

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357

Tuesday 24 November 2020

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 43 - 132

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence, Ministry of Defence; Anthony McGee, Deputy Director for Operational Policy, Ministry of Defence; Major General Charles Stickland CB OBE, Assistant Chief of Defence Staff (Operations and Commitments), Ministry of Defence.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Ministry of Defence](#)
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Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ben Wallace, Anthony McGee and Charles Stickland.

Q43 **Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing on 24 November 2020 in the House of Commons. We are delighted to welcome Ben Wallace, the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Defence, Major General Charles Stickland and Anthony McGee from the MoD. Our focus today will primarily be the Armed Forces' response and support towards the pandemic, but we will begin with some other news that has been in the headlines of the last few days, reflecting on the integrated review.

Congratulations are in order, Secretary of State. You have succeeded, where others may have failed, in securing a multi-year settlement, guaranteeing, I hope, support and funding for the Armed Forces over the next three years. Out of interest, though, when this review was promoted, there were three definite parts to it: first, confirming the UK's ambitions; secondly, confirming the threat that we face and what we want to do about it; and, finally, designing the defence posture in response to that. It seems in this case that you have secured the funding—congratulations for that—but we are still waiting to hear on the first two parts. When are we likely to get that full review and full understanding of what Britain's ambitions are in a very changing world?

Ben Wallace: On the second part, understanding the threat, first, you do not have to wait for that. Both in open source and in my world, in classified information, the threat is enduring, and it evolves, so a large part of the defence contribution to either an integrated review or, indeed, security is meeting that threat. I know what I need to do to meet the threat. Once you have met the threat, the second part of the question is about what else you want to do. That is the global ambition part. Let us put it that way.

First and foremost, the duty is defence, as opposed to offence. It is about being able to protect the nation, the homeland, our interests and our allies. That is why we can be pretty confident that the funding we have achieved and the strong requirement we needed for a multi-year settlement will help us meet that threat and modernise to meet the threat. That does not have to wait for the other bit, which is about what Britain's ambition globally is.

That does not mean to say that has not been going on in the background anyhow. All the way through this process I have been engaged with the Foreign Secretary, other Cabinet Ministers, Professor John Bew and No. 10 in contributing to the integrated review. As you know, the original plan had been for this to be some time in the autumn as a whole package. That should not have stopped us in defence from proceeding to where we are now. The budget is still where it is. The spending review is this week and decisions around funding have to be made. Our capabilities are fundamentally linked to those funding decisions. Therefore, it would be quite odd if it happened the other way around: if the Chancellor stood up



tomorrow and announced X amount of money for defence and we did not say anything other than, "We will get back to you in the IR to discuss the new money". We have to make that decision now.

I could not have held any longer the challenges around our funding deficit anyhow. These things run out, time runs out and decisions have to be made. The SDSR, the IR and, indeed, the CSR are for the following financial year; I have significant pressures in this year alone that I have to meet and deal with.

Q44 Chair: I hear and understand that. We are aware of the funding challenges that you face, and it is good to see that you now have funds to help. I do not want to labour the point too much, but we still need confirmation of what the threats are that we officially face. If we are looking over a five-year period or a decade, I and many would argue that China now poses a geopolitical and strategic threat, yet nobody in Government has yet said that and confirmed it, giving you, the MoD, clarity on where you need to focus. That is what I am asking for: when will we get confirmation of that? Is that likely to come in February? You say you know it already, but are we likely to see in print what the geopolitical short, medium and long-term threats to Britain's interests are that we face?

Ben Wallace: A range of documents have already come out about the threats we face. If you want a declaration by the Government of who our enemies are, I am not sure even the IR will be specifically tailor-making a long list of the bad, the good and the neutral guys. It will be about saying what the current status of the world is, in terms of conflict and instability, and what the current technology threatening to defeat our forces or to expose our vulnerabilities is. We have talked about space or anti-space weapons that Russia and China have trialled, tested or, indeed, even fired, which we should be acutely aware of.

To go back to the point, I know the sequence is important to you, but between now and January, which is when the IR will be delivered as a whole, we are talking about six, seven or eight weeks. Therefore, it was important for defence, because it is so linked to budgetary pressures, to get where we are right now. I look at it as a building block rather than a cart before a horse. It is a building block and it is responding to the threats.

A lot of the threats do not need to come with a flag attached. Our forces, in some areas, are in desperate need of modernisation because of proliferation of capability. In the past, it would have been quite easy and comforting to say, "Only the Soviet Union has this capability", so, as you say, we would have to declare the Soviet Union as the adversary and, in doing so, cover everything. Our biggest challenge in the 21st century is proliferation. I do not know who all the threats are going to be because the real threat posture to us will be defined by what technology they have got their hands on. A lot of people out there do not like us.



Chair: We need to press on. I just make it clear that in the quadrennial review, which is the equivalent that the US produces, it is very clear in the executive summary exactly what the threats are that are posed. They name countries that pose a geopolitical threat to the interests of the United States. I hope that is something we can tease out of the Government to make it clear, because it is that ambiguity, particularly with China, that means we continue in a place of denial.

Q45 **Mr Jones:** Secretary of State, as someone who is passionate about defence, can I welcome last week's announcement of the funding? Particularly as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for shipbuilding and ship repair, can I also welcome the emphasis on shipbuilding? The Prime Minister made a lot of play last week about the ways in which this can revitalise our sovereign shipbuilding capacity. In terms of timescales, could I ask you something I have asked you on numerous occasions myself, as has John Spellar, which is around the issue of fleet solid support vessels? When will these be procured?

Secondly, just in terms of the additional vessels that were announced last week, what is the new Type 32 vessel, and will it be able to do our NATO tasks?

Ben Wallace: On the fleet solid support ships, I have said that, first of all, having cancelled the previous tender process and the previous competition, which was effectively delinquent, we went back out to engage with potential bidders. We have had those discussions and we will pretty soon be in a position to start the competition. I can get you an exact date if you want one; I can write to the Committee and let you know.

Exactly as you say, part of the challenge for our shipbuilding industry is about making sure that we have a pipeline rather than a feast and famine. I want to make sure that all the ship contracts we place allow a throughput of work through our yards that is enough for me to be able to say to the owners of the yards, "You have a reason to invest in your workforce and your capital", so they cannot use the excuse, "In five years' time it is all coming to an end, so why would we really carry on?"

You and I both agree that productivity and competition with other, sometimes subsidised European yards is really important if we are going to stake a claim for the future shipping industry. That is why I want to make sure that it is scheduled, let us say, so that we can fill a slot when different yards come out of build. I cannot tell you how important that is, because there is nothing more frustrating, sitting at my desk, than someone saying that there is not actually the capacity next year or in five years in a yard, so it will have to go abroad. I do not want that to be the reason we cannot do it. What I am crafting right now is to make sure it is in the right place.

Q46 **Mr Jones:** Those would be different yards. They would not be the destroyer and frigate yards, would they?



Ben Wallace: It depends on who bids. It depends on who actually wants to make the ships. I have been abroad and got business for some certain yards, and I was only told last week that the yard has now decided that it does not want to make something.

Q47 **Chair:** We need to make progress. Could you just answer Kevan Jones' question? You can write to the Committee. Just give us a quick hint as to what the Type 32 will be about.

Ben Wallace: The Type 32 is not in the next five years. It is a commitment to put funding to the next Type 32 programme. The Type 32, we hope, will come further along from the Type 31, which is only five ships. The Type 32 will hopefully follow a similar track. They will be able to be used for NATO, and we can probably reveal more details about those as we go. The Navy has requested another class of ship; that is the Type 32. If you think of the profile, the Type 23 will be coming out of service, and some of that will be picked up by the Type 26s and the Type 45s, which are hopefully, with a PIP correction, going to run longer than they would have done. It is about increasing our surface fighting ships, destroyers and frigates.

Q48 **Chair:** Maybe I can get another letter out of you, if you can give us the parameters as to what you understand the Type 32 to be, because this is the first that we have heard of it. It is very exciting.

Ben Wallace: I will. Can I just say something on your point about the IR, which does link to this? Over the next few months, we will set out some of those issues that you will have concerns about more specifically. I will be doing, as will some of our military leaders, a series of statements or publications that talk about threat, modernisation, the need, if there is a need, for reform, the new domains and, indeed, talk about what the Navy's plans will be for the future.

Q49 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Secretary of State, the Committee is also very interested in how we reward members of the Armed Forces, not just for the response to Covid-19 but also around recruitment. I wonder if you would agree that means that members of the Armed Forces need an above-inflation pay rise in the public sector pay negotiations that are going on. Is that something you would support?

Ben Wallace: I know, having been through the negotiation process, how very tight we are on the public sector deficit place that we are in. In terms of the amount of money we have spent, last week, when we announced £16.5 billion—

Q50 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I take it that is a no.

Ben Wallace: If we are to give our public sector workers, whether they are uniform, military, nurses or anything else, the best we can, we have to get good public finances. I would love to reward our Armed Forces; we are rewarding them through this settlement with things like free wraparound childcare, to add to their terms and conditions and give them



HOUSE OF COMMONS

better support. I also recognise that we have to balance and do our best to try to deal with this economic impact. It is up to the Chancellor, in the end, how he manages the overall nation's finances, but at the moment, in this period, I support the position of the Chancellor and we will get more details tomorrow.

Chair: Can I just endorse the spirit of what Martin Docherty-Hughes is saying? People never join the Armed Forces for the money, but it should not be a reason, because the money becomes so low, that they are prevented or deterred from serving their country.

Q51 **Richard Drax:** Secretary of State, you and I are both ex-soldiers. We like common sense, or at least I hope we do. News from Catterick left me a little aghast. Can I quickly ask you this? The left form has been banned and the throwing of a grenade has been banned. The rifles are sanitised when they are withdrawn, and soldiers queuing for food keep two metres apart, wear masks and then go straight back to the rooms and mix. This is causing quite a few problems for the training up there. I do not really see this as common sense, and I thought we were talking about the armed services, not the social services. Can you comment on this?

Ben Wallace: I can investigate because I am going to Catterick on Thursday; I am going to the Infantry Training Centre. I am not sure why you cannot throw a grenade any day of the week.

Q52 **Richard Drax:** It is because you are within two metres, apparently, of your safety instructor, so it has been banned. I look forward to hearing your response to that.

What have the Government learned about the effectiveness of their existing crisis management structures for managing this sort of national emergency?

Ben Wallace: We have learned, first of all, the importance of resilience. For defence, resilience is our middle name. It is part of what we do. The Government as a whole have understood now more than ever that they must invest in resilience in their own functions. The warning signs have been there for quite a few years. The WannaCry cyber-attack predominantly ended up in the NHS out-patient system; I was Minister for Security at the time and remember the impact of that. I was interested to look at lots of Departments at that stage that really did not even know their IT footprint. Resilience is part of preparation, but it is also about learning to move at pace and then think about the over-horizon as you go. Very quickly in this response, my Department and the leaders involved shifted from that to handing that to their deputies and focusing on, "What next?" The first thing that Government have practised and had to learn is the key importance of resilience.

The MoD has done well with its own resilience, both in testing and supporting its workforce and in making sure that we can move at pace. We were thinking about winter preparations months ago in the MoD. We were thinking about Brexit months ago in the MoD. We were thinking



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about the vaccines before we even knew if the vaccines would be on stream in December. That is the first thing.

The second thing was about the national resilience capability plans owned by the Cabinet Office: how current to the threat they are and how realistic they are. When all this is over with Covid and there is an inquiry with people looking into it, the question will be about what was missing from those plans. To give you an example, when I was Minister for Security, I signed off the national biological security strategy, where I said that pandemics were the No. 1 threat, but at the time no one really thought about test and trace or social distancing. They thought about pandemics being much higher up the lethality scale. We did not really have that test and trace concept in the way that we learned on the job. That is the second thing.

We have also learned that, as ever, defence is there to underpin the fabric of the society that we live in, and to defend it. I never fail to be impressed by the versatility of our soldiers, no matter what they are doing.

Q53 Richard Drax: On that point, you have listed a whole lot of things that you have learned or hopefully will slip into the operation if, God forbid, it is needed again, but have you been sufficiently involved at the top level? This has been in the press and commented on many times: that the Armed Forces are not sufficiently at the top of this crisis to guide, dare I say it, some of our politicians, perhaps, in managing it.

Ben Wallace: From February or March, we had senior officers across Departments, doing C2—command and control—and helping them plan. Very quickly, that went right down to a more regional or devolved level. We had people in the London Ambulance Service really quite early on. We had people down through what you and I would call regional brigades, but they are now called JMCs. The MoD changes the name every now and then to confuse us all, but if you and I talk about regional brigades, we know what we are talking about. We had individuals quite quickly. The policy decisions that fall out of their advice is a matter either for their Secretary of State or, indeed, for the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office. It was not for want of our advice, but the challenge is about whether the advice was acted on. We have always made ourselves available.

I know colleagues often say that the Army could do more. We could always do more, but in this country we do not come along and impose. We wait for the request, for example, from the Scottish Government. If the Scottish Government want more assistance, we have a MACA process and we are absolutely happy to help them, or the Welsh Government or, indeed, the local authorities. That is why, when I last came to the Committee, I made it clear that I had devolved my authorities down to the regions and as low as possible, to allow uninterrupted assistance where it is requested.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q54 **Richard Drax:** You were available, but would you have liked to have done more? That is the point.

Ben Wallace: A lot of the stuff that we have done has not been as visual as standing on the streets doing testing. I can give you an example. Very early on, we had a request from DHSC to go and pick up a whole load of PPE from Liverpool port. DHSC originally thought it wanted 9,000 people. By the time we had worked with DHSC and worked it through, it turned out to be about 200 people. That would not have been publicised; that is just in the background, helping the command and control effort. We stood up lots of people at Donnington to receive all the ventilators, which mainly came from China, to unpack them and distribute them. We had people from the Intelligence Corps helping to scrub and analyse data in London of hospital pressures.

We have done an awful lot. I have never said no unless it is completely unreasonable or leftfield and would not add a value or have an effect. I am not even sure if I have actually said no to anything. What we have done is refined and it has turned out that it was not needed.

Q55 **John Spellar:** There is a gap here, is there not? You talked about, for example, policy for their Secretaries of State. Surely the only way you can effectively manage crises, over successive crises, is through the COBRA process, through that co-ordination, integration and often almost daily examination of, "What did we decide yesterday? How is it being implemented today? What are we doing tomorrow?" Departments are then pulled together, including, by the way, the other nations' Governments as well; they are an integral part of it. That is what drives the process. I am slightly concerned. It is not just about the availability of bodies. It is about the involvement of the military mindset in the day-to-day gritty decision-making and implementation. How often has COBRA been meeting and at what level has the Ministry of Defence been involved?

Ben Wallace: The Government set up something called Covid-O, which is attended by Ministers, which meets sometimes two or three times a week; I cannot tell you exactly. That is effectively a COBRA. I have sat on it a number of times, and if I am not on it, the Minister for the Armed Forces attends, depending on what the subject is. That is a key decision-making body. It meets quite regularly. The last one was last Saturday, and previous to that was the Friday before. It meets very regularly. Michael Gove chairs that.

Q56 **John Spellar:** When you say Saturday and the Friday before, do you mean two days sequentially or a week between.

Ben Wallace: To be honest, I am trying to work it out. We met on Saturday, and that was discussing the impact of mass testing and how to increase mass testing, learn the lessons from Liverpool, etc. A number of Cabinet Ministers were on that call. I am trying to remember what the Friday one was. It could have been Covid, the end-of-year winter



HOUSE OF COMMONS

pressures and the whole resourcing area around that. I think that was the week before, but it meets fairly regularly. It usually meets at least once a week, maybe twice a week.

That has been just like a COBRA. Having done 20 or 30 COBRAs in my previous time, I can tell you that this is very similar to COBRA. It is just specifically dedicated to Covid.

Q57 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Good afternoon, Secretary of State. I just wanted to drill down a bit more on the answers you have given to my colleagues. At the outset of the pandemic, there were regular COBRA meetings, then they went to ministerial implementation groups, and then they went to Covid response meetings at Cabinet level. I am just wondering how many of those, out of that total, you or any of your Ministers attended.

Ben Wallace: I or one of my Ministers will have attended nearly every single one. I can get you the exact number that I attended, the Minister for the Armed Forces attended, or otherwise, potentially dependent on what the subject was. It usually depends on the agenda item and its impact either on the military resource or, indeed, where we can assist. I can get you the exact details, but there is nearly always a member of the Ministry of Defence ministerial team in attendance at those meetings.

Q58 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Secretary of State, has the ministerial National Security Council actually met to discuss the pandemic? If so, were you or any of your Ministers present at that?

Ben Wallace: The NSC has met on a range of topics, literally every week or every other week.

Q59 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Has the ministerial National Security Council met?

Ben Wallace: The National Security Council is always ministerial, unless it is an NSCO. The members of the NSC include me, the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the heads of the intelligence services, the Chief of the Defence Staff and a range of other Cabinet Ministers, dependent on the subject. It has not met every single week, but it has met on a number of occasions, to deal with a range of topics, not just Covid.

Q60 Mrs Lewell-Buck: In the figures that you are going to provide for the other meetings, if you could get me those in relation to the pandemic as well, that would be helpful.

Ben Wallace: Yes, okay. Sometimes it is the consequences of the pandemic rather than the pandemic itself that we may discuss.

Q61 Chair: Secretary of State, how have things changed since the departure of Dominic Cummings?

Ben Wallace: What do you mean? Dominic Cummings was an aide to the Prime Minister.

Q62 Chair: I am just asking you whether things have changed.



Ben Wallace: In the MoD, nothing has changed. I have led the Department, the Chief of the Defence Staff is responsible for the military staff, and there is the Permanent Secretary. Nothing has changed. The MoD was the author of our part of the integrated review work and author of our budget.

What I will say is that Dominic Cummings was a big supporter of this defence settlement. That should not be underestimated. A number of people recognise that, in the world going forward, this is an anxious time in the future of stability for the globe, and he was a supporter, alongside many others in No. 10, of giving defence a settlement.

Chair: Yes, that should be recognised, and he should be thanked for that.

Q63 **Stuart Anderson:** Secretary of State, the military has a can-do attitude and will always turn its hand to things. Look through some of the MACA tasks that the military has been doing, from helping with flooding to incidents that happen where it supports the police, such as the Manchester bombing. You have mentioned the resilience and the great job that it does, but do you think other Government Departments and agencies have made best use of resources of the military and its capability during the pandemic? We know that you would always say, "Yes, we will go and do it", but have other Government agencies and Departments done that?

Ben Wallace: I might ask General Stickland to answer, because he is part of the process of sifting, of taking a request or an aspiration and converting it into an effect. We are in it to deliver an effect: what effect can we have on A, B or C? General Stickland has hands-on experience of dealing with those issues.

Charles Stickland: The really interesting thing, as the Secretary of State says, is that it is a conversation between us and another Government Department. Another lesson we have learned is that the MACA process works extremely well, in that we have actually said, "If you can provide this by another means, why are you coming to the military?" That is a good question to start with. There is then a conversation about what they are trying to achieve.

As a really good example, we had 150 people from the RAF in Birmingham recently doing drop and collect to start the whole testing process work-through. It seemed very sensible at the time and it also involved the local authority, volunteers and other players in the game. When we looked at it and refined it, we then went to Nottingham and sent six people as a team to train, motivate and mobilise a team of volunteers. That gives you a sense of the way we refine these things as we go forward.

The Secretary of State mentioned the whole issue of Donnington and PPE in the past. With the DE&S, our organisation that does supply and purchase, we put more than 130 people into the supply chain of the NHS



HOUSE OF COMMONS

when we were having real troubles with PPE, to use their correct expertise. It was not just military manpower. We understood that the issue was about rapid purchase and rapid distribution, which was something that the NHS supply system was not used to doing.

As we have gone along this journey, the most important thing is that it is a conversation between us and the other Government Departments, and we refine it to the point where military or defence expertise can best be used.

Q64 **Stuart Anderson:** Through this process, you will be working with a lot of different agencies with which you will not have built relationships over the time, and you are finding things out. A prime example is where it was thought that 9,000 troops were needed, when actually it was 200—they are probably riflemen if they only need 200. Moving on to look at that, what have you learned about co-operation with other agencies and Departments now?

Charles Stickland: Before the pandemic happened, we always had a number of cross-Government liaison officers, particularly linked with the CCS, the Civil Contingencies Service. They linked into my team in the defence crisis management system in the MoD. Very early on, in terms of understanding the needs of other Departments, we developed a thing that we have called the neural network. We started to put talented individuals in most of the Government Departments, in the right place, at the heart of where they were examining the crisis.

A really good example recently is that, when we understood that BEIS was going to be buying the vaccines—not distributing them but buying them and trying to understand how vaccine roll-out may occur—we put a bright sparky lieutenant colonel in there and said, “Go and make yourself known. Find out what is going on and find out what the exam questions might be”. This neural network spreads across most Government Departments, and then links into either the Ministry of Defence or the Standing Joint Command headquarters in Aldershot, where the operational-level games play out. That ability to have a synapse and understanding early has also allowed us to be much more sophisticated about how we dealt with the MACA process.

Q65 **Stuart Anderson:** Were those bright individuals that you put in well received? Was it challenging for them to help educate on the process of how the military operates?

Charles Stickland: There are two things. Interestingly, in a time of crisis everybody pulls together, but we took the approach departmentally of a buzzword bingo: understand, enable, support and catalyse. The lady or gentleman is not there to go and be in charge; they are there to understand and help. That humility that defence is very good at playing through was a really good start point.



The Standing Joint Command headquarters has done MACA training courses, so we have found people in Government Departments who might be putting these requests in, and we have taken them through a day of, "This is how you ask for it. This is what you should ask for. This is how you do it". There has been an assist of educating our partners in Government to make it a more fluid and efficient process.

Q66 Sarah Atherton: Good afternoon. In Wales we have seen military deployment on quite a few MACA requests: mobile testing, decontamination of Welsh ambulances, planners embedded in NHS Wales and, recently, mass testing in Merthyr Tydfil. It has been greatly appreciated on the ground; people have been reassured by the presence of the military. On the premise that it is better to make friends before you need them, what lessons have you learned from working with the devolved Administrations?

Ben Wallace: From a political point of view, we should not forget that we already had, in the military, existing networks. We had these regional commands or JMCs. We had local resilience officers in every region. One of the very first things we did was to thicken up the numbers of those people, so we would man-mark a number of local authorities and make sure that there was literally one per person.

Secondly, we have always made an effort to have relationships directly with the Scottish and Welsh Governments and the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as via our territorial officers. I do not think we had a problem. It was not like we had to learn something new with the Welsh Government; they have always been very forward-leaning and were very clear when they wanted our help. The same goes for the Scottish Government. I do not think there has been a problem in that space. General Stickland can tell you about his actual experiences of requests, but it has been pretty straightforward.

Charles Stickland: It has been fine. The point the Secretary of State makes is that it is the job of that regional commander or joint military commander—we have 10 across the nation, of varying scales—to run a network and to know local characters and local players. Similarly, most of the services have reserve senior officers, who again are their regional representatives. As the Secretary of State said, that was a really important thing early on to manage to galvanise and thicken that network. Again, it was all about understanding, and then we understood, "Okay, you need some planners because you have a particular problem with this particular issue", whether it was distribution or linking to a health authority. The key thing we learned was that the structures and the relationships we have are an excellent foundation for a subsequent crisis response.

Q67 Sarah Atherton: General, if we flip it the other way, what have, for example, the local resilience forums learned from the military? You have mentioned planning analysis and logistics, and we have innovation with the Nightingale hospitals. What have these organisations learned from



you, and how would you galvanise that as you go forward?

Charles Stickland: As we went through, we came across very different levels of capability and competence in local resilience forums. Some had never sat, and some were just, essentially, a paper tiger. Others had dynamic individuals in charge of them, from all walks of life, and were an entity, and therefore they thought through their programmes. The key thing we can teach them is that they need to sit and think about the consequences of their responsibilities, but also the issue of anticipation.

More than anything else, they form a synapse for all manner of different parts of local government, and with the health service as well. In trying to link together a very complex system at the local level, their very existence can act as that synapse. Regular rehearsal, regular anticipation and being a formed body is what I would say from a military perspective. The Secretary of State will have a view from his own constituency as well.

Ben Wallace: We went around quite a few of the LRFs. The LRFs are a reflection of their areas' local authority governance structures. If you had a pretty straightforward area, such as unitary or a unitary with coterminous districts, you tended to find they were more straightforward. If you had LRF areas where you might have a very powerful, big authority—let us say Birmingham City—but that sat alongside the liquorice-allsorts types of local authorities that we all experience as local MPs, sometimes they were not as straightforward or as used to suddenly stepping up and being the driver of that. That is what I would say.

You could have a completely different experience in one part of the country from another, and one of the lessons from this is, exactly as General Stickland said, about this sense that you have to be more than a paper tiger. You have to practise and sort out in peacetime the lines of responsibility, the leadership and the relationships between the district councils. It is as subtle as this: if your district council leaders all get on, you are going to be far better as an LRF than if they are always arguing with each other. That is just local politics sometimes. It is not often party politics; it is local politics.

Q68 **Chair:** I want to stick with the devolved Administrations, but Nightingales were mentioned. Can we just follow that up? With great fanfare, these were rolled out in different parts of the country, most noticeably in the ExCeL centre. In the briefing that I received this morning for the south-west, I asked where there is pressure and likelihood that we could go into a higher tier because of the pressures on bed spaces; I then asked why we are not utilising the Nightingale hospitals. I was told that they are not being used, we do not have the staff and, where they are working, people do not like to use them because they are dark and dingy; those were the terms that were used.

A lot of money was spent and a lot of political capital utilised—these were rolled out in front of the television cameras. How successful have they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

been? Are we utilising them to their full capability, bearing in mind that this pandemic is far from over?

Ben Wallace: We have to remind ourselves that, when this started, all the advice and the warning signals were that this would have a huge number of people requiring ventilation. The initial medical view was that this disease caused quick dependency and high levels of ventilation, so the Nightingales were designed predominantly to be mass ventilation units. They did not have showers built or canteens, because people would arrive under ventilation, be ventilated and hopefully come back out. The configuration is not to be an alternative hospital or a primary care centre; it is to be predominantly that.

If you remember, every nation in Europe went and bought lots of ventilators, we had the ventilator challenge and did X, Y and Z. Over time we realised that the treatment is different; I am sure a clinician would give you a much more professional answer. Therefore, we had Nightingales—not all of them—that were more configured for what we thought was going to happen.

Your question about what we are doing to change them, now that that is clearly not the case, is valid. In some areas, such as Harrogate, we have used them to do other functions. We have used them in some areas to do scans or something—we can get the details. In other areas, there has not been the demand from the local healthcare services to either change their configuration or, indeed, use them as they are. If they wish to do that, again, like last time, we will help to design them, set them up and deliver them.

Q69 **Chair:** This goes to the point that Richard Drax has made about what the MoD is providing to support this pandemic. This is a great example. In Bournemouth and Poole, the R number has gone up, not because people are catching the virus from outside but, ironically, because people are going in with non-Covid-related diseases and picking up the virus inside the hospital. The reason for us going into another tier is because of that high rating caused by the spread inside hospitals. You can alleviate the pressure on those hospitals by using Nightingales, with strategic planning, to take us through another six months at least of this pandemic. I ask why top-level decision-making is not recognising that we can alleviate pressure on hospitals across the country if we better utilise those Nightingales in the way that you now describe.

Ben Wallace: There are two questions, but they are not for me. First, ask your local hospital trust if it has demanded more bed space—

Q70 **Chair:** No. I am sorry to interrupt you, but this is the trouble that we face here. There remains a stigma of failure if you lean on using the military. That is something that I have picked up and has been picked up, including in the strategic decision-making at the top, where you have policymakers making operational delivery decisions, who are MPs, our colleagues, Cabinet members with no experience in emergency strategic



thinking or enduring crises. They are making judgments that you guys—the military and the MoD—are trained to do. Unfortunately, there is a sense of failure if you resort to using the military too much.

It has got better—I would absolutely agree with that—but this is the decision-making that we need to see in No. 10. If there is pressure on our NHS and you guys can provide Nightingales, surely it then makes sense to utilise that.

Ben Wallace: First of all, I regularly text, ring or speak to the Health Secretary or colleagues at Cabinet and say that we are here. To be fair, 27% of our current MACAs are DHSC. I do not think that DHSC has a stigma problem with the MoD. I do not think, across a number of Departments and colleagues, who often praise the military at Cabinet, there is a stigma attached. Part of this is a fundamental question about whether you think demand for military support should be ground up or whether you think it should be imposed from the top. I do not mean imposed by other Government Departments but by me. Should I be able to say, “I am going to change the Nightingale hospital in Bournemouth because the bed space is tight”?

As much as I see pressures on my statistics every morning, in this country the military acts in support of civilian authorities. I am sure we all have cases where we think, “I could just fix that with 100 men and women”, but fundamentally it has to be a driven thing. Get Bournemouth’s NHS trust in here, get other people in here, and ask them how they are meeting that demand. If the NHS trust in Bournemouth is saying that it does not want the Army or it does not want more beds, that is a discussion that it has to have with you.

Q71 **John Spellar:** Surely that is where the COBRA process comes in, because in real time, or within a day, that can be brought there, with all the interests represented in the room, decisions made, the Cabinet Office or the Prime Minister’s office therefore being in touch with it and driving that through. Is that not how you resolve the disconnect that you very often have between different Departments?

Ben Wallace: They do drive it through, but if they do not agree with the analysis, let us say, that Tobias has made about his health trust, if either the hospitals have said to them that they are fine with bed capacity or they have taken a view that bed capacity can be dealt with in a better way, it does not need to be driven through because they have made that decision. You can hold them all to account for the decisions that they have made, but it is absolutely not true that there is any resistance in those meetings to calling on defence assets. If they have asked, we have shaped; if they have asked, we have delivered; if they have asked, we have helped design, in many cases. We helped design the Nightingales.

Chair: We need to press on, but the point has been made very clearly that this is a pandemic that is hitting the country and is affecting our NHS system. If you create Nightingales, remove the Covid patients and put



them in Nightingales, you then liberate our standard NHS from the pressures it faces. It is as simple as that. That is a decision that could have been made at the top and it was not. That is what we pose, and it is something that the MoD could have provided.

Q72 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I have to admit that I am a bit surprised by the conversation that has just taken place. I am not going to speak on behalf of my good friend, the Member for Belfast East, but I know that the good work that the military has done in the construction of the Louisa Jordan does not seem to be mirroring that discussion. I know that there have been over 4,000 patients through the doors since July, with diagnostics, CT scans, ultrasounds and orthopaedics, and it has been utilised by, I believe, about 1,000 medical students. I hope you get around that with the Nightingales.

Secretary of State, if I could come to you in terms of the devolution element across the UK, many of us are quite grateful for what we are seeing as a historic moment that has seen, through your leadership, a one-star general put in position to discuss, to inform and to assist the devolved Administrations in dealing with the pandemic. We see that, for example, with the design of the Louisa Jordan and elements of testing. Do you think it is important now that that historic engagement is retained in dealing with what remains of the pandemic period, and, once we leave the pandemic, that we ensure that the MoD is interlinked with, for example, the Resilience Division, which leads on emergency planning response in Scotland, and its Northern Irish and Welsh counterparts?

Ben Wallace: I agree, but to some extent that is part of their standing function, even before this. The role of the one-star or two-star general, depending on which part of the United Kingdom they are in, is to be across all of that: critical national infrastructure challenges, community outreach and support, even veterans, alongside the devolved Administrations. That is what they should be doing; if they have not done it, they are not fulfilling their task. Some of the ones I have known in the past have been all over those relationships. A lot of it comes down to individual relationships. We all know that individual relationships can really turn things and turbo-boost them.

I definitely hope that we incorporate the lessons they have learned over the last few months, and make sure that they are even stronger in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In some areas, it has been really good. Irrespective of your position on nationalism and Unionism, that is showing that the military is a force for good. It does resilience, planning, help, assistance and humanitarian; it does all those things as well as being a war-fighting force in the case of extreme issues. That has been really supported, and I know there has been no shortage of praise from my own personnel for their relationships with the Scottish Government. They have enjoyed working with them as well.

Q73 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** There is some concern that, once the Covid pandemic is over, that will be withdrawn. My reflection is that, because of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Secretary of State's own understanding of devolution, being a member of the Holyrood Parliament from 1999 to 2003, they themselves have informed that change of attitude. I just hope that is retained after the pandemic, because it has been a positive step forward.

Ben Wallace: I am very happy to capture it. The one-star in that place is a permanent post. We should capitalise on it. I was fortunate enough to represent in north-east Scotland, so I know how important the Highlands and Islands are to how people live their lives and how they often live them in a way that is much more based on primary care than acute care. That is why, very early on, we sent a Puma detachment right up to Kinloss or Lossiemouth to be able to service those islands should they need it. I think that was important.

I am very happy, and, way after all this finishes, if there are problems you should come and let me know, because the whole purpose of some of these posts is exactly, as you said and as Sarah said earlier, to make sure that the ground is smoothed between the two, and we are there to help.

Q74 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State. You will know from your time as a Minister within the Northern Ireland Office that the interaction with the Ministry of Defence is not the same across various elements of our community, but I am sure you were pleased at the start of this pandemic that political maturity meant that MACA requests were made to the Ministry of Defence, and the majority have been satisfied. When you look at the way in which various devolved Administrations and regions of England have engaged with the Ministry of Defence, do you recognise that there is more that could be asked of the Ministry of Defence, and that the Ministry of Defence has a positive role to play in rolling out mass testing, as but one example?

Ben Wallace: One of the lessons from this event is that we need to help other people understand us; let us put it that way. As General Stickland said, the more they understood the MACA process and what we could do for them, the better the requests were, the more refined they became and the more impact we could deliver. That is what I would say we saw over time. There were Departments we dealt with at the beginning of this that had never seen a MACA request. If you are DEFRA or the Home Office, for example, in England, you have been used to using MACAs forever, because you are in the security area, flood area or whatever. There are other Departments that just were not used to using MACAs.

At the end of this, the key is going to be capturing that corporate knowledge, so that we never let go of it again, and building on the relationships, as Martin talks about, so that we do not have to relearn that every time something goes wrong.

Charles Stickland: The other thing is if there is a new issue that none of us really understands. For example, we just deployed two people to the JMC in Northern Ireland to talk about vaccines. That is just to try to



understand what the mechanisms might be in Northern Ireland and how this architecture may play in the various cohorts that are now being discussed in the national roll-out from BEIS. By having two people seeking to understand and talking about it, as the Secretary of State says, you can refine that and understand. The answer may be that we cannot help at all; it may not be our business, but we can connect through our network into those who can. There are some interesting things about rapid liaison to discuss future concerns or future ideas, and then refine them as we discuss.

Q75 **Gavin Robinson:** Just to confirm, two people have arrived in Northern Ireland, attached to the 38th Brigade, to discuss whether there is a beneficial relationship in the roll-out of the vaccine. Is that what I understood the general to say?

Charles Stickland: We sent 10 teams out to various parts of the country to have that conversation. Yes, that will be work through the 38th Brigade.

Q76 **Sarah Atherton:** Secretary of State, under the MACA principles, the MoD plays a supporting role in the challenges of the pandemic. My question to you was going to be whether you feel that you have held a senior ministerial position in the various Cabinet discussions: COBRA, Covid-O and the ministerial implementation groups. We have probably covered that, but please feel free to add any more.

I have been informed that you facilitated a Whitehall tabletop meeting in the summer. What conclusions were drawn from that?

Charles Stickland: It was called Project Fairlight. We worked very closely with the Covid task force in the Cabinet Office and with the CCS. Essentially, we were facilitating the questions and the structure. We managed to put all 31 SROs together.

Q77 **Richard Drax:** Could you very kindly explain the acronyms, because not all the people watching are going to understand what you are talking about?

Charles Stickland: I am so sorry. For me, that was not even a military acronym; it is a cross-Government acronym. SRO is "senior responsible official". Forgive me, and please shoot me down whenever I speak in code. The idea was first of all to get that group of responsible officers from Government Departments, at essentially three-star level, to expose their plans. It went through a number of scenarios over the course of 36 hours, to draw together where they link together. The crucial two things we determined—and we gave a report into the Cabinet Office—were very simple. The first was an issue of concurrency and that, to a certain degree in the summertime, there was still not enough sufficient thought in things happening in a concurrent sense. It was all about the winter problem set, so it was not just about Covid; it reflected also things that may occur under the EU transition. Concurrency was a key one.



The second one I would pull out, which was very clear, was the idea of making sure that everybody understood that there was direct interplay and connectivity between individuals' plans. There were dependencies, that certain senior responsible officials had not realised between their plans. Those were the two biggest things we drew out, and after that was a subsequent thing about people needing to link up and understand how those dependencies work and how we issue concurrency. We built on our concurrency tabletop exercise that the Secretary of State mentioned earlier on.

Q78 Sarah Atherton: Can I ask about the concurrency side of things? Did you have to change anything following the tabletop exercise? I am thinking about the number of personnel that you deployed or put on stand-by, thinking about winter pressures.

Charles Stickland: There are two parts to that question. From a Government perspective, our findings went to the Cabinet Office and have been taken forward. For example, tomorrow I am going with the Minister for the Armed Forces to a maritime security tabletop exercise, which has drawn on Fairlight, and I can come back to that if you wish.

From an MoD perspective, in September we had already gone through our work to look at what we term the winter concurrency set. We looked at a worst-case scenario that involved floods and fires—I do not think we covered locusts. We looked at Covid activity and we looked at those things that we are being asked potentially to support for EU exit. We layered on top of that a counter-terrorist issue—what we call Op Temperer. We tried to create the most difficult day. We system-checked whether we had the appropriate forces at readiness throughout this period, and we built what we called the winter concurrency package. We also built a winter ops centre, augmented by some people such that we are stood up through this period.

From an MoD perspective, we then presented that to the Secretary of State and said, "This is what we think we need". If we need to surge and add to it, that is a different conversation, but, as a baseline winter preparedness force, we think we have it covered off in all these various areas, accepting where we might be duplicating or double-hatting. From a Government perspective, tomorrow is a really good example. The scenario is fisheries business with some Russians deploying through the channel and then a safety-at-sea incident. We are trying to look at how we do national command and control down to the gold level and how we manage that concurrency challenge. Hopefully, Fairlight has triggered and stimulated those sorts of conversations.

Sarah Atherton: I was going to ask whether you had factored in a watching brief on potential adversaries, but you did with the Russians, so thank you very much.

Q79 Stuart Anderson: Secretary of State, are we going to see a formal review of lessons learned from this pandemic? The area I would be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

specifically interested in, in that review, if it was forthcoming, is seeing if we have effectively used veterans for support in this area and, if not, why not and if we could adjust that moving forward.

Ben Wallace: The Department will do a lessons summit. As General Stickland talked about with Fairlight and that sort of thing, we are already learning as we go in some of them. Yes, when—touch wood—this all moves to the side, we will do a lessons summit and we will definitely draw together every single thing we can. To be fair, defence is used to those things, whether it is post-Falklands, post-Gulf or whatever. That is very important. I know the Government have said that they will support an inquiry into it, and I hope lessons across Government come out from that inquiry.

On your issue of whether the veterans could do more, I remember DCMS made a massive call for volunteers at the beginning. We had the veterans' charity, Rubicon, come forward. The pattern of assistance from the military has seemed to follow a similar trait, which is a request and then the first real support is in the areas of logistics and planners. That then transitions to mass for a period of time. Then the mass falls away and then we go back another request.

Liverpool is a really good example. It starts off with a request for a few planners and an understanding of how we could do something. We then deploy mass—over 2,500 men and women, mainly from the Army—to assist in Liverpool. If you now look at the take-up of the testing and the lessons learned as we are doing the testing, we are doing roughly 12,000 tests a day at the moment, but we have a capacity of 40,000. We then start asking the question of whether we need all these soldiers standing around if we are not coming up to that. Other people need that mass elsewhere.

We will see from the lessons how we can be more intelligent in finding people to test, so let us move out from fixed bases. Let us be more local to some of the communities. In Liverpool, we are learning that certain parts of the city are not coming forward, so let us go to them. At the same time, we would usually come along with a big dose of training the trainers. When I visited last Monday, the military were training care home staff and carers how to administer the lateral flow test. They will take that back, go back to their homes and train. Eventually, the mass requirement decreases. It may not go completely and then you are on to the next request. Currently, vaccines start life with planners but eventually I can tell you that the vaccine will end up in mass because you will have to deploy the soldiers.

That is how we see it. With Rubicon and the veterans' community, we thought at first that we would need quite a lot. That has not transpired, but I am always thinking about where the next mass challenge is and whether they could be a part of it. Literally before we came in here, I was talking with General Stickland about whether there may be a role for veterans if we chose to roll out mass testing on a huge scale that needed



HOUSE OF COMMONS

people on the ground. Maybe there is a role then for those people. That has been the flow of how we have seen those things go.

Q80 **Chair:** On the capabilities there, what capacity do you have now for medical support?

Ben Wallace: If we are talking about medical support within vaccines, because we always have medical reserves who are usually working in the NHS, I would just rob Peter to pay Paul if I suddenly took a whole load of consultants out of the NHS to mobilise them. If you are specifically talking around vaccines, we have about 1,000 combat medics who could help in that area. I can give you the exact number.

Charles Stickland: There are potentially some medical legislative changes that may be able to give some more, but it has to be somebody who is actually a properly trained medical person.

Q81 **Chair:** We want numbers.

Ben Wallace: I can give you the exact numbers. In combat medics, we have more than that. We have nearly 2,000 combat medics: 1,803 from the Army, 379 from the RAF and 547 from the Navy.

Q82 **Chair:** These are combat medics not currently being used.

Ben Wallace: Some of them will be used, yes.

Q83 **Chair:** I am trying to work out what the number is right now that are not being used.

Charles Stickland: The Defence Medical Services last night worked out that, in order to sustain our very high-readiness forces and our operational delivery, the figure sits at about 1,000.

Q84 **Chair:** Is it roughly 1,000 spare?

Ben Wallace: We have 150 currently committed to task and 950 regular. A further 1,050 will be at R1 at 48 hours.

Q85 **Chair:** The reason why I pose this question, not to go over old ground, is that we talked about the Nightingales. The answer that came back from the Health Minister was that there were not enough staff for her to run these Nightingale hospitals. This is the biggest crisis since the Second World War. You have capacity. It is an enduring crisis, so it is not going away any time soon. There is a potential to pull in retired medics as well, which has been done on the civilian side. I just wondered if this has been considered or thought of, to alleviate the pressure on our NHS hospitals.

Charles Stickland: There is a conversation going on between Defence Medical Services, Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care. We need to be really careful about level of people's capabilities. We very specially asked that question about who could help with vaccines and administering a vaccine because it has to be a certain



type of person. There is a training course that the Department of Health and Social Care is instigating for those people, should they be used.

A combat medic cannot run a ventilator farm. We are looking and have always asked where we can assist, but we have to be very careful about whether it is a porter-plus—that is a phrase we have used. We have offered and had the conversation but, in terms of our ability to run our own medical services and deployed operations, you find that we do not have a huge capacity of people to do that high-skilled ITU business.

Q86 Chair: That is appreciated. I am just talking about the cognitive thought that perhaps needs to go in. Go back to our Bournemouth hospital situation. There may be some highly trained people who are required on regulators but now, today, the majority are no longer there. They do need special Covid training for that. Alternatively, you could also use our military capabilities to assist in the general wards to provide support there. Again, it is the military assistance to civil effect utilised to its full. You then move on to the vaccine itself, which we will come on to in a second. How long the training course is to train somebody to give a vaccine?

Charles Stickland: It is only a couple of hours, but essentially it is to make sure that somebody who is already a qualified medical individual is doing it.

Ben Wallace: I have made clear that they are available to assist in injecting and helping people receive the vaccine. Going back to the mass bit, we think that the bigger part of our contribution will be the distribution of the vaccines from warehouse to NHS area.

Q87 Chair: The last time I spoke to my local authority, it had not been in communication with anybody from the MoD, from the top down, to be aware of what support you could bring in the distribution and the logistics to delivery of the vaccine as well. I am picking up here that there may be a disjoint between the offering of the service that you can provide and what could be received at the delivery end.

Ben Wallace: That is because the centrally controlled vaccine taskforce is in charge of it. The question for your hospital or anyone else is, "Have you been in touch with the vaccine taskforce or, indeed, the Department of Health or NHS England?" They are the ones who are going to own and deliver. Public Health England is going to distribute and then, from there, the delivery/injecting, I suspect, will be done by the NHS. We will be there in assistance.

Q88 Chair: Have you receive a formal MACA request in relation to vaccines yet?

Ben Wallace: Yes.

Charles Stickland: We have eight people working in NHS England and Improvement to set up an ops room.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q89 **Chair:** This is all back-of-office stuff. I am talking about the mass roll-out in local authorities. Has there been any request from local authorities to say, "I cannot handle this"?

Ben Wallace: We are not at that stage yet.

Charles Stickland: I was talking to Brigadier Phil Prosser from 101 Logistic Brigade, who was helping assist in the planning of the end-to-end process of the vaccine roll-out. He sits in NHS England and Improvement. The important thing, from his perspective, is that the first cohort that is going to be played through is through the NHS. It is about when vaccines come online and those sorts of things. They are content at the moment that, using existing distribution mechanisms from Haydock, a third-party contractor, and the existing NHS structures, they can do their first cohort of people, who are NHS workers and key workers.

They are starting to ask us in two areas. One is planners, again. The second one is a potential MACA coming in to look at 10 sites and help them set up some sites, but that is very embryonic because the first thing they are looking at is using existing structures to flow out the first phase of the vaccine.

Q90 **Chair:** The point has been made. Richard Drax and I share the same county health authority. It is overwhelmed in dealing with the challenge, as can be understood. Therefore, the assets and the support that you can bring need to be made clear. It would be very much welcomed if they were aware of what you could provide with this mass roll-out that is going to be required. I know you say it is not for now, but you need to get the thinking in place because it is two to three months away.

Ben Wallace: That thinking is being done. I keep referring you to the simple matter of fact that, if the Department of Health is not feeling that pressure from its local hospitals, that is a question for NHS England and the local Department of Health. They should be feeding it up, saying, "Our beds are full; we cannot do this" or, "We cannot do that". We will help. We will absolutely help. If the message is not getting to the brain of the whole taskforce, as the local MP or anything else, you can do something about it and help that.

It is not on our part that they do not know about it or they have not had the assistance. The assistance is there if they want it. That is why we are in those org bodies right now trying to make sure that we plan how to help it. For example, I do not know the ins and outs of the vaccine roll-out because it has not been decided. Let us say they use a network of all the local Boots and Lloyds pharmacies, all the GP surgeries and all the local hospital trusts. The point General Stickland makes is that the most efficient way, first and foremost, is using existing structures if they have the capacity to do it.

You do not want to reinvent the wheel. If it is there, it is there. If you think about it, when we were looking at examples of how to get lateral flow to more people, which person visits your house six days a week,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

whether you live down a track, up a hill or in the centre of a city? It is the postie. There are lots of questions about how we piggyback on existing systems.

Q91 **Chair:** I understand. We are on your side. We want to get the best out of the Armed Forces because we believe it is a fantastic asset and one thing that we can be very, very proud of. You talk about the brain and understanding all the moving parts. We assumed that perhaps you would be part of that brain in No. 10 to be able to co-ordinate all of this together. The point has been made.

Winter is obviously a challenging period, not just for the NHS but for local authorities in other matters. You have had to step in to deal with flooding, snow conditions and so forth. How are your preparations and your normal set-up, Operation Temperer and otherwise? Are you able to continue your support for the pandemic and be prepared for any other additional requests that you may receive?

Ben Wallace: We thought about this some months ago, probably in early autumn, and about the potential for a perfect storm where flu, NHS pressures, Covid, floods, Brexit and everything else all come together. Again, learning the lessons in SJC, we moved to a more overall force that is able to do a number of these tasks. General Stickland can give you an overview of it. We keep topping it up if we think there is going to be more. Literally in the last 24 hours, we have gone from 12,500 to 14,000 in anticipation of any pressures. If you remember, at the very beginning of this process, we were quite crude, and we put 20,000 aside. We ended up only using, on any one day, about 4,000 people so we have refined that, but we are starting to step up again.

Charles Stickland: Stuart Anderson's point about learning lessons is interesting. In the construct of this force, we absolutely looked at that agricultural 20,000 we threw at the problem in February and March. We have now refined it right down. In answer to the question about resilience, and normal floods and fires, we still hold two UK stand-by battalions, amounting to about 1,200 people, at 12 and 24 hours' notice to move. Those are the ones that we would use routinely should there be a damn burst, a flood and those sorts of things. They remain part of the winter operations package.

As the Secretary of State said, we are also focusing on holding various other forces at readiness for standard resilience activities, so armed police backfill under Temperer is not part of something to do with Covid. It is still ring-fenced for that delivery. Similarly, we have a thing called Escalin, which is tanker drivers. Should that be something that comes under the Brexit side of things, we have ring-fenced individuals to play that through.

On top of that, as the Secretary of State said, we have essentially layered what we found were the most useful bits of defence for the Covid response. Interestingly, we found we categorised them as mass—bodies



to do stuff—command and control, logisticians and engineers, and medics. We managed them in specific pots. Again, as the Secretary of State says, if we have used some, we try to top them up.

The main thing that we have been trying to do in the creation of this force, which is important, is to maintain core operational output throughout, whether that is very high-readiness forces to go and intervene somewhere, or the things that we are doing overseas all the time and the support that is required. Where possible, we have also tried to make sure that we understand the resilience of defence into 2021 and 2022. On core programmes, our recruiting and training pipeline stopped in February and March. That is a thing we have sought to maintain. We have tried to make sure we have a sensible balance in our provision and learned from what we did with the 20,000 to have a more coherent force.

Q92 Richard Drax: When we first started, you had the 20,000 figure. If I recall from these who I know serving, they were put to one side, almost bubbled, if that is the right phrase, and told to stay at home, in effect, if and until they were called upon. Is that happening now to your two stand-by battalions? Are they now, in effect, at home, not operational and waiting to be called or are they training and doing all the things that battalions normally do?

Charles Stickland: Everybody shut down in February, March and April. There was a, “Crikey, how do we handle this as an organisation?” As you say, a lot of people were sent home in a bubble. With this force now, in the main, we have tried is to keep people at readiness but doing their day jobs, rather than having people particularly ring-fenced. That has been the most productive thing. Our ability to have somebody at five days’ notice to move still allows them to get on with their training, to run their establishment and potentially to be an individual augmentee planner, but their boss knows they are on a tether and that, should the call go up, they will lose that individual to go and be a planner. It is a learning process. We are much more efficient by using notice to move than bubbling.

Ben Wallace: They have different R levels. Even within a single battalion, we will have R1 at 24 hours’ notice to move, R1-plus at 48 hours, R2 at five days and R3 at 10 days. It might be done company by company, so one company might be on 24 hours and the other one might be on 10 days’ notice, so they can get on and do their normal training or whatever they are planning. They will rotate through, so they get some relief within their own unit but are also ready to move. From your day, you will remember that notice to move never seemed to be notice to move. I remember often having five days’ notice to move and, about a day later, you were told to go. “No move before” is, I think, a much better way of doing things.

Charles Stickland: I am guilty of that with a couple of quick ones that have come in. “I am really, really sorry. I know you were at five days,



but I need you to be there in two days' time, please". Bless the boys and girls, they normally are.

Q93 **Chair:** Brexit was mentioned. Can you just give us a flavour as to what you are anticipating and what you have been asked to prepare for?

Ben Wallace: Some of it comes out of Yellowhammer and the previous ones. It is making sure that the UK is resilient on logistics chains. That would be making sure that the UK gets access to its supplies and whatever it needs, whether that is medicine or even other things, just normal commodities. There are also areas around fisheries and protecting our ports, etc. In the Brexit worst-case scenario, with migrant flows, protests, blockades and those sorts of things, we have to make sure that we know how we can deal with that in that space. Then there is being prepared and being flexible to help out. There were all those plans around backing up in Kent—I cannot remember the name—with the use of military bases to park lorries.

Chair: I think it is Operation Stack.

Ben Wallace: Exactly. It is that sort of thing. The plus side is that, before Covid, the work we had done on things like Yellowhammer has been brought forward. Suddenly all the other Government Departments are in a much more alert mind state than they might have been, because of Covid. That is the first thing to say, but it is quite broad. Some of them are interchangeable, but it certainly brings into play things like maritime security much more than in the past. That has been very useful.

Q94 **Stuart Anderson:** It is brilliant that they have R1 to R3 notice to move. You said that the Army is brilliant with its resilience. What we are effectively doing here is plugging gaps and making sure that the country is resilient. There has to be a point where you no longer have resilience with X troops here, X troops there and the current commitments we have. How many people can we let go to MACA tasks before it breaks your resilience?

Ben Wallace: That is right. There is not infinite resource. That is also why it is in our interest to help Departments refine their ask as well. It is in our interest to make sure that we do not just jump in with both feet when someone says, "I need 9,000 people" and that we work out what we really need to do. That is true.

It is also true that, if we were doing this for years on end, it would have a cost. It would have a cost not only on our defence tasks, but on people and personnel who join, first and foremost, to be a helicopter pilot or a logistical specialist in the military. That is important. That is why we are rotating through people, just like other military deployments where, if you think about it, we have always had training up for something, on your op and then coming off the op, and then another block—a third, a third, a third. It is a similar task to make sure that people, when they finish this Op Rescript and other stuff, are back into the pipeline.



Long-term deployment like this would, in the end, have an effect. We are not there yet. We are managing our defence tasks. We have been fortunate about some of our adversaries. They too have suffered Covid. Their ability to provoke or disrupt in some parts of the world has been minimalised. Even ISIS started issuing guidance to its volunteers about Covid, which I thought was rather amusing, or sad, actually. We have reaped some benefit from other people being less active as well.

Q95 Derek Twigg: Secretary of State, we know that Armed Forces personnel made a major difference in terms of PPE. Could I ask you a question in two parts? Were you asked at any point to take on and run the test and trace system, which, as you know, there have been major concerns and problems with? If you were, why did that not happen? If you were not asked, do you believe that it could have been run better by a senior military officer than by involving lots of consultants?

Ben Wallace: First of all, I would say this, but I think the military could run an awful lot, pretty straightforwardly. Anyone who has worked in the MoD, as you have, knows that the can-do attitude and the determination just to live with risk in a way that other people would not is one of our greatest strengths. No matter what political party you come from, working in the MoD and learning that about the people we work with never leaves you.

Let us remember that, when the testing stuff started, they were complicated pieces of equipment—lateral flow tests. They were not as easy as they are now. I went up to Liverpool to see the current easy test—it is now an easy test. It was a little more complex. There is also the question of what we were trying to achieve with a test. Testing is one thing, so you know you are ill or not ill, but the other challenge was doing it at scale.

Do I think that we can do more? Yes, and we are doing more. We are right now planning and assisting how we can do more on mass testing and tracing. With the new testing equipment, the lateral flow, where you can get your results definitely within under an hour—it can be 20 minutes—and they are pretty easy to self-administer, the question does not become so much about tracing as about testing. If the ultimate goal is to get to the stage where you wake up in the morning, you take a test, if you are ill you stay at home and if not, you do not, that changes the balance. We are right now helping with planning the roll-out of mass testing.

Q96 Derek Twigg: You are right: I understand the can-do attitude and ability, because I spent time at the MoD, as you know. Can I come back to the question I asked you? Were you asked at any point to take on the test and trace system, not just one part of it but the test and trace system?

Ben Wallace: I was not asked to take over the test and trace system in its entirety.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Q97 **Derek Twigg:** You were never asked to run the test and trace system.
- Ben Wallace:** Not in its entirety at all. We have been asked throughout about improving it, helping it, assisting it or delivering some of it but never, "Could you send a general and run it?"
- Q98 **Derek Twigg:** Do you believe you could have run it?
- Ben Wallace:** We did not have the knowledge of the science that would have enabled us to run testing in a way that was any different from how it was rolled out. I will give an example. We brought our knowledge to bear en masse without having to run it. Mobile testing units were designed, delivered and rolled out by the Armed Forces and then eventually handed over—
- Q99 **Derek Twigg:** Secretary of State, I am sorry to interrupt, but I want to press this. I understand what you are saying. The question I am asking is about whether MoD or Armed Forces personnel could have run the system. There would, of course, have been medical expertise involved in that and advising, like there are with consultants that have been brought in. Do you believe that the MoD and Armed Forces personnel could have run the system, with the necessary support?
- Ben Wallace:** The other part is, "Could I have run it better?" We could have run the system. Could we have run it better? We will know that when it comes to inquiry and the wash-up of this whole event. Of course we could have run something. We could have run lots of things. Whether we could have run it better is a judgment we can only make in retrospect when this is all over.
- Q100 **Derek Twigg:** But you were not asked. Did you offer to run it?
- Ben Wallace:** We offered to run everything.
- Q101 **Derek Twigg:** Did you offer to run the test and trace system?
- Ben Wallace:** Over these last eight months, I have offered to run an awful lot of things.
- Chair:** This has suddenly got very, very interesting indeed, because this is what we are trying to tease out. We have this fantastic asset, and we join with you in praising what our Armed Forces can do, but they have not been utilised to their full capacity. The test and trace system is a great example, or one of many. It is a bit like No. 10 playing golf and having the woods in its golf bag but never utilising them because it does not understand them. That is, I am afraid, the analogy that seems to be developing here.
- Q102 **Derek Twigg:** Again, did you actually offer to run the test and trace system?
- Ben Wallace:** As I said at the beginning of this, there has not been a Cabinet where I have not offered to the Cabinet that we are here to help. There has not been a week or a fortnight where I have not been in touch



HOUSE OF COMMONS

with the Health Secretary or others offering to provide assistance. My colleagues and senior officials all know that we are here to help, and we will help. It is a subjective view about whether we could have done it better. Only time and retrospective inquiry will tell about whether somebody else could have done something better. That is the key. Let us remember that we are dwarfed by the scale of the NHS and the million-plus workers in the NHS. The sense that there were no other people out there perfectly capable of helping is wrong.

Q103 **Derek Twigg:** But it costs a lot of money to pay consultants.

Ben Wallace: Those contractual decisions about what the Government do—

Q104 **Derek Twigg:** I will go on to another question. You just referred to the mass testing programme in Liverpool. Can I confirm for the record that there were 2,000 Armed Forces personnel there? Is that correct?

Ben Wallace: Yes, I think there are over 2,000.

Q105 **Derek Twigg:** We are very grateful, and I know people up there are very grateful for the work that our Armed Forces personnel have done there. What about your ability to cope if the programme was expanded to London or even, possibly, all the major cities?

Ben Wallace: I am just trying to look to get you the exact testing in Liverpool. In Liverpool, in the last 24 hours, we have delivered 11,130 tests but our testing capacity is about 38,000. That is the current gap. I am a Lancashire MP and the greatest thing is that I work very well with Joe Anderson. I live up in the north-west and it was great to see that we delivered a really good package when local government, national Government, the Armed Forces and volunteers worked together. We still stand by to do even more in Liverpool if they need it. For me and you, I cannot wait to help Liverpool out of lockdown. We want to get the economy going and people back. That has been good.

The simple limit on our ambitions and our capability is the size of the Armed Forces. Could I do a Liverpool roll-out tomorrow across the whole of the UK? No. I do not have that many people to cover that population. That is why it is really important to import lessons learned to find out how we can replicate what we have learned in Liverpool, but at a scale that may be required of us. I mentioned earlier about things like post and using Rubicon, veterans and other local volunteers to help, but, no, we could not do it en masse at that scale because of the size of our Armed Forces.

Q106 **Derek Twigg:** You are helping to prepare for the vaccine programme.

Ben Wallace: Yes, we are. I can tell you how many are working in the vaccine place. Eight MACAs are open at the moment for vaccines. We have 59 persons working in the vaccine taskforce, which will obviously



HOUSE OF COMMONS

convert in the action into many, many more. I do not know the exact figure of how many we think in the first draft.

Charles Stickland: To be honest, we are still doing the force-sensing and understanding of the manpower delta. It is at that level of maturity that we are working with the structure and the roll-out, and making sure that, as I said before, much of the distribution is done by third-party contractors and existing systems. We are trying to work out what that manpower delta is where we need to help. That is ongoing work.

Q107 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I have to say that some of this conversation, in the way it is going, feels as though we are trying to create Totaljobs for the Armed Forces. They will be bringing back the Green Goddess and being asked to empty the bins next. That is not where we want to go. We want the Armed Forces to be doing the right job at the right time, led by the right people.

If we turn this question upside down, should this not be seen as a public health matter and be led by public health professionals? If we look at the gold standard in terms of test and trace, it is Germany, and neither private consultants nor the armed forces are involved because the best people to be leading it are public health professionals. I am not saying that the Armed Forces or military should not be involved in the roll-out and so on, but it must be led from the top by public health professionals getting over the public health message.

I think Derek is trying to make the point that, by allowing it to be led by private consultants, we are seeing vast wastes of money in terms of test and trace. I am not saying it is perfect, but I know that in Scotland it is being led by NHS Scotland and not by private consultants. Should we be making sure that it is public health professionals who are leading on test and trace?

Ben Wallace: To follow on from Derek's point about mass testing, the model we are exploring is letting the public health leads shape how they want to achieve mass testing. Funnily enough, in Liverpool, the other person I missed out when I said we have enjoyed working very closely with them was the public health director, Mr Ashworth, an excellent individual who is working alongside Joe Anderson and our Brigadier Joe Fossey to shape that response. One lesson we learned from Salisbury is that public health directors are very, very important, both locally and nationally, in dealing with this type of thing.

Q108 **Sarah Atherton:** While we are on subject of vaccines, are some defence personnel going to be given priority for the vaccine? I am thinking about submarine crew.

Charles Stickland: We have just started to do our prioritisation as to how it would play out. Interestingly, in terms of the priorities Government have set, we sit very, very low down, because this should be about doctors and the most vulnerable. Because of the way the vaccines work, in many respects they are not stopping you getting it. They are stopping



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the symptoms killing you. It is making sure that those cohorts of health workers and the most vulnerable come as the highest priority. We will put in our requests for where we think defence should have vaccinations, but we are also being very honest that we are generally a relatively young, fit and vibrant group of people who can manage it in a different way. That is the first point. We will be low down the priority, rightly so, in relation to the vulnerable and other key workers.

The second point is what we are doing internal to defence. We are doing our own pilots of how we can use the lateral flow testing to survey our populations. For example, if we can test everybody at the gate of a training establishment, we can weed people out. They can go and isolate, and we can let the cohort get on with training. We are also at the forefront of the conversation about test to release. That might be somebody who has had a contact or who has come through a travel corridor. If you test them in a different way, you can get them back into the workplace quickly.

We are working with Public Health England to work out how to do that. Those pilots to use asymptomatic testing to support our surveyed population and get back in the game start on 8 December. We feel that is probably more important for defence at this stage while others are taking the vaccine to start with.

Q109 **Chair:** Can I probe this a bit further? Have you had any outbreaks on board any of the ships or at, let us say, Sandhurst? On what scale have you been affected by the pandemic?

Ben Wallace: I can give you the figures. We have had outbreaks. Interestingly enough, some of our defence expertise has been very good on how to deal with it. We had an outbreak on a ship. They were isolated and dealt with properly. I can get you exact number of MoD tested if that would help. I can give you figures. There have been 44,197 service personnel tested. The number of positive tests has been 1,197: 392 in the Navy, 611 in the Army and 194 in the RAF. Apart from only 85, all the rest have been in the UK.

We have had them. They have been dealt with in accordance with the advice. They have been isolated. In some cases, we would do quarantine before going on a deployment and testing throughout. If anything happened, they would be either taken off the ship if they could be or, if not, they were isolated. That slowed the spread or stopped the spread in many cases.

Q110 **Chair:** Which ship was affected?

Charles Stickland: The Queen Elizabeth and HMS Richmond had some. As the Secretary of State has articulated, we have taken outbreak management very seriously. We have used some of the technology and our combat biomedical technicians. We have put them on deploying ships



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and they have a test capability. Very simply, on the carrier, we have had areas where we have said we are going to have an isolation facility.

Q111 **Chair:** Walk me through this on the carrier itself. The carrier departed. I presume it was moving into an operational environment or on exercise.

Charles Stickland: On exercise, yes.

Q112 **Chair:** I do not know what the crew is now. Is it 500 or something like that?

Charles Stickland: It is circa 850. It depends on what you have loaded.

Q113 **Chair:** You had an outbreak. How many people were affected on it?

Charles Stickland: I cannot give you the exact figures, sorry. I can come back to you but essentially it was managed as an outbreak. We had two basic plans. The first is if the individual has not been in contact with others. We always said that, because she was within helicopter reach of the land, that individual would be casevaced and isolated off. We have a protocol on all naval vessels where you have an isolation facility. You essentially do a contact trace on board and then you isolate those people on board.

Q114 **Chair:** I presume you are doing testing before you depart.

Charles Stickland: Yes.

Ben Wallace: They were low figures. If my memory serves me right—I will write to correct if not—on the first deployment of the Queen Elizabeth, there were four people and they were taken off. On the second deployment, we are talking low double figures. It was not like another scenario we have seen on other aircraft carriers or anything else. It was very controlled.

Funnily enough, because we have quite a controlled population, we have been able to feed in learning from these outbreaks. As a classic example of soldiers' innovation, when we moved 2,000 soldiers up to Liverpool in Pontins, you can map the people in there and what has happened. If there had been an outbreak, you can map how they got it, what we did with those people, the tracing around them, the circulation of how they moved, and then they would be removed from their room and put in an isolation block. We have learned quite a lot about the disease from that as well.

It is all about personal skills and personal discipline. It has meant that we have a better chance than most, if you remember routine in defence and that sort of stuff. It is absolutely making the difference. Like anyone else, we are not immune to it. Interestingly enough, in some of those environments you see people who just do not get it. Everyone else seems to either be asymptomatic or, indeed, have it, but there were one or two people who just did not have it at all. All those lessons are fed into the system.



Charles Stickland: I would raise one point that the Secretary of State mentioned, which is probably worth highlighting to the Committee. That is what we have called the QFAC—the quarantine facility. To deploy people overseas, particularly into operations in Afghanistan or Iraq but also at sea, which has been done by the Navy, we have looked very carefully at having a 14-day isolation facility where part of their pre-deployment process is to go to either Shrivenham or sites that the single services hold. There is asymptomatic testing that happens normally about three times through that process.

That means that, when they have deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq, as examples, the receiving coalition organisation is pretty comfortable that the UK team are in a good medical state, but we can also assure that we are looking after our people in that sense. That is a process that we have had in train since about June this year. We will continue to roll it though. I hope that gives you a picture of how seriously we are taking it.

Q115 **Chair:** The footprint you have across the world in upstream engagement—you mentioned Afghanistan and Iraq, where we had training programmes taking place as well—is very impressive indeed. What we do across the world is perhaps not highlighted enough. A lot of that effort had to be withdrawn at the start of this pandemic around February and March. Are you able to say whether we have been able to return in many of those cases? How have we adapted?

Charles Stickland: The Chief of Joint Operations, Vice-Admiral Ben Key, looked very careful with us at where the medical pathways or medical facilities in the areas where we were operating were not appropriate. As you say, we brought numbers back. Essentially, all we have done is monitor how coalition colleagues and the structures in which we operate have reacted to Covid, become Covid-safe and operated intelligently.

Q116 **Chair:** My question was not so much on the mechanics of the individuals. What is our footprint now? Have we got back to where we were before with what we were doing?

Charles Stickland: Apart from very small numbers in Iraq, because some of it has been moved into Kuwait, the footprint has been re-established. I am looking at Somalia, at training teams in Africa and our force flowing into Mali. We have recalibrated and gone back to the footprint we had.

Q117 **Chair:** While we are on force numbers, what are our numbers in Afghanistan currently?

Ben Wallace: I will have to answer that to you. I do not know.

Q118 **Chair:** I think it is in the region of about 400 based around Kabul.

Ben Wallace: Yes, I think it is three hundred and something, mainly around Kabul.

Q119 **Chair:** This is slightly away from what we are talking about but, with



HOUSE OF COMMONS

President Trump's decision to remove US troops, could you qualify what is happening to ours?

Ben Wallace: We take a position in line with the Secretary-General of NATO's statement on that. It is a NATO deployment. We go in together; we leave together. We are minded that our job is to provide stability and security to the Afghan people, and that force levels dropping below a certain level would be problematic for us all. I engaged with my US counterpart last week to discuss that issue.

We have not seen the detail of the reduction or exactly how that is going to be achieved, but we are making it very clear, alongside our other NATO partners, that it is very, very important that we do so in a way that does not leave the Afghans and our NATO partners vulnerable, should that happen. We are still continuing to plan and train for the forces going back to Kabul. We already have a regiment out there and that will be replaced by another one. That is not changing at the moment. We need a sufficient force structure to do our counter-terrorism and protection.

Q120 **Chair:** Will you revisit your entire footprint come 20 January after the inauguration of the next President?

Ben Wallace: If the United States continues to draw down, one of the challenges for NATO and the integrated review is that, at the moment, our dependency is so great that, if the United States were to unilaterally completely pull out of Afghanistan, it would give very few options for the other nations.

Q121 **Chair:** I am afraid it is a pretty petty and irresponsible decision by the commander-in-chief of the US forces, is it not? We will move on to the next question.

Q122 **Stuart Anderson:** Last week's announcement was outstanding, seeing multi-year funding. If we did not get that, that was a huge problem. Thank you for the work you did on that, but this year has taken a huge impact of resources. What is the cost of this so far?

Ben Wallace: The marginal cost of the MACAs that we have delivered is £27.7 million at the moment. It is not the end of the financial year but that is the marginal cost for our assistance.

Q123 **Stuart Anderson:** As it is a MACA task, surely it should not come out of the MoD budget.

Ben Wallace: No, those costs will be met by the Departments.

Q124 **Stuart Anderson:** You are confident that you will get those costs recovered.

Ben Wallace: I will send the debt collectors in if we do not. Yes, that is the agreement that they have with the Cabinet Office and us. Let me be clear: there is no indication that they are not going to pay for the costs. It is, without doubt, part of the process. It is marginal. It is not full



recovery. You could argue that £27 million is not massive compared to the other sums of money that the Departments are spending.

Q125 **Stuart Anderson:** What do you estimate that to be at the end of the current financial year?

Ben Wallace: I cannot give you an estimation. I suspect it will go up, simply because of my point about going to mass. If the military is involved in more vaccine roll-outs, the mass starts to pick up and more people cost more money. People will be surprised how low in numbers it is. I was surprised, to be fair.

Q126 **Gavin Robinson:** Secretary of State, do you mind if I take you back almost to where we started this session with the integrated review and fleet solid support ships to ask two specific questions? What impact has this pandemic had on major procurement programmes and on Armed Forces recruitment?

Ben Wallace: On the major programmes, the defence manufacturers have done an amazing job. They have lost very few days. On the plus side, they already had quite big spaces. I went to visit David Brown gearboxes in Huddersfield last Friday. These big engineering firms have a large-scale space. Often, if they are operating machinery anyhow, they are doing it away from each other. They have done a fantastic job at maintaining the flow of both defence manufacturing and products. We have not seen a major delay to any programme caused by Covid. That is a plus side.

All our constituents will be worried about the economic impact, so this is a very welcome opportunity to be working and engaging for some of our constituents. There has been no shortage of people wanting to go to work and contribute to building great things for this country. The big defence companies had already been quite used to allowing people to work on secure IT at home. These sorts of things have been in a good place. In that sense, it has been positive.

On recruitment, there was a pause early on in the depots functioning and how they did it. I am going to investigate the grenade throwing scandal when I go up on Thursday.

Richard Drax: And the left form.

Ben Wallace: You can do a right form as well, so I am interested to know why you cannot do a left form.

Richard Drax: I am intrigued to know what is so dangerous about the left form.

Ben Wallace: We have quite rightly gone back to picking up and living with Covid, effectively, in the training of our forces. I was privileged enough to take the Sovereign's Parade in August on behalf of Her Majesty the Queen. Some of those men and women passing out had literally been



in quarantine for their last term at Sandhurst, where they had not been able to go out or anything else other than to just focus on their courses. As ever in the military, we have adapted, improvised and overcome.

Charles Stickland: From a statistical perspective, for 2019-20, we have hit 93% of the target, which was this surge afterwards, which is 31% up on 2018-19. Some of that is us adapting and developing with Covid, but there are also some very clear socioeconomic issues in terms of an opportunity for an employer and people being retained. The statistics play that people have done a really good job to do virtual recruiting and all the very adaptive things that people have to do after an initial pause in April.

Q127 **Gavin Robinson:** Is it fair to say that, in a year or 18 months' time, when we ask you about the delay in any procurement and you cite coronavirus as the reason for the delay, we will be able to play back this clip from *Hansard*?

Ben Wallace: You will be able to play back that I said no major delay, "major" being the word.

Q128 **Gavin Robinson:** Do you wish to categorise the delays, then?

Ben Wallace: I shall leave that for when you challenge me in a year's time. Everything has slowed down in some areas, but it has very quickly picked back up again. It is not comparable.

Q129 **Gavin Robinson:** More tangibly, how have you ensured that the defence industrial supply chain has been supported during this pandemic? If you will remember, I asked you a number of months ago about the opportunities to either pump-prime or bring forward aspects that would give confidence and an injection of funds into the supply chain. Have you taken any of those steps?

Ben Wallace: Yes. We brought forward some of the long-lead items on Type 26, where we could effectively get money out of the door to stimulate the economy. If you remember, early on, we tried to bring forward things, like the Type 26 long lead times and other production schedules, or laying orders where possible. We brought forward some defence infrastructure plans. I went with the Chancellor to Catterick to talk about the improvements to that infrastructure. We have definitely brought some projects forward where it has been possible to do so, for both the socioeconomic purpose and the purpose of getting on with trying to bring forward capabilities that we need.

Q130 **Gavin Robinson:** Are you in a position to conceptualise that, to indicate the value of the programmes that were brought forward and how many companies will benefit?

Ben Wallace: The best thing is for me to send the Committee the examples, the costs of those, the funding we brought forward and, indeed, how that impacts on the programmes. The major delays that I see before me at the moment are not because of Covid.



Q131 **Chair:** The Committee had a wonderful visit down to Lulworth, where we saw some of the land warfare vehicles. All were in the pipeline: the Challenger 3 update, the Warrior upgrade, the Boxer and the Ajax. I read today that Boxer has moved a notch forward—that is certainly what was mooted in the press. Are you able to give an update on what is happening with these four projects?

Ben Wallace: Yes, I can give you a top-line budget. I have encouraged Boxer to be brought forward. In this IR, we need to sunset, as the Chief of the Defence Staff would say, some capabilities that are running out of their capabilities and we need to sunrise some new capabilities. The only big challenge is how long the night between the two is. That is why this funding settlement was so important, in giving us the funding headroom to do that. Boxer is really a key part of the future. Getting it as forward as possible is really useful. It is also useful for export opportunities. That is the great thing about the Boxer deal that we did. If we can help land export contracts abroad, a number of them will be made in the UK, which is good for jobs in Telford and Stockport, and many of the components are British.

For Ajax, there is currently a slight pause in the area around the turret. We are trying to sort out some issues with the turret. That has caused a delay. I am not sure how material the impact on its delivery time is, but it is not a massive material impact. On issues around Warrior upgrade and Challenger, we will lay out the details going forward of plans we have to discuss modernisation. Going back to this point about what we are going to do with all our money, that is the question that we need to answer for you, Parliament, our stakeholders and our allies. We will lay that out in the future.

Q132 **Chair:** That is very, very helpful. Finally, we are drawing to a close. Can I step back from all of this and look at our relationship with the United States, which I know you have worked hard on and continue to work hard on, as our closest security ally? President-elect Biden has announced a formidable foreign policy team and will probably move us into, I believe, a new era of Western leadership, yet here we are about to mark the start of our own G7 presidency by potentially cutting the overseas aid budget. There is an interesting relationship between hard power and soft power, which the MoD appreciates possibly more than most.

Would you not agree that downgrading our soft power programmes could leave vacuums in some of the poorest parts of the world that will cause further poverty and instability and, therefore, potentially a requirement for hard power? Those vacuums could easily be filled by Russia and China. This does not give the picture of us claiming genuinely to be global Britain, when we should really be advancing a sense of duty, as the West gains greater resolve with new leadership in the White House.

Ben Wallace: I do not know what is in the Chancellor's Budget.

Chair: Look me in the eye and tell me.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ben Wallace: Tobias, you have been in Government. Chancellors keep their budgets very close to their chests.

Richard Drax: Sometimes even from the Prime Minister.

Ben Wallace: Yes. I do not know, and it would be wrong to speculate, but what I could point out, and you know this, is that soft power does not belong in other Departments any more than it belongs in our Department. If anything, the lesson of constant competition—you alluded to China and Russia—is that soft power is as much a part of defence's output as anybody else's. I know an awful lot of soldiers who are also humanitarian aid workers. I do not know many humanitarian aid workers who are also soldiers. Our soldiers right now are delivering peacekeeping, engineering and capability development in some of the poorest parts of Africa. Our soldiers help secure countries so food programmes can actually go ahead. There is no point delivering a food programme into a country that is in anarchy or chaos, or where the food gets siphoned off on to the black market and never gets to the people.

Our survey ship was one of the first into Beirut. Our Navy divers were on hand to help them should they wish it. Our RAF flew PPE out to Mali at the height of this Covid problem. We have our 300 personnel deploying right now to Mali to help with that most poor country's stability and security. We had a team of Royal Engineers in Sudan, one of the other poorest countries in Africa. Humanitarian aid and soft power are part of our job.

It is not mutually exclusive. Let me put it another way: the former DFID did not have a monopoly on humanitarian aid and Britain's soft power. RFA Argus and HMS Medway have been helping in Honduras on hurricane relief, and they have been in the Caribbean on Covid and economic support. They are grey ships with white ensigns, if you are HMS Medway. That is my point on humanitarian aid.

Chair: There is time between now and the Chancellor's statement tomorrow for him to be made aware of everything you just told us. If the taxpayer was aware that this could be paid for out of ODA funding, although much of it, I am afraid, cannot be because of out-of-date rules, there would be greater support for the continuation of the 0.7% spend. You make a very powerful point on the blurring of warfighting and peacekeeping. The military do an incredible job. We cannot even claim on that for sending our ships to support the Royal Marines going to support the Caribbean after a hurricane. The rules need updating. Were that to happen, our soft power capabilities and us giving the perception that we are stepping back from global Britain would not be threatened. I hope that is a conversation that you would share with the Chancellor.

We have covered a wide variety of subjects, not least the pandemic. I am afraid Anthony McGee has got off completely scot-free today. I do not even know what accent you have, let alone your contribution. I am sure we will get you to speak another time. Secretary of State, Major General



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Charles Stickland and Anthony McGee, thank you very much indeed for joining the Committee this afternoon. Thank you to Committee members as well. This brings to a close this Committee session.