How will we mitigate the gap? It cannot be Boxer, because that is well delayed as well, and Ajax will be coming in late, if ever. What will actually cover this gap in an intensified international situation?

Lt. General Nesmith: I think that would remain to be decided, but one of the options—

John Spellar: You mean you haven't planned for that?

Lt. General Nesmith: One of the options could be that we therefore continue to use Warrior as our surrogate platform. But, of course, it is very much a live issue about when we anticipate Ajax coming into service.



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David Williams: Yes, we need to keep under review our plans for how we blend the withdrawal from service of Warrior with the entry into service of Ajax and Boxer, although I do not recognise the characterisation of Boxer being massively delayed—

Q48 **Chair:** Sorry, what?

David Williams: I don't think that Boxer is massively late.

Alex Chalk: It is still in the original IOC. That—

Mr Francois: It is not. The original IOC was '24; it is now '25. I am sorry, but you are wrong.

Q49 **Chair:** Either way, it was a programme we were financially involved with back in 2005, I think, and that is a little while back.

Alex Chalk: In 2003. The central point is that there will be a blend—that is right. We have 700 or so Warrior armoured fighting vehicles—

John Spellar: It's more like a single malt than a blend.

Alex Chalk: But Ajax will come on stream—we anticipate that happening, and no doubt we will talk more about that in due course—and Boxer will be rolled out as well. The Apaches will be upgraded as well, so then we can talk about Deep Fires and all those sorts of things. They come together to form at any particular time a lethal fighting force—

Q50 **Chair:** Minister, slow down, because you are now merging things and blurring the battle picture. Going back, if I may, General, you said that Ajax is replacing Warrior. Please correct me if that is not what you said.

Lt. General Nesmith: We took the decision to extend Warrior as a surrogate platform for Ajax.

Q51 **Chair:** Ajax is a recce vehicle replacing Scimitar—that is what I thought was happening.

Lt. General Nesmith: Correct, so—

Q52 **Chair:** And it is Boxer that is replacing Warrior. You talk about capability gaps. Ajax has not come about yet, so Scimitar, which is 1971, is still kicking about, as far as I understand, and Boxer is a track vehicle without a turret replacing an armoured fighting vehicle with tracks and a 30 mm RARDEN cannon on the top. So there is a capability gap if you replace Warrior with Boxer. Is that not correct?

Lt. General Nesmith: How we see ourselves operating over time, as we transform to Future Soldier, is around a core capability of armoured fighting vehicles, which is the mix of Challenger 3, Ajax and Boxer. It is how they work together that provides the capability—

Chair: This is a decade away though.

Lt. General Nesmith: —over the next decade of transformation or modernisation.



Chair: As you said at the beginning, 2032 is when all these things come in, when you have the full complement. Anyway, I think we should make progress. We get the message: everything coming over the horizon is very slow, and the world will look very different in 2030 or 2032. Mark?

Q53 **Mr Francois:** Minister, you kindly said that you had done some homework and have looked at our report about the British Army's armoured vehicle capability, "Obsolescent and outgunned", which we published in March 2021. You will recognise this statement from the executive summary: "This report reveals a woeful story of bureaucratic procrastination, military indecision, financial mismanagement and general ineptitude, which have continually bedevilled attempts to properly re-equip the British Army over the last two decades." When we published the report, the Army had not brought a major AFV into service for over 20 years. Two years, or very nearly, have passed since that report was published. In that time, which new major AFVs have you brought into service?

Alex Chalk: I have read the report, for which many thanks, and I have looked at precisely those points. My analysis of this—it might be helpful for me to say how I view it coming in—is that it is true, there has not been an armoured fighting vehicle in that time. However, by way of context, it is important to note that in the period when we were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, a lot of vehicles were procured rapidly for the British Army—in fact, more than 2,500. I accept that not all of them were heavy armoured fighting vehicles, but whether it was the Ridgeback, the Foxhound, the Mastiff or the Wolfhound, there were hundreds and hundreds of them—over 2,500 vehicles. I pause to note, because one could be forgiven for missing this point, that more than 2,000 of those are still in action. Indeed, some of what we have been able to deploy to Ukraine, those 200 fighting vehicles, are, indeed, pretty heavily—I certainly wouldn't—you know what those vehicles are, but not everyone does.

Mr Francois: I understand—

Alex Chalk: So, that is important context. The reason—can I just—

Mr Francois: The bells are about to ring.

Alex Chalk: I know, I will absolutely get to this point, but, specifically to your point—someone mentioned FRES—the context of those 20 years is that, up to about 2010, there were three failures. There was TRACER, which didn't work. There was MRAV, which is what Boxer used to be called, where the decision was made not to go with it in 2003. Then, there was FRES, which was going to be 3,000 vehicles and did not happen.

The reason why I mention that is that, if you go back to the NAO report of 2011, which I did read, it said that that would create a tail of gaps in the heavy armoured military thing going up to 2025. In other words, those three decisions had a problem. Then, as indeed, "Obsolescent and Outgunned" said, we pivoted into the fact that we were fighting in



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Afghanistan and procured 2,500 vehicles for that particular conflict. That is the context.

Q54 **Mr Francois:** Minister, I take your point that this is, in one way, on the nub of it.

Alex Chalk: Yes.

Mr Francois: Part of the problem is, while we can blame the contractors—we will get on to Ajax in a minute—a fundamental problem has been that the executive committee of the Army Board could not make its mind up on what it wanted. Twenty years ago, it wanted heavy armour to fight in an eastern European scenario. Then, because of Iraq and Afghanistan, it switched its focus to fighting in the sand, with lighter, more mobile vehicles. Meanwhile, I think it would be generous to say that it took its eye off the ball at the kind of heavier end of capability. Now, it is desperately trying to play catch-up, because of what has happened in Ukraine, and there was a 20-year missing period, which is why so many of those programmes have been cancelled, have gone wrong, or are horribly delayed.

The Defence Command Paper, General, said that we will have, in effect, a fully-fledged fighting division by the end of the decade. That is still seven years away, and I think the Committee will be very concerned by the fact that, today, you did not even reconfirm that as a date; you wouldn't give us a date by when we will have a full-up warfighting division. Can you tell us that that happen by 2030, General?

Lt. General Nesmith: I would absolutely confirm what was set out in that Defence Command Paper. Future Soldier delivers over a 10-year—

Mr Francois: We are, for the record, still fighting for a fully-fledged warfighting division seven years from now?

Lt. General Nesmith: In the Future Soldier plan, it was absolutely about a decade of delivery, and there were known capability risks that we took as we formulated that plan. I think that, through today's lens of war in Ukraine, on land, some of those decisions feel very uncomfortable. Perhaps when we get on to the "What we have learned from Ukraine" piece, the question will be, "What does that mean that we need to do?"

Mr Francois: This is kind of at the nub of it. This is part of the problem, which is that the Army kept changing its mind about what it wanted. That then wagged the procurement tail, as it were, and that is partly why we are in the horrible mess that we are in. Boxer is delayed, its IOC slipped by a year, Minister—look behind you; they will nod, right? With Ajax, we do not even have an IOC; Challenger's is 2027 for one squadron; and for the replacement for AS-90, we are talking around the end of the decade—and there is a war going on in Ukraine right now.

The cumulative effect of all of those decisions that that, if we had to crash out of barracks and fight today, we would be woefully unprepared. Let's be honest: part of that is the Army's fault, isn't it, General?



Lt. General Nesmith: I think, as I said, we have most definitely learned lessons from the equipment programme over the past decade.

Q55 **Mr Francois:** In which case, if that is true—forgive us for a little bit of cynicism, but we will take you at your word—what are we doing to materially accelerate those programmes? Why are they continuing to slip to the right, rather than being brought forward to the left as urgent operational requirements? Why do we still need to wait until the end of 2027 for a world-class battle tank, to take just one example?

If you admit—to be fair, you have admitted—that a lot of it was the Army's fault, but shouldn't the Army then say, "All right, we've made a horrible mistake. Let's now speed everything up to compensate for it"? Surely that is what you should do.

Lt. General Nesmith: First, Defence made some of the decisions around the equipment for the Department, of which, clearly the Army is a part. I would also say a number of things. First of all, we need certainty of our funding, so that we can get on and deliver the programme. I absolutely recognise that we laid out a decade of delivery—

Mr Francois: You have £31 billion—the PUS just said it. How much more do you want?

Lt. General Nesmith: But there is a profile to it. Secondly, we recognise that there are capability gaps in that, capability risks in there that we no longer feel comfortable about—the 4+1, which I am sure we will talk about later—and we are doing something to address that now. We have rebalanced across our own programme to be able to deliver some of that. Thirdly, we are absolutely looking at what we can accelerate. There are a number of challenges around that; the funding profile is but one of them.

Mr Francois: Just quickly, on Mr Spellar's point, you were mixing apples and pears earlier, and you know you were, about different capabilities. The difference between Boxer and Warrior is that Boxer is wheeled and Warrior is tracked. So if you have to accompany tanks cross-country, you cannot do it as easily in Boxer as you can in Warrior, yes? *[Interruption.]*

Chair: Hold that thought. We will suspend this sitting for about 10 minutes as we vote. We will reconvene shortly.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: Welcome back to this Defence Select Committee hearing, which was briefly interrupted by a vote. Mark Francois, would you like to wrap up your question?

Q56 **Mr Francois:** Thank you, Chair. General—not quite saved by the bell—the Army has £31 billion allocated to it in the Equipment Plan. Given that you have candidly admitted that it was largely the Army's fault that you went round in circles for 20 years, what concrete steps are you taking as a service to accelerate some of these armoured fighting vehicle



procurement programmes to plug the gaps in our inventory in case we have to fight? Ultimately, that is what all this is about. What are you doing to speed these programmes up so that the vehicles do not take years and years to come into service?

Lt. General Nesmith: I will touch on two different aspects of what we are doing as a consequence of war in Ukraine. The first is to recognise that in our Future Soldier plan there are a number of capability areas where we now feel uncomfortable about the level of risk. That is the 4+1 capabilities that we may come on to talk about later. In the first instance, it is about how we address some of those capability gaps around our air defence, our uncrewed air system, our deep fires, our ISTAR and our logistics and stockpiles. That is what we are looking to address in the first instance in terms of rebalancing some of the capability risks. We have already done an internal balance of investment for that purpose.

Secondly, against our programme, we of course are looking at opportunities to accelerate. Two very realistic constraints may play out in our ability to do that. One is some of the supply chain constraints that we see as a consequence of war in Ukraine and the second is the capacity of industry. That is not to say that it is not our want to accelerate programmes—we do, and we will be looking to do what we can.

Q57 **Mr Francois:** So you are trying to speed things up.

Lt. General Nesmith: We are looking at what we can do to fill our gaps, or the capability risks that we no longer feel comfortable with, and to do things quicker within our modernisation plan.

Mr Francois: Thank you, General.

Q58 **Chair:** In this final section on the Army's requirements, we will quickly turn to the Joint Expeditionary Force. This is a welcome story that is perhaps less publicised—a British initiative bringing together like-minded nations. It is a sub-unit, if you like, of NATO, but it is separate to NATO. We know that Ukraine will not be joining NATO any time soon, much as it would like to and we would like it to. As you look towards the integrated review, do you think that we should lean on the JEF's common commitment to democracy and utilise that, rather than leaning on NATO? If you are inside the club, NATO works extremely well—absolutely right—to secure and strengthen countries' capabilities and defence; if you are not in the club, you are left exposed.

I am simply asking you to take away my question. Can we lead—because this is a British initiative—on advancing this pool of high readiness and ability to stand up to threats, using the JEF, with a view to inviting Ukraine? Ukraine will need an umbrella of security, whatever happens this year, in the next few years until it is able to join NATO proper.

Alex Chalk: I am certainly happy to take that away as one of the many lessons that we are going to be learning from this conflict.



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Chair: If all answers were as simple as that, we would get through everything.

Alex Chalk: May I say one thing? When we were talking about the armoured fighting vehicles and the protective ability that had been procured in the 2010s, I said it was about 2,500 vehicles. In fact, that figure was 2,313, of which more than 2,000 are still being used by the British Army.

Chair: The Committee was aware of that, but we were being polite.

Q59 **Mr Jones:** Well, that is not true. They are not being used, most of them, because a lot are parked up and we are selling them off.

Alex Chalk: I am just saying that those are in the in-service fleet.

Mr Jones: Come on. We are giving them to Ukraine because we weren't using them. We are starting to sell them off, and a lot of them are not operational.

Chair: The record has been corrected. Emma, I turn to you as we look at more general Army acquisition, not least Ajax itself.

Q60 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Thanks, Chair. Moving back to the discussion that my colleagues had about Ajax, as you know, the UK selected an off-the-shelf design for Ajax, but last year the director general said that, apart from the chassis, we have in effect developed it from scratch. What went wrong? Why is that?

Lt. General Nesmith: One of the identified recommendations from the Ajax reviews is that we overcomplicated our requirement. Several hundred requirements were laid out for the programme, and that was way too complicated. One of the lessons we have taken into how we professionalise our programme delivery is about the simplification of laying out requirements so that there are far fewer, the programme is simpler to deliver against and it has broader utility.

Q61 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I am a little confused. You are saying that you overcomplicated the requirement, but the decision was made to have an off-the-shelf design. Did you not already know what the requirement would be when you selected the off-the-shelf design? How come it ended up going full circle, if that makes sense?

Lt. General Nesmith: Apologies if I misunderstood the question. I will ask Darren to talk to the detail, but there was an off-the-shelf chassis, against which we have then adapted.

Major General Crook: Absolutely. It is a modified off-the-shelf solution. It is a base vehicle known as ASCOD 2, which had been developed by the Austrians and Spanish, so it was a modification of that, enhancing it up to include the capability that we were seeking to gain advantage from, including the sensor suite and the 40 mm cannon.



Lt. General Nesmith: What we have learned from some of that is, first, about the simplification of our requirements and, secondly, absolutely, one of the principles in our land industrial strategy about the use of proven capabilities, modularity and commonality.

David Williams: The lesson for me is not falling into a trap. There are perfectly reasonable circumstances in which we might take an off-the-shelf product or vehicle and choose to modify it. The important thing in those circumstances, going into that, is that it is not necessarily much less complicated or complex than a pure development programme. If you really want to go off the shelf for the simplicity that that brings, you need to go off the shelf, buy something, get it into service and then think about how you might develop it in a spiral way through life. The degree of complexity in the requirements for Ajax involved well over 1,000 key user requirements, and a number of those requirements changed during the life of the project, as opposed to Boxer, for example, which had about 100 KURs.³ We are learning from that experience.

Alex Chalk: When I came into this role, as a complete civilian, I was absolutely clear that, as a matter of common sense, it is much better to get 80% capability today, rather than 100% capability tomorrow, because tomorrow never comes, or can never come. Imagine how pleased I was to see that, in your own report "Obsolescent and outgunned", you make exactly that point at paragraph 23. The thing that is encouraging to me is that in Boxer we are going for something that is that much simpler. The sophistication comes from the command module that goes on the back, which we can swap out, but the essential structure itself is much more straightforward. We see that in the Type 31 as well.

Q62 **Mr Jones:** It is, but it goes back to an earlier point. I do not disagree, General, about what you are trying to do for the future, but I have been in this field for quite a while now—I was at the famous "trials of truth", part of FRES, where Boxer was tested way back in 2006, I think. My problem is with how you get the culture in the Army to sit up and listen. If you look at the reason why we have a lot of these delays, it is down to the Army, with changes to specifications and overcomplicating things. How do you embed that, so that even at a senior level you can say to people, as the Minister said, "Yes, it's nice to have, but actually we will get 80% of it, rather than what you want." Let us be honest, FRES was just a category of that, how it developed over time—it was just optimism. It has been the same with all these programmes. That is an Army problem and not a political problem.

Lt. General Nesmith: Sorry, I am in danger of repeating what I was saying about professionalising the programme delivery, but a lot of thought—

Mr Jones: Sorry, General, I think you are missing the point. The emphasis on over-procurement is not with the people delivering the programme, but with the higher-ups, including the Army Board, who have

³ Boxer has 13 Key User Requirements and 79 lower level Key System Requirements.



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asked for things to be changed over a period of time. How do you get the rigour into delivering what the Minister wants to deliver—which I certainly think is better—which is trying to get 80% of what you want, rather than “tomorrow never comes” and the approach of the past 20 years on this programme? How do you get that vigour into senior thinking?

Lt. General Nesmith: Absolutely, the programme delivery teams need to be capable, competent and linked.

Mr Jones: That would be a start, yes.

Lt. General Nesmith: Linked to that is creating an environment in which people are able to challenge. While we have a lot about upskilling our programme delivery, which gives people the toolset to be less optimistic or to have less optimism bias—that is absolutely about the programme teams and is an important upping of our game in that respect—linked to that is how we shift our Army culture. You know that we are working hard on a lot around Army culture—

Q63 **Mr Jones:** Have the generals been on that course as well?

Lt. General Nesmith: It starts at the top. It is absolutely about creating an environment that is open to challenge. That is the other aspect of changing how we work together.

Major General Crook: There is also an element to do with the cost of change. We now have examples, which we can show, where there is that cost of change in financial terms and in schedule. We have to take those opportunities, crystallise them and present them to people.

Q64 **Mr Francois:** General Crook, let us take a parallel example, with Warrior, before we come to Ajax. For the capability sustainment programme, you decided to give Warrior a new turret and an upgraded weapon. You spent 10 years trying to do that, and £400 million of British taxpayers’ money, and then you cancelled it. With Challenger 3, you are trying to put a new turret on with an upgraded gun, and you think that will take you at least another four or nearly five years before you can bring 18 of them into service. Based on your track record of doing that with armoured vehicles, do you understand why the Committee is so sceptical?

Major General Crook: Mr Francois, yes, I do. I absolutely recognise that caution and the shadow of those former programmes, but I would point out that we have been working really closely with RBSL since they had the contract award. In fact, the Minister and I visited RBSL in December, where we were able not just to meet the apprentices, but to see some of the system integration labs, the dynamic test rigs and the turret test rigs, which are there to de-risk the programme.

There is absolutely a challenge—of course there is—and there are risks in the programme, but we have that ability, by working with industry and good professional people, to de-risk the programme. We are also bringing in a known weapon system: the 120 mm smoothbore is proven, and we understand it. RBSL have the skills from that ground base and, as I go



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back to that apprenticeship piece, they are looking to build that through-life to get that turret in. We are absolutely committed to that.

- Q65 **Mr Francois:** But RBSL, along with Krauss-Maffei Wegmann, built Puma for the German army. This is a new AIFV. They brought it in. They did a trial. There were 18 of them. Every single one of them broke down during the trial. In Germany, Puma is a laughing-stock programme. It's their Ajax, if you like. So how can you have confidence in a company that does that?

Major General Crook: We continue to work closely with the heritage that these companies have; you touched on KMW there. There is a heritage in this, a design organisation in this. We are understanding the lessons through that trials process. The trials process allows us to learn and embed new ideas into things. Of course, with the Puma IFV, some of the challenges they are facing are in the public domain. So we are learning from that as well. That is enabling us to build our test systems, understand the criteria that we're getting at and then design trials, with industry, that get at these things early.

- Q66 **Mr Francois:** Let's come to Ajax directly. You have mentioned trials. Here's where we are today, right? According to the Public Accounts Committee, who were very disobliging about Ajax—*The Telegraph* at the weekend called it a farce—you have now spent about £4 billion of taxpayers' money, at a time when we are having arguments about how we use taxpayers' money to get people out of hospital, and all the rest of it. You've spent 4 billion quid over 10 years. You still don't have a single Ajax vehicle in frontline service. And you still can't give us an IOC date—after 10 years. So perhaps you could update this Committee. What is now the initial operating capability date for Ajax?

Major General Crook: Well, let me just go through a couple of other points and—

Mr Francois: No, just answer that one first and then make your other points.

Major General Crook: We have been working very, very closely with General Dynamics, as you would expect, to draw together a schedule that we understand, in terms of the retrofit of the capability. We have presented that as a plan to the investment appraisal committee.⁴ I think that was articulated to you in December. That is now being considered, with advice to go back to Ministers. So we need to wait until we have had that ministerial advice given and approved before we go forward.

- Q67 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, but 10 years and £4 billion on, you still can't tell us when it's going to enter service?

Major General Crook: I don't think that I am in a position to say that.

- Q68 **Mr Francois:** Well, can anyone tell us? Just give us a date. Can any of you give us a date? It's a very simple question.

⁴ This instance should refer to the Investment Approvals Committee.



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Lt. General Nesmith: From the work that Darren has just described, we have an assumed IOC and FOC—

Q69 **Mr Francois:** Which are what?

Lt. General Nesmith: Which we are unable to give publicly because it hasn't been through the due process. But we have an IOC and we—

Q70 **Mr Francois:** With respect, General, you have had 10 years. How much more due process do you need? You've had a decade!

Lt. General Nesmith: It's departmental process from the point at which it goes from an IAC, through Ministers—

Q71 **John Spellar:** Maybe the perm sec can assist us, then.

David Williams: The decade for the programme is not a fair challenge in terms of where we are on setting the IOC and FOC, going forward, because clearly we have had to revisit those in the light of the problems that the project has had around noise and vibration and the work that we have been doing—

Q72 **Mr Francois:** No, sorry, it is, because we started off with development and production at the same time, which was very unusual, and that began in 2010, so actually we could have said 12 years.

David Williams: Yes, but my point is that whatever we may have thought in 2009, 2014 or 2018 has had to be adjusted in the light of the noise and vibration problem that the vehicle has experienced, on which we now have a workable solution. The vehicle has successfully been through the user validation trials, and we are refining and finalising what we think that means for IOC and FOC, but that will be advice to Ministers, and it will be for Ministers to decide whether they agree with that.

Q73 **Mr Francois:** So you can't give us a date, either. Look, some of the people who were involved in the trials were subsequently medically discharged from the Army with very serious hearing problems. Some of the people who served during the trials had to have steroid injections. A lot of the people who were involved in the trials had to have very detailed hearing tests to determine whether their hearing had been adversely affected. This is a really serious matter. Some people lost their jobs; they lost their military careers.

You say that the vehicle has been through a set of safety trials. They were conducted by the MoD. You could, if you were a cynic, point out that there are a hell of a lot of careers hanging on this programme, so why weren't these trials completed independently? A cynic would say that this was the MoD marking its own homework, wouldn't they?

Major General Crook: We are marking General Dynamics' homework. We are using the armoured trials and development unit to do that, which is independent of Defence Equipment & Support. We have people who have been working tirelessly to push this trials process through, to build the data to support a safe system of work. That is what we have been generating.



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Yesterday, I had a conversation with one of the senior NCOs from the armoured trials and development unit. He described the capability as a game changer, and he completed the UVT battlefield missions with complete confidence, so we have built a safe system of work, and we have worked that safe system on an incremental basis to build a body of evidence to support this. We are not marking our own homework; in fact, I am one of those who has had the hearing tests. We've got safety at the absolute forefront of our mind, and we are building that body of evidence to make sure that we've got the battle-winning equipment that our troops deserve.

Q74 Mr Francois: All right. Because of the problems around this programme, the Secretary of State—by the way, thank you for describing this report as excellent; that is not what the Secretary of State said when it came out but, then, I think he was misadvised—brought in a QC, now a KC, Clive Sheldon, to conduct a review into the management information surrounding the Ajax programme. So, it was not about whether or not you could solve all the problems but, basically, about who knew what when about what was going wrong.

Permanent Secretary, you told the Public Accounts Committee just prior to Christmas that we were very close to that report being published, and that it would be published—that it wasn't going through a Maxwellisation process. Can you or the Minister give us a date today for when the Sheldon review into Ajax will be published?

David Williams: I can update you to the extent of saying that Mr Sheldon has indicated that he will provide, essentially, a final draft to Ministers around the end of January, so it is a few weeks away. There will then be a process of ministerial consideration, and there may need to be some fact-checking. I do not know whether there will be a process of Maxwellisation; it depends on the level of personal observation, as opposed to systemic.

Q75 Mr Francois: You told the PAC that there wouldn't be.

David Williams: Well, I am not aware that there will be, but I have not seen the report.

Q76 Mr Francois: Okay. When Sue Gray published her famous report, she was in control of the timings for that, so obviously Mr Sheldon will be in control of the timings for this. I suspect that, when this report comes out, there are going to be some people who were involved in this programme who are going to be deeply embarrassed, but let's wait and see. Assuming it gets to Ministers by the end of January, when will it then be published so that we can read it and this Committee can take evidence on it?

David Williams: I am afraid that I cannot give you a feel for that. I am happy to get the sponsors of the review to provide a response to the Committee in writing, but given some of my previous engagement with the project, I am not sponsoring the work itself.

Q77 Mr Francois: We understand that.



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My last question is for the Minister, and then I will hand back to the Chair. It is probably fair to say, Minister, that the MoD has not covered itself in glory in this, and neither—it has to be said—has General Dynamics. If you cannot tell us what the IOC is for the vehicle, which is very disappointing, can you at least give us a likely date for when the Sheldon review into what went wrong information-wise will be published? You are the Minister; when do you want to publish it?

Alex Chalk: As soon after the end of January as possible. To try to be of as much assistance to you as possible, if we get it by the end of January, I would expect that the process of doing whatever needs to take place—maybe Maxwellisation, maybe not—should happen within the subsequent four weeks, maybe six weeks maximum. I would expect it to be shortly after that point.

Mr Francois: Four to six weeks.

Alex Chalk: Well, four to six weeks for that process to conclude. If there is anything further that needs to happen beyond that, you are talking about weeks, not months. I think that is as far as I can usefully go.

Q78 **Mr Francois:** Lastly, can you give us an assurance that, rather like Sue Gray, the report will be published completely unredacted?

Alex Chalk: I have to see what it says first—I really do. That is important—*[Interruption.]* No, it is important, actually; it's not something to scoff at. That's because if there are things in that which are operationally sensitive, bearing in mind that—I have spoken to my predecessor—it was absolutely essential that this silk was able to go wherever he needed to go and to follow the evidence. By the way, I think that's absolutely the right approach. It follows—*[Interruption.]* Hang on, let me finish the point. It follows, therefore, that if, in the course of those inquiries, he discovers things that have an impact on national security, then of course I'd have to look at them. I think that's unlikely. That's all.

Q79 **Chair:** Thank you. Perhaps you could share a copy with the Committee, under the usual terms, so we can then see the full unredacted report. That would be very helpful.

Alex Chalk: Yes; that is overwhelmingly likely, yes.

Chair: We will come back to Mark in a second, but over to Dave now.

Q80 **Dave Doogan:** Minister, we hear a lot about the global reputation of the British Army. By any measure, it is an advanced, established and quality operation. Likewise, General Dynamics is a world-leading engineering company. How can these two organisations have come together and produced something as troubled as Ajax?

Alex Chalk: That is precisely why there needed to be a review of it. I think that's right—this has been an unhappy episode. I want to make one thing clear, only because when I came into this Department it wasn't initially clear to me but it has provided me with a measure of reassurance. You could be forgiven for thinking that throughout all this—there had been



all these user validation trials, all this stuff going on—that nothing has been going on in the background while waiting for this to conclude. In fact, already we have 143 that have been completed in the six variants. By completed, I mean about 80% ready to go. Yes, you need to do some software upgrades and you need to have replaced some of the armour, but you have got those 143. There are over 400 hulls that are ready. If you go down to Merthyr Tydfil—

Q81 Dave Doogan: Thanks to Spain.

Alex Chalk: That's true. Not uncommonly, these are combined and collaborative efforts, but the overwhelming majority of the work, by the way, is taking place in the United Kingdom. Those production lines are running hot; it's all going ahead. I think it's reasonable to say that we have turned something of a corner, notwithstanding the points that you properly make. The user validation trials—it is just worth reflecting—completed over 1,500 km. They have done blast protection; they have fired rounds on the move. You have had a letter, haven't you, from General Dynamics suggesting that 98,000 km have been completed? We recognise 1,500 km, but on any view it is a lot. A great deal has taken place and you have heard what General Crook said about the view from those who are driving it.

All I was going to say is that yes, of course we need to learn the lessons and we need to be transparent about that, but the idea that nothing has been produced, this is all sunk and it's no good would be—

Q82 Dave Doogan: I accept that things have happened, but billions of pounds have also been spent and we've still not got IOC levels.

Alex Chalk: That is true. The only thing I would say is that when you're procuring equipment of this nature, you do have to do quite a lot of the money up front, so that you can build these hulls and do a certain amount of that work. It's not just the case that you pay nothing, they produce it and then you get a bill at the end.

Q83 Dave Doogan: It's a bad contract, Minister—it's a bad contract. Anyway, I don't want to over-rehearse Ajax over and above the work that other colleagues have done. Boxer, on the other hand, is a much more straightforward project and it's still troubled. What's the common denominator?

Alex Chalk: As you say, Boxer is a totally different kettle of fish and I will just state at the outset that it is worth reflecting that the lessons have been learned, in the sense that it is a much more straightforward machine. As you say, the Germans have been using it: they have used it in Afghanistan. The Australians use it, and so on and so forth. You have the drive module, which is quite a straightforward bit of equipment and then you put the command module on top and you can swap them out.

Actually, I have been to RBSL; I have seen the production lines there. We will produce them this year; they will be produced throughout next year



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and the year after, and so on. Of course, if you look hard enough, you can find problems in any of these projects, but overall—

Q84 Dave Doogan: You don't have to look hard, though, Minister.

Alex Chalk: But Boxer specifically is proceeding reasonably well. I think it's reasonable to say that. I know that Mr Francois says it has slipped a year. I don't want to get into all the detail and argument about that.

Q85 Dave Doogan: Well, you say it's slipped a year, but we say it's slipped five years.

Alex Chalk: No, I don't think that's right—I really don't think that's right. I don't know whether others who have been here for longer want to comment on that.

David Williams: Boxer, against its approved IOC date, is still on track, but what we had—

Q86 Dave Doogan: If you keep moving the date, it'll keep getting on track.

David Williams: We have contracted through OCCAR for an earlier delivery date in '24, which the project is now slipping against, but it is still within the approval that we have set for the programme, and that's largely down to supply chain pinch points and availability of material.

Q87 Dave Doogan: General, you said in response to Mr Jones earlier that Ajax and Boxer procurement had not gone as you would have hoped, or words to that effect—I hope I am not putting words in your mouth. You said there were lessons to be learned—something of that nature. Many of us on the Committee are really concerned that exactly the same mistakes are now getting made with Challenger 3, in terms of British military procurement exceptionalism. It is as if all the business over there—namely, Leopard 2—is good for other countries but not us; we need a different set of bells and whistles that will cost a different amount of money. When it comes to upgrading, we will have to pay for it ourselves, as opposed to sharing and disaggregating those upgrade costs with all the NATO allies in Europe that operate Leopard 2. Why are we ploughing this lone furrow with an out-of-date platform?

Lt. General Nesmith: I think I recognised that we had learned lessons from the equipment programme, rather than particular elements within it standfast, with Ajax. You make a comparison with Challenger 3. There is a real integration challenge around the programme—that is true. In terms of the simplicity of setting the requirement from Ajax to Challenger 3, we have also lived in the spirit of a significantly more straightforward and shorter list of requirements against our Challenger 3 programme.

Q88 Dave Doogan: Nevertheless, we are going to create in Challenger 3 a one-off and unique British product, which, like all Challengers, only the UK will operate, in terms of a peer nation—I realise they are in Kuwait and Oman. In the long run, this will be much more expensive with, I would argue, significant operational drawbacks. Why are we not operating on the same platform? It would have been built in the UK if we



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had ordered more than 130—that was the threshold. So, it is not about the industrial strategy. I do not understand. I would like you to give a compelling reason why the answer to the problem of the future main battle tank for the UK is Challenger 3 and not Leopard 2.

Lt. General Nesmith: At the time the investment decision was taken, based on the analysis, it delivered a more capable platform and through-life costs were lower. At the time that the decision was made, that was the compelling case for why we chose Challenger 3.

Q89 **Dave Doogan:** I think time will demonstrate that that appraisal is fundamentally wrong.

Alex Chalk: Can I come in on that? I do not think it is as clear as that. In your own report, “Obsolescent and outgunned”, you did not say that we should definitely go for Leopard and not Challenger. I do not think it is as cut and dry as that.

Q90 **Chair:** We do not write policy. All we do is expose. I want to draw this to a close because I want to move on to something else. Just on Boxer, the bottom line is it should not take eight years to procure an off-the-shelf vehicle. We are not designing this; we jumped out of the design package in the early 2000s. Eight years to procure something that you can already buy off the shelf now shows that something is going wrong. That is the message we need to get across. We need to make progress and I do want to get on to Ukraine. Over to Mark on Morpheus.

Q91 **Mr Francois:** Ajax was billed as a highly advanced digitised system. In layman’s terms, in the integrated review the argument was that you could have a smaller army with fewer units—and in some cases less kit—if everything was brilliantly joined up, highly digitalised and could speak to each other. That would give a force multiplier effect, and at the end of the day you get more bang for your buck. I am using layman’s English, but that was the gist of it. I can see witnesses are nodding.

The brain of Ajax, the bit of kit that is meant to do all of this digitised communication and the thing that is meant to go into most of the Army’s other fighting vehicles, is a system called Morpheus. Morpheus is an even bigger basket case than Ajax. It is late, you have spent a vast amount of money on it and there is very little to show for it. Without the brain, a lot of the rest of the concept does not work, not just for Ajax but across the whole of the British Army. General Crook, what is the IOC for Morpheus?

Major General Crook: It will perhaps come as a surprise, Mr Francois, that Morpheus is outside of my—

Q92 **Mr Francois:** I know that it is Defence Digital, but you are the nearest we have got today, so what is the IOC for Morpheus?

Lt. General Nesmith: Perhaps I can take the question. Right at this point in time, we are in dialogue with General Dynamics.

Q93 **Mr Francois:** Ah, General Dynamics; they seem to crop up a lot. Go on.



Lt. General Nesmith: We are working with General Dynamics to work out how we progress through the Morpheus programme—in particular the EvO transition partnership element within that. You are right to say that our Future Soldier proposition was absolutely around the centrality of data and the network, and of course the real game changing part of Ajax is the sensor sweep that is provided on it and the internal open architecture that futureproofs it. Today, we have a capability that allows us to digitally connect our platforms. Sticking with Ajax as an example, the plan was always to put Bowman—our BCIP capability—into our Ajax platform. At a point in time in the future, exploiting the open architecture, we will be able to migrate to whatever the future system is.

Q94 **Mr Francois:** Thank you very much for that. What is the IOC for Morpheus?

Lt. General Nesmith: I just don't think I am in a position to answer that.

Q95 **Mr Francois:** Okay, I will ask the Minister in charge of defence procurement. He runs the whole thing. What is the IOC for Morpheus?

Alex Chalk: Exactly as the general said, there needs to be a discussion with General Dynamics—incidentally, it is a separate company from Ajax—about where we go in terms of what they have produced thus far. That is going to be happening very shortly—in the course of the coming weeks—and we will be in a position to update the Committee thereafter.

Can I just make this point? It may be that everyone understands this, but I didn't initially. Morpheus, as has been indicated, provides the architecture so that, although it is Bowman that allows Ajax to speak to the sensors, Boxer and all these other items, in the fullness of time, when there is a successor to Bowman, you do not have to be tied to General Dynamics or whoever. You can have, as it were, a plug-and-play system. The critical point is that we will be able to deliver what Ajax needs to be able to do—speak to each other, in very simple terms. It doesn't require a Morpheus in the future for that to take place. I just wanted to make that point.

Q96 **Mr Francois:** Yes, but the point with Bowman—without getting into classified territory—is that within a few years the crypto may no longer be secure. Let's just leave it at that. That is why you need an updated system, which you are calling Morpheus. By the time Ajax comes in, Bowman may no longer be secure. But even if you start with Bowman and have to rip all that out and put in Morpheus, that in itself will cost you a small fortune, won't it? You will pay through the nose for the privilege, won't you?

Alex Chalk: David might want to come in on this. The central point is not so much that you have to rip things out.

Mr Francois: You will.

Alex Chalk: What it means is that you are then stuck with whatever the upgrade is. You can't then say, "Do you know what? We don't like that particular company. We are going to go for another company. Just plug it



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into our Morpheus open architecture and off you go." The difficulty that comes if Morpheus doesn't work as expected is that there are effectively proprietorial handcuffs. That company will say, "You have to use that equipment in order to be able to carry on speaking A to B."

Q97 **Mr Francois:** Bingo! And it's GD who have done it to you again. You have not been leant over one barrel; you have been leant over two. How did the Department—admittedly, it was before your time—allow itself to get into a position where its absolutely critical, 21st-century battle-winning, highly digitised communication system is completely dependent on one company that have already given them a tank that doesn't work after 10 years. How did that happen?

David Williams: The decision about Bowman was made in the early 2000s.

Q98 **Mr Francois:** No, I am talking about Morpheus.

David Williams: The point about Morpheus is that, starting from the Bowman system, given the proprietary position of GD, they are the people best placed to help us with the system architecture that we need. The question now, having got that open system architecture from them, is: how are we going to take that forward? We are in discussion with GD about that now. I would expect recommendations to Ministers on how we want to take that capability forward in the course of this quarter—that kind of timeframe.

Q99 **Mr Francois:** I have two more, very quickly. The MoD has a process called an urgent operational requirement, or a UOR. It is what we used to provide some of the vehicles for Iraq and Afghanistan. There was an absolutely urgent need. We went to industry, dropped all the procurement bureaucracy and bought what we needed in a hurry, and by and large it all worked. Given these massive capability gaps that have become very apparent in the Committee with a lot of these Army programmes—they are so wide you can't hide them—and bearing in mind that there is a war in Ukraine, and that Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary-General of NATO, a respected man, has said that we could get drawn in and we might actually have to fight, for real, even within a few months, why don't we turn a lot of these programmes into UORs and materially accelerate them, on the basis that there is a risk of war? Why don't we do that? Anybody?

Lt. General Nesmith: From my perspective as Deputy CGS, we absolutely would want to accelerate our modernisation programme. We recognise that we are able to deliver capability quicker, when the mechanisms around us are different or the circumstances around us are different.

Q100 **Mr Francois:** In many cases, the mechanism is the problem; the bureaucracy is the problem.

Lt. General Nesmith: There are two aspects I was going to go on to talk about. One is our risk calculus. I suspect if we looked at some of our performance cost and time criteria, we may well take a different judgment



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about where we are willing to take capability risks. That is one aspect that we would want to look at. Secondly, we need to have a process around which we can make departmental decisions. That is an enterprise perspective.

Q101 **Mr Francois:** From your point of view as a soldier, as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, would you like to see things like Boxer and Challenger and even Ajax turned into UORs, given the fact that we might have to fight a war?

Lt. General Nesmith: I would like the modernisation programme accelerated. I say that because urgent operational requirements traditionally didn't come with some of the support mechanisms that we require, so we absolutely want capability delivered, rather than a piece of equipment. Do we want to go faster across our modernisation programme? Yes, we do. There are some real-life constraints around how much of that we may be able to do; some of that is supply chain and some of that is industry.

Major General Crook: If I may, we are working really closely to deliver, together with industry. We recognise that it is not us on our own—it is with industry that we do it. That means that we have got to look at the way that we are doing those trials, and how we construct those, and what level of risk we can take in terms of the testing regimes.

You will recognise that we have taken a very cautious approach on Ajax, because of the noise and vibration. We are prioritising noise, vibration, safety, legislation—we are prioritising that activity. We are working with industry partners to use those integration laboratories and test rigs to develop the capability in parallel. We are looking at long-lead items and how we de-risk that.

Q102 **Mr Francois:** There is a war going on! Why is it taking you so long when Ukrainian civilians are being blown to pieces as we speak?

David Williams: The principal way in which we are engaging in the conflict in Ukraine is through our leading role with allies in providing lethal aid to Ukrainian armed forces.

Q103 **Chair:** The point that is being made is that things may not stay at that point. Things may accelerate. They may expand. We may get more drawn in.

David Williams: They may, although I think the principal way you mitigate that risk is by supporting Ukraine as well.

Chair: Okay, that is for another debate, but I think the point has been made. John had a quick question before we move on.

Q104 **John Spellar:** Given the move towards open architecture, why have we allowed General Dynamics or any other company to retain total control of the intellectual property and not insisted as part of the contract that the intellectual property transfers to HMG?



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David Williams: That is a good question. I can't tell you what process we went through on IP back in the early 2000s.

Q105 **John Spellar:** What is the general policy?

David Williams: We are much clearer in our approach now to the IP about that sitting with us rather than with our suppliers. In particular, the digital space, so not just Defence but the industry as a whole, is moving away from a reliance on OEMs—original equipment manufacturers—to open system architecture. I can't retrofit that position to decisions made in the 2000s.

Q106 **Chair:** I am going to bring this part of the session to a close, before we move on to Ukraine. What we have learned today has been very illuminating.

The elephant in the room is money. I will just summarise where we are on our land warfare combat effectiveness. I have made some scribbles here. Our main battle tank, the Challenger, is over two decades old. We are cutting the numbers from 227 to 148—to be upgraded, but the upgrades do not roll out until the 2030s. On armoured fighting vehicles—there are over 700—the Warrior is also a few decades old but will be scrapped completely, with the planned Warrior upgrade cancelled. Now, the vehicle is to be kept in service until the 2030s when, eventually, it will be replaced by the tracked vehicle, Boxer, which has no turret—

Alex Chalk: Boxer isn't tracked.

Chair: Sorry, Boxer is an untracked vehicle that has no turret and no main firepower. Finally, our recce vehicle remains the Scimitar, introduced back in 1971, which might be before you were even born, Minister. It should have been replaced by Ajax three years ago, as we have been discussing, but a litany of procurement problems means that it is unclear when or if that will happen. All that time, Europe's threat picture deteriorates. That is a miserable state of procurement. Surely we can do better. Minister, will that be addressed in the integrated review? Do you accept that we need a bigger defence budget?

Alex Chalk: I want to take issue with quite a lot of that. First, Boxer is not a tracked vehicle; Boxer is a wheeled vehicle—

Chair: I clarified myself, but let us not get—

Alex Chalk: Also, it is important to note that, when you talked about Warrior, what we expect to happen is that Ajax—which, by the way, has a gun on the top; a 40 mm cannon, I think—will start to come on stream. I have already indicated that 143 are 80% delivered. You have asked proper questions about precisely when, but that will start to come on stream—

Q107 **Chair:** I am going to interrupt you there, because again you are mixing apples with pears. I do not want to get into this again: Ajax is not a replacement for Warrior. The Warrior fighting vehicle is a fighting vehicle, which means that there are troops in the back who can dismount to be dismounted armoured infantry. That requires the gun on the top, that 40



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mm RARDEN cannon, as well as troops on the ground. There is no room in the back of the Ajax to put anyone in, so you need another APC to go with Ajax, if you have Ajax there. That is the reason why Boxer is not a replacement for Warrior, and Ajax is not a replacement for Warrior.

Alex Chalk: I invite the military people to come in if they want to, but that is why such things work in concert—that is why we need Boxer as well, to ensure that people can get to the front in an infantry vehicle. That is absolutely right. The only point that I am gently seeking to make is that it is not the case that absolutely nothing happens until 2030, when suddenly we switch the lights on and all those capabilities that have been delayed suddenly arrive; they arrive over time. They roll off the production line, so that we have a blended fleet and then migrate to the point—so, by 2030—that we are all singing, all dancing. Respectfully, that is not completely unusual.

Chair: There is no point getting into this in more detail. In the same way, Ukraine cannot do armoured warfare with just 12 tanks; they need more—they need the capabilities. The full complement will not come into service here until the 2030s, when we can start doing our all-arms combat. Until then, we have a mix and match of old and obsolete kit, with the stuff that is coming online. The message I hope you are getting from this Committee is that it is unacceptable to get to that point in such a length of time. I will draw a close to that, the message having been put across. We will now look at Ukraine and the lessons that we can learn. To take us away is someone who has been waiting very patiently—Richard, over to you.

Q108 **Richard Drax:** Good afternoon to you all. Nice to see you. My question is a little gentler than what you have undergone so far. We are nearly a year into the Ukraine conflict. What relevant lessons might influence the future development of the British Army? From the perspective of an ex-military man, bearing in mind that the war we have seen has mainly been defensive on the Ukrainians' part, which is why the kit we have given them has proved so helpful, not least the anti-tank missile, if they are to win, they will obviously need tanks, planes and all the other things that they are asking for? What are the lessons so far? What influence are they having or could they have on the future development of the British Army, bearing in mind all the difficulties that we have heard about over the past hour, which are considerable?

Lt. General Nesmith: I will start with wave-topping at a macro level some of the lessons that we would take from the war in Ukraine. The first is of course the centrality of preparing to fight and win wars alongside our allies and partners, and the centrality of our role in NATO. Secondly, it is how we adapt—

Q109 **Richard Drax:** Sorry—"centrality" sounds a bit jargony. Do you mean that we will fight with other NATO allies and play our part?

Lt. General Nesmith: Correct. And I guess the point being that we worked effectively alongside our Ukrainian friends, both before and since the illegal invasion. It is about the power of that relationship and what, as



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a leading member of NATO, we have been able to harness as a consequence of our national standing.

Second is adaptation. It is adaptation at a level of adapting how we fight today, and we are absolutely learning lessons from the war in Ukraine about how we would fight today. But also—we have already touched on this—it is how institutionally we adapt quicker and bring in new capability at a quicker rate.

Third is how we ensure that we are ready, resilient and competitive today. You will have heard the Chief of the General Staff talk a lot about the mobilisation in order to deter Russia.

Fourth is around our Future Soldier vision. I have touched on this a couple of times, but the modernisation programme, or Future Soldier, absolutely laid out our core purpose. That has absolutely been amplified, but we recognise that there are a number of areas we are very focused on as we go into the Integrated Review refresh. Some of that is around capability risks, the 4+1 capabilities. Some of that is around making sure that we have a resilience in our workforce. There is a lot about our industrial capacity and about recognising that we have not invested in the land industrial base as we would now wish to. We would, of course, then like to deliver on modernisation quicker.

The fifth macro-level is that there are tactical insights that we take on a daily basis, from either Interflex or learning from what we see play out.

Q110 Richard Drax: We have seen how the Ukrainians are fighting the Russians now and we have heard about the difficulties you have. Having studied Ukraine for a year, which I am sure you have, are you going, “Oh dear. We don’t need as many tanks or Ajax”? That is, indeed, if there were Ajax. Are you having second thoughts on the route you are trying to take, not least to 2030, as we have heard today? Are you saying that we need more of something else? Is thought being given to the development, which is what the question is about, of the British Army, which at the moment has stalled horribly for the reasons we have heard? Do you have any change of heart or mind on equipment, the size of the Army or whatever?

Lt. General Nesmith: It tells us that what we set out in Future Soldier is absolutely right, but there are some areas where we would want to address some of that capability risk. We absolutely want to build on Future Soldier—Future Soldier Next, or whatever you would like to call it.

Q111 Richard Drax: What would you like in relation to what you are trying to get?

Lt. General Nesmith: The capability risk areas that I have only very briefly touched on are around our ground-based air defence, our electronic warfare and signals intelligence, our uncrewed air systems, our deep fires, and then logistics and our stockpiles. Those are areas that we have identified in our Future Soldier plan where we need to mitigate some of those risks. We also recognise that we need to ensure that our workforce



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is resilient so that we can deliver a sustainable and resilient workforce that underpins the capabilities we seek in Future Soldier, and we need to have an industrial capacity that will support us over time.

Q112 **Richard Drax:** Do you want a bigger Army?

Lt. General Nesmith: What we want is a workforce that is sustainable to deliver the capabilities laid out in Future Soldier. That is about having the right mix of skills and talent and of Regulars and Reserves and it being sustainable over time.

Q113 **Richard Drax:** Bearing in mind that, as we have heard, we could possibly be drawn into this conflict—God forbid—we know that the Ukrainians are suffering large numbers of casualties. We have 70,000 in the Army, of which 24,000 or 25,000 are the spear tip, I suspect. The rest are support in one form or another. They aren't going to last long in some sort of armed conflict that could go on for weeks, months or potentially even years. Do you not want more soldiers?

Lt. General Nesmith: In our force design we are of course looking at whether we have the right mix, but I emphasise that it is about the capability that we seek through Future Soldier, acknowledging that we would absolutely be fighting alongside our allies and partners. But we are looking at whether we have the resilient, sustainable structures to support the capability we need.

Q114 **Richard Drax:** Finally, because time is tight and there are other questions to come, you talked about stockpiles. There have been questions of "Why has everything taken so long and are you going to do something about it?" In all the priorities you have listed, including the stockpile of weapons and so forth, are you demanding sufficient money from the Government to ensure that we are ready—again, God forbid—in the event that we get dragged into this war?

Lt. General Nesmith: We are supporting the broader Defence work to make sure that we are reviewing the assumptions around what are appropriate levels of stockpiles and that they are addressed.

Q115 **Richard Drax:** So after a year, are you only reviewing and not asking?

Lt. General Nesmith: No, I think some of that work is in progress.

Alex Chalk: This is absolutely front and centre, because one of the lessons learned is that you need more ammunition. By the way, it is not just the UK that has learned that lesson, but across the western alliance. Not only has money been allocated over 10 years for replenishment of munitions, but also £560 million was granted in the autumn statement to go beyond that—in other words, to build deeper stockpiles for those additional stockpiles. As I say, that is about half a billion pounds over and above. What we need to do is not just replenish—we talked about NLAWs and Javelins and Brimstones—but go beyond that as well.

On one of the key lessons, I would emphasise that we have a number of deep fires multiple launch rocket systems, some of which are currently



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being upgraded in the United States to give a greater range and so on, but we are also procuring more. We are looking to increase the number of rocket launchers that we have precisely to meet one of the lessons from Ukraine. So deep fires and ammunition—absolutely, on those two points.

Chair: This is leading into Gavin's question, so we will explore these details—

Q116 **John Spellar:** Can I ask what sort of production capacity we have in the UK? What are we doing to ensure that we have capacity?

David Williams: The previous answer given by my boss, the Minister, is that alongside replenishing what we have given to Ukraine and beginning to use the money that has been allocated to us by the Government to build up future stockpiles, there is a critical question for us about the underpinning industrial capacity and the health of the supply chain.

At the moment, the rate-limiting factor for me is not money but our ability to get the supply chain behind NLAWs, the industrial capacity for ammunition and so on, in the right place. We are engaging with a range of our primes as we speak on not only how we quickly replenish what we have given, but how we build a pipeline of sustainable industrial capacity from which we can surge in time of crisis. Our previous approach has tended to be to buy the stockpile, sit on it and do nothing. We need to think about a sustainable drumbeat of purchase.

Alex Chalk: I think the way Andy Start put it before the Public Accounts Committee last year was that we need to move away from stop-start, as you say, to always on. That is where we need to be. We need to be constantly producing the ammunition, so we are not in a situation where we get a batch, fire it and then it is incredibly difficult to warm up the production lines. They have to be always on; that is the new tempo.

Q117 **Chair:** We will come on to stocks in a second, but just a couple of questions on bigger thinking to do with Ukraine, not least to do with the integrated review. When will the review of the integrated review be completed?

David Williams: The refresh of the Integrated Review is being led out of No. 10 and the Cabinet Office, so it is not a Defence exercise or document, although obviously we are closely engaged in it. It is under way now. The precise matter of when that is revealed will be for the Prime Minister, but I would expect it to be in the next few months.

Q118 **Chair:** Okay, with that in mind, looking at the previous integrated review, you flag up the deteriorating global security environment, and you speak about Russia and China posing threats, but that was prior to Ukraine. Can we ask that there is a recognition that you are going to need a bigger budget? The last review cut back on Army, Air Force and Navy capabilities because of space and cyber-defence expansion, understandably, but the world is very different today. Is that recognised in the MoD and in No.10?



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Alex Chalk: There was a recognition in the autumn statement that that is where we need to move towards.

Chair: No, there was a tie over of funding to make sure that you would not fall behind. There was not the recognition that now is time to increase Defence spending because the world is changing.

David Williams: The Chancellor recognised that the Defence budget would need to grow, but decisions on by how much and when should flow from consideration in the Integrated Review refresh. That is the sequence that we are thinking about now.

Clearly, the world has moved on, although a lot of what was at the heart of the IR still remains good. That sounds trite. Clearly, we called Russia out as the most acute threat to our security; I think we probably underestimated the degree of belligerence and stupidity, because we did not predict an invasion of Ukraine so quickly.

On the other hand—this plays to the timescales—the conflict may escalate, but clearly our support to Ukraine is designed to avoid that. There is at least a point in which the Russians’ land capabilities and ability to execute a plan are not as good as we thought they were in February. They are certainly a lot worse now as a result of the attrition that Russia has had in terms of personnel and matériel. So we need to take all that into account. There are lessons from Russia and Ukraine.

Q119 **Chair:** I do not want to open up a whole debate here, but Russia’s ability to endure hardship is far greater than the west’s. Putin can keep throwing stuff at this, lose stuff, keep going, and test our will and commitment to longevity. That is what he is playing at, and that is why we potentially need to spend more on defence. May I ask the Minister a question, which you may not be able to answer now, in the light of the consequences of failing to support Ukraine prior to the invasion and failing to prevent one in the first place? Arguably, inflation would be 4% had the invasion not taken place—how different the public sector deals would be if that were the case! Across the MoD capabilities, how many microchips that are used in military equipment in the Army, Air Force and Navy come from Taiwan?

Alex Chalk: I don’t know. I will have to write to you on that. I do not know how many microchips we have.

Q120 **Chair:** I didn’t think you would be able to answer that question. I think it might be worth learning and understanding how reliant we are on Taiwan, bearing in mind that China is watching things very carefully. We need to think about these things today.

Alex Chalk: May I say one thing on that? It is very important. The issue of the vulnerability or otherwise of our supply chain is absolutely front and centre of what we are seeking to review in our military. When we look at the industrial strategy, how we reshore things where necessary, and how we build our sovereign capability, it is precisely that issue that we are looking at. On the ammunition that we are talking about, we are looking



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line by line at what goes into each one, and seeing where we can remove things that are at risk and reshore them where appropriate. That process is very much under way.

Q121 Chair: I will have a stab in the dark, and I am happy to be corrected, but I reckon about 80% of the microchips that are used in all our complex defence systems are from Taiwan. That is food for thought in relation to whether we have resilience of supply. I will leave that there. My final question is for you, Mr Williams. If the UN were to request maritime support for a neutral fleet to protect the grain ships coming out of Odessa, would we be able to contribute?

David Williams: In capability terms, we would be able to contribute. The question is a policy and political one.

Chair: That is a good answer.

Q122 Dave Doogan: Minister, you talked a lot about supply chains, which is fine where those supply chains still exist. As the general identified in one of her previous answers, many of our supply chains have not received the support in the land industrial space that they could have had, because of stop-start procurement behaviours and sale to foreign jurisdictions. They have gone. Government policy cannot be to try to regenerate those capacities, because once they have gone, they have gone: the industrial base is gone, the skills have gone and the knowledge is gone. Will the Government commit to taking a much more circumspect view of who comes and procures domestic defence companies in the United Kingdom than it has historically?

Alex Chalk: There are two issues there. The question of whether things are gone or whether they need to be reheated is, I think, moot. On our ability to build Ajax and Boxer, as I say, I have been to Telford and met some of the young apprentices. It is incredible; they are so excited to be working on this. That capacity is very much building. I am not sure that I completely accept that it is gone, but I accept the point about things being degraded, stop-start and so on. That is why we have to be much more always on. Forgive me—what was your second point?

Q123 Dave Doogan: I do not want to annoy the Chair, but the industrial capability of the military-industrial complex in the United Kingdom is much smaller, in both scale and expertise, than it used to be. These things are gone—not the final prime doing the assembly. You referred to Ajax, with Spanish hulls that would have normally been built in the United Kingdom. Once these have gone, they have gone, so will the Government take a much more circumspect view?

Alex Chalk: Certainly we are now much better able, not least through the legislation that we have passed, to step in where we think that a sale would materially undermine our industrial capacity, or indeed affect national security, so we have the legislation to do so. I am very pleased that we introduced it, and we have been deploying it. So we will absolutely be muscular in this space. We have recognised that we have to be more sovereign, more capable, and have more capacity in this country than ever



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before. That is important for our national security and our industrial base, and that is the approach we want to take.

Chair: Thank you for that. Gavin.

Q124 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon. General, do you mind if I come back to a question you were asked by Mr Drax? Should we have a larger Army? You could have said yes, but you did not. Arguably, you should have. You could have said no, but you did not. You talked about recognising the capacity that we need and having the ability to respond to the threats that are there. How good do you think the MoD is at identifying those threats? How good do you think the MoD is at changing tack or providing different capabilities in response to a changing threat?

Lt. General Nesmith: First of all on the workforce, CGS has said that it feels it would be odd to reduce the size of the Army at a time of war in Europe. But I did not use the word "capacity". I used the word "capability", and it is absolutely about having the resilient workforce to deliver the capabilities that we need.

Q125 **Gavin Robinson:** How good do you think the MoD is at recognising the need for defence capability or capacity?

Lt. General Nesmith: I think that is part of the Integrated Review refresh decision.

Q126 **Gavin Robinson:** So it is really poor. There has been a modernising defence programme and SDSR. There has been a national security review, a national capability and security review etc since I have been in Parliament, and every time there is a changing threat. Almost on a yearly or 18-month basis, there is a different recognition of the threat that pertains, but the Army is not changing quickly to adapt to that threat, and nor is the MoD capable of upscaling or downscaling in response to that threat. Do you agree with that or disagree?

Lt. General Nesmith: I think the assessments that were made in the Integrated Review, which led to our Future Soldier transformation programme, is what we see playing out in Ukraine today.

Q127 **Gavin Robinson:** When I joined this Committee and James Gray was a member and he talked about the importance of the High North, the MoD used to roll their eyes in the backs of their heads. And when Martin Docherty-Hughes from the SNP was a member of this Committee and he used to talk about the need to retain the library on Russia at Shrivenham, people at the MoD rolled their eyes in the backs of their heads. "Boring. We've moved on. We don't need to know." But we do. So is there a recognition that rather than stop-starting, you do need to keep things on and you do need to recognise that there is no threat of global terror and then there is? There is no threat in Europe, but the threat is in the Middle East and then it is not. Then you are back to a threat in Europe. This constant need to change and pivot to meet the threats while degrading capability and capacity does not work. Do you accept that?



Lt. General Nesmith: I think there is a range of threats out there, and we are absolutely alive to what those threats are. Our future force design is absolutely about understanding that future operational environment. Here and now, today, what we are most focused on is our ability to deter the threat from Russia. That is through the lens by which we are looking to adapt our Future Soldier plans so that we are able to play the part of a NATO force that defends and deters.

Mr Francois: Deters?

Q128 **Gavin Robinson:** General, I thank you for your answers. There is a recurring theme in what people who come before this Committee say to us during their service and what they say once they have left service and have a little bit more freedom, but I am grateful for your answers. I will turn to the Minister now.

Minister, since I have been on this Committee there have been eight Defence Procurement Ministers, and the recurring theme with the Procurement Ministers is that you end up having your first session dominated by issues for which you have no responsibility. The mark of your success will be that your successor does not have as many questions thrown at them, so you can take that hopefully in the spirit that I do mean it. Minister, you are right to say that we cannot have this on/off approach. There will be an issue that, no doubt, will be back before us again about naval procurement, shipbuilding and so on, which consequently arises from MoD degrading capability and capacity. On stockpiles—I will go into this further in a moment—when you became Minister for Defence Procurement, did you ask or were you aware of what stockpiles we had in February?

Alex Chalk: The first week. I think it was the first morning.

Gavin Robinson: And what we have today?

Alex Chalk: Yes.

Q129 **Gavin Robinson:** So what is the percentage difference?

Alex Chalk: That genuinely is a matter that is confidential. I cannot tell you about specific stockpiles, for obvious reasons.

Q130 **Gavin Robinson:** I am concerned that you did talk about the finance associated with replenishing stockpiles and going further, and you projected 10 years for that.

Alex Chalk: There are two aspects here. Absolutely, it was one of the first things I wanted to know—what we have gifted to Ukraine, where that leaves us, and what the plan is to reprocure that. A number of contracts have been placed. It is slightly more complicated, as I discovered, because you are not necessarily buying exactly the same thing as you gifted. Sometimes the NLAW has improved and so on and so forth, but I can assure you that that is absolutely front and centre. On an almost philosophical point, and this goes to my point about 80%, it is no good to find yourself in a situation where you have bought your, as some referred



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to, Gucci weapons or 100% weapons, and you then run out and the cupboard is bare.

We have to move to a point of always on, even if that means that the thing you are procuring is not necessarily 100%, but you know it is going to be there, in your stockpiles and that your supplies are going to improve. That, by the way, does not just apply to ammunition. It applies to other platforms as well—whether it is Boxer, which is, to be candid, probably a less sophisticated and complicated bit of equipment than Ajax, or whether you are looking at the Type 31, which is less complicated than Putin's. We all know from using our Apple Macs and PCs that it is the software you put on to these things that provides a lot of the capability. We should be looking to spiral that up, meanwhile keeping the production lines—the hardware, if you like—going so that you can upgrade in that way. That has got to be the approach, because that is how you keep the industrial capacity warm, create a pipeline of apprenticeships and all the things we need, and then you are in a much better position to ramp up in a time of war so that it is not from a standing start. That has to be the philosophical approach.

Q131 Gavin Robinson: Philosophically, are you content that you are now in a place for practical application?

Alex Chalk: I really am. Some of the points you are making, respectfully, are exactly the ones that occurred to me when I came at this and no doubt to civilians out there. I see this Department as one that has moved beyond issues of over-complex systems that cost an absolute fortune and are incredibly difficult to bring forward, because—guess what—the more complexity you have, the more things can go wrong. It is now a Department that recognises that capacity is important and actually getting these things off the line is important, keeping in mind the fact that a lot of the real brains and capability are things that you spiral in through software and other bolt-ons. A classic example is Boxer. If you take Australia, they have more command modules than drive modules, because they can switch things around. That is where we need to be.

Q132 Gavin Robinson: Minister, you have mentioned NLAWs, which are made in my constituency. You would be very welcome to come and visit if the Committee intends to do so. You will recognise that that was one item that was discontinued—foolishly discontinued. When we replenish contracts, we are doing that from elsewhere.

Alex Chalk: The only thing I would say is that that was also a weapon about which there were plenty of voices saying, "What on earth are you doing with this? Anti-tank weapons in a world of cyber? Why are you procuring all this nonsense?". But it was the British Government and the British Army that said, "No, we do need it", and it was such a powerful thing for our Ukrainian allies that they had it there. The job of this Committee quite rightly is to say, "You've done this and that wrong", but the majority of these procurements happen on time and on budget, and we have a huge amount of very, very lethal equipment in our inventory. I



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don't want to lose sight of that very important point at the end of these proceedings.

Q133 **Mr Francois:** Minister, we hope you will be in post for a while, for the record.

Alex Chalk: Thank you.

Mr Francois: The PAC, our sister Committee—remember, its prime focus is the efficient spending of taxpayers' money—concluded in October 2021 that “The Department's system for delivering major equipment capabilities is broken and is repeatedly wasting taxpayers' money.” I have to say, on the basis of the evidence this afternoon, they are absolutely right. Do you agree that your procurement system is broken?

Alex Chalk: No, I don't, actually. I think there are some things that have not proceeded as they should, and that is absolutely correct. You are absolutely right to focus on Ajax—this is not in any way a criticism—but there is a danger that people get the impression, as I say, that this is all sunk, wasted money and we have nothing to show for it. Yes, it has had problems with noise and vibration, but if that comes good—

Mr Jones: If.

Alex Chalk: Of course, but 'twas ever thus. There are now very good grounds to think that it will come good, and we will have a very effective and lethal bit of equipment.

Q134 **Mr Francois:** But with respect, this has not just been about Ajax.

Alex Chalk: No, but that is so important—it is the tip of the spear that you used to make that point, not unfairly. All I am saying is that you could be forgiven for getting the impression that that is billions of pounds that is going to produce nothing. As I say, there are 143 of these that are already made, and 80% ready to go. There are 400 hulls that are ready to be specced on.

Q135 **Mr Francois:** Big deal! You can't fight the Russians with a hull in a factory.

Alex Chalk: Of course you can't. All I am saying is that this is happening, and it is rolling forward. Yes, there are things that need to be learned, but there are plenty of other things: Apache is coming forward, and the P-8 is working as it should. We were able to give 100,000 mortar rounds to the Ukrainians; we can give them night vision goggles. All I am saying is that it is not all one-way traffic.

Mr Jones: The P-8 and Apache were both off the shelf, bought from the Americans directly.

Q136 **Mr Francois:** Can you confirm that today is Wednesday 11 January 2023?

Alex Chalk: Yes.



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Mr Francois: Good. Well, we can't say that you didn't confirm any dates at all. Thank you very much.

Alex Chalk: Thank you, Mr Francois.

Q137 **Chair:** Just to remind the Procurement Minister, Boxer does come with a variant that has a big gun on the top, as the Committee will be aware. Thank you for bearing with me.

Alex Chalk: We are looking at it.

Chair: You are looking at it? Eight years on, you are looking at it. That is fantastic.

Let me draw this to a conclusion: when generals get asked, "Would you like a bigger Army?", the usual diplomatic reply is, "Of course we would, but it's over to the Ministers to decide." I am sure that is the case with all people in the armed forces: they would always like a bigger Army, but quite rightly, it is for the politicians to make those decisions. It is certainly something that the Committee would push forward, too.

Just on the kit that has been gifted across, which means that some of our cupboards could be getting quite bare, could we please have a private briefing for the Committee to go through everything that is there, so we can help you look at what can be done to replenish, as Mark has alluded to a number of times, in case things do get turned—

Alex Chalk: Yes, absolutely. I think we have offered that a number of times, but I am happy to restate that. I think that would be valuable.

Chair: We will chase that up with you. Finally, we very much look forward to the refresh—as it is called—of the integrated review.

It has been very illuminating and very informative: thank you so much for your time. Minister, thank you very much indeed; David Williams, good to see you again. Generals, we really appreciate you coming here and being as candid and frank as you can about what is actually happening during this difficult time. At the end of the day, we are all on the same side, wanting the best for our armed forces. That brings this session to a close. Thank you to colleagues, as well, and to all the staff.