



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: Service accommodation, HC 1749

Wednesday 13 September 2023

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Members present: Robert Courts (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Gavin Robinson; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1-57

Witnesses

I: Sarah Clewes, Chief Executive, Naval Families Federation; Maria Lyle, Director, RAF Families Federation; and Collette Musgrave, Chief Executive, Army Families Federation.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Clewes, Maria Lyle and Collette Musgrave.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Defence Select Committee's Sub-Committee inquiry on service accommodation. I am Robert Courts, the Member of Parliament for Witney, and I am chairing this Sub-Committee. We have three witnesses, whom I will introduce shortly, but before I do that, I have two housekeeping matters to deal with.

First, I must ask the Committee whether there are any declarations. From my own point of view, I am the Member of Parliament for Witney, which includes Royal Air Force Brize Norton, so of course I have a large number of service personnel in my constituency, and some of the accommodation under the future accommodation model that we will discuss in due course is at Brize Norton.

Sarah Atherton: I was briefly Minister for Defence People and Veterans while the future accommodation model was being progressed.

Richard Drax: I have Lulworth and Bovington camps in my constituency, which clearly has connections with this subject we are talking about today.

Chair: The other housekeeping matter to deal with is that the Sub-Committee is taking written evidence as part of this inquiry. We have extended the deadline for that written evidence to come in from those who are interested in the matters that we are discussing.

I thank our panel for coming along to give evidence. We have Collette Musgrave, Maria Lyle and Sarah Clewes, and I ask them to introduce themselves one after another.

Collette Musgrave: I am the chief executive of the Army Families Federation, an independent charity that represents Army families. I have been in post for the for the last two years.

Maria Lyle: I am the director of the RAF Families Federation, another independent organisation. We represent RAF serving personnel and families. I have been in post for just over four years.

Sarah Clewes: I am the chief executive of the Naval Families Federation, and I have been in post since January 2022.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much, and we look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Before I hand over to members of the Committee to start asking the questions, this is a timely report, and we are very grateful to you for giving your evidence, for the simple reason that satisfaction with the standard of both service family accommodation and single living accommodation has been falling in recent years. We are concerned at the impact this is having on morale and retention in particular.

To give just a couple of figures, satisfaction with the overall standard of



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SFA has fallen from 52% in 2022 to 46% in 2023. For those families living in SFA or SSFA, 74% are now dissatisfied with responses to requests for maintenance and repair work. Satisfaction with the quality of that work has fallen as well, and I take that from the most recent attitudes survey, with which everyone will be familiar.

That is the context within which we are holding this Sub-Committee inquiry. That is the context that we are looking to address, and I will be very grateful for the evidence from the three panellists today.

I start by asking each of you in turn if you could outline some of the most frequent problems that service families report regarding accommodation. Will you also address which issues are of the most concern and how they differ between the services?

Collette Musgrave: In terms of the issues that present most frequently to us, quite clearly, over the last year, the 2022-23 financial year, the issue that presented itself most frequently to us was response to repairs and maintenance. This was in direct response to the roll-out of the FDIS contract, which is the new housing prime contract. We saw a 26% increase in housing inquiries to the Army Families Federation during that period. That was a total of 2,500 inquiries relating to housing issues, of which by far the greatest proportion was in direct relation to response to maintenance and repairs.

We do see, and have historically seen, other areas of concern, including relating to the condition of the estate. This is quite variable across the SFA estate, depending on location and very often related to the age of the properties concerned. We also receive a considerable number of inquiries that relate to the policies and processes that surround the allocation and access to service family accommodation—issues in relation to movement, to removals in and out, to adaptations to the homes of families who require them for physical and mental needs, and to questions regarding entitlement to service family accommodation, which is an area that is constantly developing in response to the way in which modern families are living their lives.

Certainly over the last year, in '22-23, there is no doubt about it that the key thing that we saw was very much around the response to maintenance inquiries, the extended timelines, the frequency of having to engage in order to get a response to those concerns, and the unresolved maintenance issues that were resulting in further damage and disrepair to the properties. I am happy to expand on any of those points.

Mr Jones: Chair, would it be in order for me to ask question 5, which relates to this?

Chair: Certainly, but shall we hear from the other two panellists first? Then I will bring you in, Kevan.

Maria Lyle: I would broadly echo Collette's points. We see a similar range of issues from RAF families and personnel. Certainly over the last year, we



have seen a 100% rise in issues brought to us around accommodation. The statistics that you quoted—

Q3 Derek Twigg: You are saying that you have seen a 100% rise in the last 12 months?

Maria Lyle: Yes. The statistics quoted at the start of this session from the families continuous attitude survey are echoed by the statistics in the Armed Forces continuous attitude survey, so this isn't just a family member saying they are dissatisfied; the serving person themselves are saying they are dissatisfied with service family accommodation and single living accommodation. More pointedly, if you look at the fact that these surveys have been running over time and you can see the statistics over time, you will see that in most cases they are the worst they have ever been. So, again, echoing Collette, it is the quality of repair and response that is the single worst issue in RAF families' minds.

Often, when I was analysing the differences between the services, the RAF seemed to be the most vociferous on some of these measures. They are also the most vociferous about whether it is still good value for money or not. What has traditionally been the hook behind single living accommodation and service family accommodation is that it is inexpensive in comparison to living in a private rented house or paying a mortgage. It is inexpensive, but if people are getting such poor levels of service, their calculation of whether it is value for money is clearly changing—certainly, the RAF statistics bear that out.

Q4 Chair: May I just pause you to clarify one point? You mentioned the issues of quality of repair and response. I think quality of repair speaks for itself, but may I press you a little more on what you mean by quality of response? Does it mean timeliness, or might it mean what they do when they respond?

Maria Lyle: That isn't defined in the question. There are about six different questions that fall out around accommodation. One of them is around the quality of repair—the actual work that is done in your home and your satisfaction with that repair, and there are statistics around that. Then there is a separate question about the responsiveness, and I believe those statistics were being driven by families who attempted to contact the call centre in the worst of the introductory stage of the most recent contracts where they simply could not get through. When they did get through via email or telephone and logged a response, the systems were not working and therefore they weren't getting a reply and they didn't know when their issue was going to be resolved. I know we will go on to talk about that. That has improved from where it was, but their response to this survey will be coloured by that.

The last point is that when we look at the statistics and at what comes into us both on SFA and, to a lesser extent, on SLA—we talk to people about SLA when we do visits and get shown around SLA on some of the main operating bases, and I am very well aware of some of the poor quality of single living accommodation out there—it is driven by two things. Yes, it is



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driven by underinvestment over a long period of time, but it is also driven by the poor quality of service that people sometimes receive. They are two quite distinct challenges that have occurred over the last few years. We need to carefully pull those two apart and look at them separately.

Q5 Chair: That is extremely helpful. Thank you very much. We will come back and investigate those issues in due course. I will now turn to Sarah for her opening comments.

Sarah Clewes: I completely agree with the points that have been made already. What that looks like for the naval families is frustration around the lack of customer service and the piecemeal approach to maintenance tasks, without any thought around the impact on the families—coming to repair one thing, but the impact of other things on the family, and then it being their responsibility to go back and try to get those things resolved. There is a lack of customer service where the loop isn't being closed: one issue might be rectified, but what others are impacting that family? Couldn't it be looked at with more of a customer service approach? That would be really useful to save the time and energy of busy families going back and trying to get through to the call centre, as we have talked about already.

According to statistics from FAMCAS, most naval families live in their own properties, so SFA is less of an issue for our families, but certainly there is a big number of naval families living in SFA. We know from the inquiries coming into our office at the Naval Families Federation that frustration around repairs and maintenance is often top of the list in terms of the calls that we receive into the office. From the evidence that we gather when we go out and about on ships and submarines and at homecomings and those kinds of family engagement events, housing is always in the top two.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Kevan.

Q6 Mr Jones: The satisfaction survey speaks for itself. You have just reinforced that. It is the lowest level of satisfaction. MoD Ministers always hide behind the point that 97% of MoD accommodation meets the decent homes standard. How do you explain the contradiction?

Maria Lyle: In some ways, the actual standard of accommodation and the service that you get when you are in that accommodation are two separate questions. What we are seeing writ large in these current statistics is around the standard of service when something goes wrong in the accommodation that you are in. The MoD and certainly DIO itself are looking at that definition of decent homes and are aware that that itself needs changing. That is something that is going on across Government. I believe they are working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on that.

Q7 Mr Jones: It's a pretty broad one.

Collette Musgrave: It is. The difference between decent homes and decent homes plus is difficult to define.

Q8 Mr Jones: So would you say that by hiding behind that statistic they are



trying to mask the problem?

Maria Lyle: I don't think that statistic is helpful. It does not go any way to describe the lived experience of people. If you are on your own in a house with small children and you can't get your hot water or heating to work, it doesn't matter whether your house allegedly meets a decent homes standard.

Q9 **Chair:** There is clearly an issue around the definition of the decent homes standard, particularly the distinction between standard and service. Can you assist us with what that is based on in terms of data interrogation? Is DIO collecting data that makes any assessment against the standard meaningful? You have the standard, but you have to map against the standard as well.

Collette Musgrave: I don't think we could really speak to DIO's data collection and how accurate and comprehensive that is, or otherwise. Our experience is that there can be difficulties. In the Army Families Federation, we have been developing a damp and mould register for well over 10 years, keeping track of the addresses that are reported to us as facing damp and mould issues, and we see the same addresses come up time and again as new occupants occupy them. Only very recently has that information been taken from us. I have to credit DIO, in that they have taken on board the issue of damp and mould and taken that information from us now. But—

Q10 **Chair:** You have been assessing it for 10 years; you have been recording it.

Collette Musgrave: We as the Army Families Federation have been assessing those properties for 10 years.

Q11 **Chair:** And only recently have they expressed an interest in it.

Collette Musgrave: And with the FDIS remediation process, we have now engaged very positively with them to do that, and a damp and mould survey of most properties is now being conducted. But frustrations are certainly expressed to us, and we have seen over many years the same addresses time and again presented to us as having long-term problems.

Q12 **Mr Jones:** Is that to do with the recent court case? Has it perhaps concentrated their mind?

Collette Musgrave: I couldn't comment.

Q13 **Chair:** Is it the same position with the other two services—the RAF and Navy?

Sarah Clewes: We don't have data; we have not been collecting data, but certainly it is a very common issue. We were able to go back to one of the contractors and say, "Maybe there's an education piece here. Maybe people need to understand how to deal with damp and mould, so that they can make informed choices and live more happily in their homes." So we were able to influence that. As we have said, things are getting better, but to go back to the inspections, there is a programme of inspections, going



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into properties to gauge the level of this issue. But often, those appointments are ad hoc; they are not made in advance. So somebody might pop round, hoping that somebody is at home and available to have their house surveyed, but actually it isn't convenient; they are not at home and they were not informed of the inspection time. That goes back to the customer service point that I made earlier.

Maria Lyle: Certainly, we have helped families who have had issues with damp and mould for some years, as the other families federations have done. The fact that there is now at least a very clear programme of what DIO and their contractors intend to do about those properties is a step forward, because previously it had been a case of fixing it when it was reported but there was not necessarily a long-term addressing—

Chair: A long-term forward plan.

Q14 **Mr Francois:** When I was a Minister in the Department—we're going back nearly a decade—they used to grade accommodation from 1 to 4, as you may remember, with 1 being the best and 4 the worst. Now, part of the problem is that the definitions have changed and we talk about decent homes and decent homes plus. But at the time, it was 1 to 4, and, from memory, I think we stopped letting out, except in exceptional circumstances, anything that was grade 3 or 4. Families getting new SFA would normally—in most cases—get only a grade 1 or 2 home. That meant that the actual quality of the buildings—the physical quality—tended not to be too bad. The real weakness was always the maintenance—as you said, the boiler going wrong, the electrics playing up or something like that. So even a decade ago, while there were deep-seated issues like mould and others, the thing that really drove most service families up the wall—no pun intended—was getting maintenance and repairs done, as opposed to the overall physical condition. Is that still basically the balance of the problem?

Maria Lyle: Broadly, yes. The grading from 1 to 4 still exists and is used as part of the process for defining how people pay for their homes and how much they pay. There will be families living in all those categories of home, albeit the aim is to ensure that they all, regardless of how they are categorised, meet decent homes standards. That is the conundrum. If you know the home that you are accepting is a certain grade and you are paying for that—and there will be some disputes; some families believe they should be paying less. That is the subject of disputes.

Mr Francois: Yes, people can appeal.

Maria Lyle: But the fundamental issue is getting something effectively repaired in your home.

Q15 **Mr Francois:** But if the basic principle is that you get what you pay for, you have a right, as a tenant, to have DIO repair your home when there is a problem, right?



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Collette Musgrave: Well, you are not a tenant, obviously—in the legal definition, Armed Forces families are not tenants; they have a licence to occupy.

Mr Francois: Sorry, you are right.

Collette Musgrave: It is quite fundamental.

Q16 **Chair:** It is fundamental. On that point, is there a case for making them tenants, so that they can take action as a private tenant would do?

Collette Musgrave: I think the evidence from our families is that they would much rather see the processes and policies that are in place work effectively. That would be their priority, rather than further change, which I do not think there is much appetite for out there.

Mr Francois: Ms Musgrave, you are right to correct me, but none the less, the principle holds good: if you are paying for a service, you have a right to receive that service in return. Often, we find that people pay for A, but do not get B. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you, Mark. Thank you, everyone, for your comments on that question. I now turn to Richard Drax.

Q17 **Richard Drax:** This question has been talked about substantially already: has there been an improvement in delivery of maintenance and repairs to service accommodation under the FDIS contracts? You have all been commenting on that—it is getting better, but improvements could still be made.

Perhaps the question I should ask is: what are the main issues that caused the huge backlog, in particular in maintenance work before Christmas? Also, we do not get a chance to talk about special forces much, because we are told we cannot, but that should not stop us talking about the accommodation of brave men and women who put their lives on the line. The SBS comes under the Royal Navy, of course. Sarah, can you comment on the accommodation in Poole, which I have heard is not good in some cases, particularly for the single men? Is that on your radar? May I ask you to answer that question first, before we go on to the main issues?

Sarah Clewes: It is on my radar; in fact, I was there last week. I made the point of going to Royal Marines Poole to see the accommodation first hand. I was able to walk around the base and see. Driving into the base, there are lots of SFA properties, and they look quite nice. They have nice new roofs and windows, so it looks like some work is going on, which is encouraging. But when I went on to the base and walked around it, the single living accommodation, I would agree, was substandard. I only saw it from the outside, but from what I could tell there has been a lack of investment and of planned maintenance. At the moment, maintenance seems to be very reactive, but that planned, preventive maintenance piece to get on top of all those issues over a huge period of time seems to be somewhat missing and not on the radar for getting it back in place, which could make a huge difference. So, absolutely, I visited recently and from what I saw from the outside, I agree SLA is substandard.



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Q18 **Richard Drax:** Did you get any helpful answers when you raised that? Have you raised it with anyone to ask, “What are you going to do about it?”

Sarah Clewes: I am going to go back to have another visit, and I will see what we can do about it. We have not had the evidence from families—families are not calling the Naval Families Federation to say, “This isn’t good enough”, and we have not heard from any serving personnel either, so I do not have any evidence from families, which is key. But actually, having visited and looked around the base, I can see for myself that it is substandard.

Q19 **Richard Drax:** Bearing in mind the calibre of those brave men and women, I suspect that they do not want to comment, which is why it is even more important to look in there and dig around, which you are very kindly doing.

May I go back to the main question, again starting with you, Sarah? What are the main issues causing the backlog, in particular the maintenance work before Christmas?

Sarah Clewes: The contract was fairly new. We are mindful that it was a big piece of work to crash together three different providers to look after some 48,000 properties. We absolutely understand that that was a huge task, and that it was going to take some time. New systems and processes take time to bed in—absolutely—so maybe the timing of it, with winter months being the trickiest, was difficult. We saw a lot of calls in, especially from Scotland, as you would expect with the harsher weather.

I like to think that since then—we got over the winter months and came into spring, and things are a little better—there has been some improvement. We were mindful that the contract was fairly new, a big undertaking and a big change, so there was a little bit of slack, but at the same time, getting through the harsh winter months is not easy for people when their home is not well insulated, the doors are ill-fitting and the windows are not great, and with the impact of the cost of living crisis on utility bills. There was a lot of activity just before Christmas. We are now thinking about the winter months coming shortly.

Q20 **Chair:** Could you put a little flesh on the bones when you say that there has been some improvement? There was a lot of press attention on this around Christmas, so you would expect there to be some improvement as people react to that. However, this is not a new phenomenon; it has been going on for many years. I would just like to understand, qualitatively, to what extent there has been an improvement. Is this just a blip because people are reacting to a negative press story, or is there actually a fundamental change that is improving things? To what extent has there been some improvement?

Sarah Clewes: I think communication has improved, which is one thing that, certainly, the families federations have been championing. Give people the information so that they can make informed choices. The “Families First Newsletter”, which talks about the current issues and what



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is coming next, provides some reassurance. If you are living in a property, you think, "Where am I? When will they ever get to me?" Seeing that information, you think, "Okay, there is not much activity at the moment, but I can see from the newsletter that that is coming in forthcoming months." That provides some reassurance.

Communication has been better to inform families so they know they are not forgotten. Communication sounds fairly basic, but actually, just telling people what is going on is key and has been very well received, certainly from the naval families.

Q21 Richard Drax: It is rather like waiting at an airport and you do not know what is going on. All you want is an official to say the plane is delayed and that calms everyone down, whereas when they do not say anything, everyone flies off the handle. Maria, is there anything else you would like to add on the Christmas backlog and what has been done? Are you satisfied with DIO FCIS?

Maria Lyle: I am satisfied there has been an improvement. The current outstanding number of calls looking for a fix, according to the last time we were given the figures in July, were 25% of what they were in December.

Q22 Chair: Again, you would expect that because of the summer, wouldn't you?

Maria Lyle: You would, but you would not normally expect that difference. That is because the figures in December were appalling and not as they should have been, so we should not be seeing quite such a change. The figures in December were driven by the fact that the systems that were supposed to communicate between the contractors at Pinnacle, who were taking the calls in, and the contractors out on the ground fixing were not working. That in itself then caused families to call back to the call centre saying, "I still haven't had anyone round to my house." That had broken down.

That was fundamentally what the rectification plans that DIO asked the contractors to get in place were to address. They were to address the systems themselves to make sure they were working and to then start prioritising which of those outstanding issues needed fixing and working their way through those issues. That is what the contractors have been doing over the last seven, eight or nine months: driving down the numbers. Now, if you ring Pinnacle to speak to the centre, the response times in terms of answering the phone are in seconds. Compared with what it was, where you could sit on the phone for an hour—or a lot more than an hour—waiting for a response in December, it is like day and night.

I still have concerns that the system that then handles the subsequent complaint, if you are not happy with how your repair has been handled, is cumbersome and lengthy, and that families who have already experienced poor service continue to get a very poor experience. They are often the vulnerable ones anyway because they have experienced an issue. That is the area that I would still centre as being a running sore, really.



Q23 Richard Drax: What is being done to tackle that particular issue?

Maria Lyle: At the last opportunity we had to meet the head of DIO accommodation and the chief execs of the contractors involved, I asked if they would have a high-level workshop to process map a customer experience of putting a complaint in and how that is dealt with across the contractors. They have agreed to do that. It is happening in the next fortnight and we are being involved in that process.

Q24 Mr Jones: On that point, is it all done on phones? With most organisations these days, you can email a complaint.

Maria Lyle: You can, absolutely. I was using phone because the emails were not being answered in December. That was why people were using the phone—because they had no surety that someone had received their problem. You can, of course, use those systems.

Q25 Richard Drax: Collette, is there anything you would like to add?

Collette Musgrave: Yes, if I may. The nature of how we record our inquiries allowed us to do quite a detailed analysis of what was behind these issues. Bear in mind that between September '22 and January '23, we saw inquiries from families on repairs and maintenance increase by 139% compared with the previous year. That immediately triggered a process by which we did a deep dive into the issues that were being raised with us, although it was apparent very quickly from our engagement with Army families that there were significant problems right from the get-go with the IT not being ready and, as Maria has alluded to, the lack of interoperability between the four contractor systems.

I will dive into it in a little bit more detail. As Maria said, there was a surge of inquiries, but the lack of response created a cycle of more and more people going in with more and more inquiries, a surge in complaints and compensation requests, which is a tick-box under our inquiries database, and families repeatedly calling to chase up the work, which, in and of itself, blocked up the entire system. As Maria has alluded to, there were differences in the processes between the various contractors: internally, urgent appointments are booked direct by Pinnacle for VIVO, but Amey had a different system, so you were losing things in that process as well.

When doing an analysis of the figures, we saw from families the evidence that there was a significant underestimation of the volume of legacy work that was transferred over. I think all three of us, as families federations, asked on more than one occasion about the amount of legacy work, whether the handover to the new contractors would be done in an efficient manner, and whether many of those jobs would be closed off.

I cannot point to the evidence but, anecdotally, from talking to families, it would appear that jobs were closed off under the old system, when in fact they were not closed off and families were straight on the phone with the new system to make those calls—apart from the fact that they were not, because occupants of SFA were asked to delay reporting routine repairs for the first month of the contract in order to allow the system to get up



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and running and be properly installed, which, in and of itself, saw a huge spike towards the end of that period.

I hope that adds a bit more colour. I would absolutely agree with what my colleagues are saying in terms of evidence, but because we are in a position to have evidence in our database directly from families and to be able to do that analysis, I hope that the Committee finds that helpful.

Q26 Richard Drax: May I raise one last point before I hand over for the next question? In my time, we had the families officer, who was in all cases a very senior ex-warrant officer. One thing a contractor feared more than anything else was this gentleman—it was a gentleman in most cases in those days—coming round to visit them to say, “Why haven’t you done Corporal Jones’s, Sergeant Major’s or another officer’s house? Why haven’t you fixed the door or the window?” Is the regiment or corps still chasing the organisations that should be repairing these homes, or is it all being left to contractors and is nothing to do with us any more? In my day, the serving officers were very involved in making sure that the families and the soldiers were well looked after.

Collette Musgrave: We do have in place within the Army—I cannot speak to the other two services—military housing liaison officers, who work on a regional basis. They are indeed very senior NCOs or LE officers, and they do an absolutely fantastic job. They are experts in their field. They have deep knowledge and expertise, gleaned over years. They are active and enthusiastic in support of families accessing SFA. They will do everything to try to make the system work in support of families. However, there are very few. They are on a regional basis. That expertise is spread very, very thinly. Indeed, there is an excellent team at Army regional command who deal with casework and seek to resolve issues. But, again, the expertise is spread very, very thinly.

Q27 Chair: The senior officers are on a regional basis. Is the position the same, similar or different for the RAF and the Navy?

Maria Lyle: Each RAF unit will have a member of their personnel support set-up who is the lead for housing. Again, most of them are very effective in their roles. If you can imagine, the perfect storm occurred in December and January of this year, and they were fighting a losing battle at times. They are driving around distributing heaters and having people cold-call them saying, “I have got a small child and I have no hot water.” In your constituency, at Brize Norton, there are huge numbers—it is a really big unit—and there is an excellent, well-experienced member of staff there who has been there for some years dealing with housing, but she cannot solve every issue because of the scale that she is dealing with. So yes, there are named people.

On a standard operating model, if things were working as they should, that is probably quite effective for the RAF. Could it be bolstered? Absolutely, but it is not a bad model. However, I would not say they were able to put out all the fires that they needed to this winter.



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Sarah Clewes: In the Navy, the responsibility for housing, in terms of walking the patch, if you like, falls to the base warrant officers, who are busy folk with many hats. They do what they can, but in terms of being dedicated just to housing, as we would have known some years ago, it is a secondary role alongside a number of other priorities for our base warrant officers.

Q28 **Sarah Atherton:** We are talking about phenomenal amounts of money for these poor-performing contracts. The National Accommodation Management Services contract to Pinnacle was £144 million. VIVO and Amey's contracts are worth £650 million over a seven-year period, and they are really not delivering the goods. Any idea when their contracts are due for renewal? [*Interruption.*] Have they just renewed it?

Mr Jones *indicated assent.*

Sarah Atherton: Well, what can I say? My next question then is: what can service families fix themselves? What are they allowed to fix themselves, or is everything a no-go zone? Can they not fix a leaky tap? Does anyone know, because I have had anecdotal evidence that their hands are very tied and they have to wait and go through those contract systems?

Collette Musgrave: There is guidance. I haven't got it with me, so I could not say in detail. There is certainly an expectation that certain very basic levels of house maintenance—replacing your lightbulbs, knowing where your stopcock is, looking after pipes in the winter—are within that guidance. I have no direct evidence that I could speak to with this, but as a former occupant of SFA, it can become quite difficult to know where the line is. Personally, I feel perfectly confident in changing a washer on a tap. Would somebody else feel confident reading the guidance that has been presented to them under the licence to occupy and feel that they should touch that tap, or would they feel, "Oh my goodness, I might be charged damages if I get it wrong—I better not."?

It goes back to a point that Sarah made earlier, which is that often the information that is provided to service personnel and their families as they occupy houses is not always accessible, particularly to family members who do not have access to defence systems to get that information. They are sometimes reliant on information that is either anecdotal and being passed around, or even out of date. Sometimes, for some families, even just the ability to read and understand what can be quite jargonese MoD language can be challenging.

Q29 **Sarah Atherton:** Thank you. The other point you made there was about charges. I have heard about punitive charges, particularly in the "marching in, marching out" process. When you look at families first and you are moving somewhere, perhaps you haven't done such a good clean as they would expect and you get these charges levied against you. Is that a significant problem?

Maria Lyle: It is a problem; I wouldn't say, of the ones that are bought to us, that percentage-wise it is a significant one. Does it happen? Yes. Are



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there cases where it is seen by the occupants as being unfair? Yes. And some of the cases are raised with us and we support the occupants to dispute those charges.

I do not have the figures to hand. I believe there is less of that coming to us than there used to be, actually. So, I would say that is an improving picture, personally. But I would need to doublecheck the figures to make sure I am correct.

Q30 Mr Jones: Can I ask a quick question? You were talking about having a regional manager to look after these things; you were saying they were doing a good job. Isn't that the problem with this contract? It is that the MoD aren't an intelligent customer, are they?

Mr Francois: You can say that again!

Mr Jones: There is no actual holding these contracts to account. Surely that is what is needed in the system, not at a regional level but at a local level, to ensure that what they say they are supposed to be delivering, they are delivering.

Collette Musgrave: I think that if the contract was running effectively—we have had sight of the KPIs. If they were being met, then actually everything would be as you have described, that indeed local, regional and national oversight would be working, flowing up and down effectively, and KPIs would be met.

Q31 Mr Jones: Let's take my local housing company. They have housing managers that look after so many thousand houses on an estate, for example, in an area. And they are held to account, to ensure that things get put right. Isn't that what is needed in this system? You need somebody really at a local level managing this.

Chair: The point is that someone has to check that the KPIs that you refer to are being met. The point, of course, is that if you didn't need to, it would be fine, but this is—

Collette Musgrave: I think the question that we were asked was about the involvement of uniformed personnel.

Mr Jones: I am not necessarily talking about uniformed personnel.

Collette Musgrave: So your question is about what happened—and yes, there is indeed local and regional oversight, and people within the system from the contractor side and from DIO.

Mr Jones: What are they doing then, from the customer's point of view—i.e. the MoD?

Q32 Chair: Can I understand that, please? You said there are people involved from DIO at a local level. Can you tell us who they are and what they do, please?

Collette Musgrave: As part of the rectification process, DIO put in place people at various levels, in order to oversee and ensure that the



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rectification plan was actually actioned and that progress towards meeting the KPIs was in place. That is what we have been told—

Q33 Mr Jones: That is different from what I am suggesting. For example, in Stanley in my constituency there is a large amount of social housing. There is a manager there who looks after that area and if I have got a problem, I shall go to her. If a tenant has things, she checks what is going on. Likewise in other parts, there is another manager that looks after that area. I don't know how many houses they actually look after, but they've got a certain number to look after in an area. But there's nothing like that, is there?

Collette Musgrave: Sorry, from—

Mr Jones: From the MoD's point of view.

Collette Musgrave: I am afraid you would have to ask the MoD what they have got in place—

Mr Jones: I think the problem with the contract is that it is a huge contract. If you have a national contract like this, you have got to actually make sure that it is being delivered at local level. It should not be down to families to do that. It should be something that the intelligent customer—i.e. the MoD; somebody locally—says, "Well, you're not doing this, you're not doing that. Why are you not doing it?"

Q34 Derek Twigg: I think that what Kevan is saying is this. Let's take an Army base, for argument's sake. For the accommodation on that base, who on the contracting side is the person—the senior person—who holds responsibility and accountability that you could go to? Do you know someone like that? Is that right?

Mr Jones: Yes.

Collette Musgrave: The contractors are split down and have regional managers.

Mr Jones: That is the contractors, not the MoD.

Maria Lyle: I think we are talking at cross purposes here. With the services, if I think of the RAF, I can think of cases in the past six months where either a station commander or his deputy, who runs the facilities and housing side of things, has called in the regional manager from VIVO or Amey and run a housing-focused clinic day to say, "We are deeply unhappy with your service. I want you to bring all your staff in here. The families can come and talk to me, and they can talk to you, and you focus on the key priorities." Has that resolved all the issues? No, it hasn't, because if there are some deep-seated issues with properties that are just not fit for purpose, that sort of approach will not resolve them.

Q35 Chair: That sounds to me like a clinic brought together by the services, rather than someone from the MoD saying, "This is the contract. This is what you're meant to be doing. You are failing to comply with this station", which is what Kevan is asking you.



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Maria Lyle: And that is the role of DIO. Its role through the head of DIO accommodation is to hold the contractors to account.

Chair: Yes, but at a local level.

Maria Lyle: These new appointments within DIO are part of that system to flag up to DIO management where their contracts are not being met so they have the evidence to penalise them financially, but you need people here from DIO to give you the absolute detail of that.

Q36 **Mr Jones:** I accept what you are saying, but listen: this is a basic housing management function—that you have to have someone at a local level. You said the base commander or whoever did it in that case, and DIO might send out a regional manager. Well, that is no good either. You need someone who the buck stops with at a local level who you, families or base commanders can say, “What is happening here?” It does not seem that that is in the process, is it?

Collette Musgrave: As Maria has mentioned, I think this question is probably better directed to DIO, but I suggest that there have definitely been some problems in terms of recruitment and filling those roles.

Chair: We will pose that question to the DIO, but we would have expected you to know, though, whether that person exists because their presence or not would be a barrier to you.

Collette Musgrave: The role exists.

Sarah Clewes: I think that is important to our families. If there is a clinic, families can go along. There will be a local representative; there will be somebody from the chain of command, so they do feel listened to, which I think is important. What that person, that regional manager, does with that information in terms of having an impact, we don’t know. But I do think it is important to acknowledge that these local managers are around; they are visible. Actually, in terms of thinking, as a family, that you are speaking to the right person, that is quite important and that is in place. What they do with that information and how it shapes change is a different matter that we probably cannot answer, but there are certainly local relationships, if you like.

Q37 **Mr Francois:** If we go back over a decade, and this follows on from Mr Drax’s point, if you took an Army battalion patch as an example, you had what was known as a patch manager, who was usually a retired senior NCO who knew the whole garrison very well and who knew that No. 23 has always had a problem with mould—they knew it. When families—often the wives if the battalion was away—had a problem, they would go to the patch manager, and the patch manager would get on to the contractors and get the problem resolved. It was a very simple, straightforward system and, by and large, it worked very well.

We have now completely moved away from that where we have this very big, very expensive national contract, with some regional sub-contracts, which is delivered by Pinnacle, VIVO and Amey, and then the DIO is meant



to monitor them, but there is no patch manager who you can take your concerns to. You try an email or you try to telephone. You are saying that that has got a bit better, but in the “good old days”, the partners who were there, perhaps when their service personnel partner was away, knew who to get hold of very quickly, and a lot of the problems got resolved at ground level.

We have completely moved away from that, though. You are talking about having a specific surgery; this was someone people could go to pretty much any time during working hours. In many ways, these new arrangements are nowhere near as practically good as the old ones, are they? The old system worked really well and then some genius came along and changed it. Ms Musgrave, do you remember patch managers?

Collette Musgrave: I do remember patch managers, and the remnants of them with the Army in Germany, indeed.

Mr Francois: I am not saying it was perfect, but it was simple.

Collette Musgrave: It was simple in some respects. The evidence from our families certainly suggests that, with the nature of family life, with an awful lot of spouses and partners who now work and/or are otherwise not always at home, many aspects of what was promised in the FDIS contract—such as the Home Hub, the much more responsive call centre and the ability, particularly for the non-licenceholder, to engage effectively and put in calls for repairs and so on—were actually welcome and in response to what families indicated that they wanted to have.

As we have discussed already today, many aspects of those have either not rolled out as they should have—as they were anticipated—or have yet to roll out, such as the Home Hub aspect. For some parts of the contract—Amey, in particular, as part of the social element of its offer, did actually start to bring back some more of that patch manager-type role in some areas. And we have seen some evidence that, where that role has been recruited, or there is a role that is similar to that patch manager role, that has certainly worked—

Q38 **Mr Francois:** I’m sorry, but we are always tight for time on these things; I don’t mean to cut you off—so Amey have started to do that, but not VIVO?

Collette Musgrave: It was not part of their offer.

Q39 **Mr Francois:** Right, okay. Sorry, but I should probably have declared an interest earlier on as well, but I will do it now. I was commissioned as a former Armed Forces Minister by a previous Prime Minister—Theresa May; we have had a few—to conduct a study into why people leave the Armed Forces and what we could do to keep them. It was called “Stick or Twist?” and was submitted in February 2020, helped by a very bright staff officer called Brigadier Simon Goldstein and my researcher, a great guy called Rory Boden.

We spent a year on it; we visited about a dozen military establishments and did focus groups with officers, senior NCOs, junior ranks and partners,



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and we went into all of this in great detail. That is where we got the patch manager bit, for instance; we got that right from the horse's mouth, as it were. At the end of that, which is why I should declare an interest, we submitted a report to the Prime Minister, copied to the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, very strongly recommending against the FDIS model—it was conceptualised at that time but had not gone live—and arguing for a completely different solution. But the machine ploughed on.

My question for you was part of our argument at the time, and it follows on from Mr Jones' point. When there are public sector housing associations, registered social landlords, who have been doing this stuff for like 50 years—this is, after all, a form of public sector housing and you have organisations that have been doing that for half a century—why do you need to give a massive fat contract to a bunch of facilities management companies? You have a whole bunch of housing associations that do this as their bread and butter every day of the week. What is your view on that, Sarah?

Sarah Clewes: My view on that is that I do not have enough evidence around whether that is a good decision or not. I do not know enough about social housing but I am sure that it isn't perfect; I am sure there are some issues with that as well, but you would like to think that what is already out there, in terms of a model that is successful-ish would have been looked at—

Mr Francois: You would. Thank you very much. We are tight for time. Maria?

Maria Lyle: I think there are quite a lot of differences between the population that uses housing associations and the military population, not least the mobility and the management of that. That does not mean that there is nothing that can be learned from the housing association model that could be successfully introduced to the way that military housing is managed. I am not sure that is definitely possible to transpose one for the other, and there could be some significant challenges in doing so.

Mr Francois: Okay. Ms Musgrave?

Collette Musgrave: I would absolutely echo Maria's comments and note that, in fact, some of the current contractors who are involved in FDIS actually have deep experience in the social-housing model. Certainly, from our conversations with them, they have found the population, the demand and the requirement of serving personnel and their families to be quite different, as Maria outlined.

Q40 **Mr Francois:** Okay, but certainly, from your own evidence, those first few months of the introduction of FDIS have been, shall we say, not a stunning success, despite that experience.

On a completely different topic—gas safety—the Committee was very concerned to hear some months ago that hundreds of families living in SFA did not have up-to-date gas safety certificates and in some cases electricity safety certificates. That is extremely worrying. We understand



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that some remedial action has been taken, but we also understand that the original figures we were given underestimated the scale of the problem. What has been the reaction of your three organisations to that, and are you satisfied that enough is being done to address it? Obviously, safety is critical. Let's start with Ms Lyle this time.

Maria Lyle: We were disappointed to understand the scale of the issue. I have been relatively pleased, I have to say, with the speed of roll-out once the scale of the issue was understood. Yes, there are still some outstanding, but the number is very much reduced—it might even be less than 100. It became an overwhelming focus of the organisation for a short period of time to get on top of that particular issue because of its safety implications.

Q41 **Mr Francois:** How could “around 100” be acceptable? If you were a private sector landlord and did not have an up-to-date gas safety certificate for one of your tenants, you could go to jail. How can it be that the DIO get away with that scot-free and a private sector landlord doesn't?

Maria Lyle: For those properties, it has been because they are unable to gain access. They have not broken the door down, but they have repeatedly tried to contact those service families to gain access to the properties. I will happily throw both DIO and the contractors under the bus for a number of things we are talking about today, but I genuinely believe that the properties that are outstanding will not be outstanding through lack of attempts to access the properties.

Q42 **Mr Francois:** But how can any serviceman or servicewoman not be worried about the safety of their own kids? That does not make sense.

Maria Lyle: Sometimes they are attempting to access the properties when they are lived in by a single serving person who is on deployment.

Sarah Clewes: Absolutely. That is exactly the point I was going to make—that it is about trying to get into those properties. Sometimes if the contractor happens to be in the area, he will knock on a couple of doors and think, “I'm here doing this one. I might as well pop next door and see if they are free.” If they are, that's great, but if they are not then that is where the figures are coming from: the lack of access to the properties. Giving people appointment times to ensure they are in would be great, but that is not always possible, for example if somebody is deployed at sea or on a submarine for six months. Sometimes it is just not possible. There are some practicalities around it, but I absolutely take your point.

Collette Musgrave: I have nothing to add to my colleagues' comments. They are absolutely as I would expect. The issues are around gaining access. There should not be a presumption that there are people living in these properties at this particular time. They may well be elsewhere.

Chair: Derek, did you want to come in on that?

Q43 **Derek Twigg:** I will just quickly go back to the example I used of an Army base, or an RAF or naval base. You said that at the end of the day



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you think the person who is most accountable is the regional manager, who you bring in if things get difficult, and that you are planning to have these clinics. Do these regional managers last long? Do they change a lot? Do they stay for long enough to develop relationships? I am just trying to work out how much of a grip they have if they are changing all the time.

Maria Lyle: DIO, like a lot of Government Departments and civil service Departments do have a certain amount of churn. There are some posts where that has absolutely been an issue. It is an issue in the post we are describing—not with all of them, but some. We are at a position in this country where people will seek other roles if their role is stressful and they do not earn enough. I would say that that is absolutely the case at times for these people.

Q44 **Sarah Atherton:** Can I go back to the gas safety certificates? If you are landlord who has a tenant and you have given them enough reasonable time to access a property for reasons of certification, you can give them 24 hours' notice and go into that property, because it is a legal obligation of the landlord. Is this something where there is a unique difference between being a tenant and having a licence to occupy? Why can't they do this under a licence to occupy? The excuse that they cannot get access would not hold.

Collette Musgrave: That is a very good challenge and I don't know the answer to the detail. There are issues with the licence to occupy. We have evidence from families that they don't feel that it has real teeth. Certainly in conversation with families when you are dealing with an issue around licence to occupy, they will say, "Why aren't there inspections?", for example. As a landlord you would have a right to go and inspect somewhere every six months. There is no evidence of that really happening.

In neighbourly disputes, for example, or when there are concerns from a neighbour in an SFA around the state and condition of a neighbouring SFA where they have raised those concerns, we do have evidence from families that they are being told, "The licence to occupy means we can't go in and inspect that property." This is not consistent across the estate—it very much depends on the local circumstances—but there are certainly some cases where families are being told, "We can't do anything about it because of the licence to occupy."

We have engaged with the Ministry of Defence and provided them with evidence around very many aspects of the licence to occupy, which in and of itself is by and large adequate for the purposes, but if it is not enforced and the processes around it are not consistently and visibly enforced, that can, for a small number of families, create some quite serious problems in terms of how they are living in their SFA.

Q45 **Sarah Atherton:** If a family is struggling to manage damp and mildew, some of which can be mitigated by ventilation, heating, moving furniture away from walls, etc., they need help and support to do that. They are not getting that because someone is not going in every six months to say,



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"You could do this," or, "Stop drying all your laundry on the radiators or over doors." They are not getting that level of support. Or do they get that from somewhere else?

Collette Musgrave: They would get that if and when they raised an issue around damp and mould and somebody came to their house for an appointment. That is when they would get that support. If a family does not raise an issue about the condition of the repairs of a home, it is unlikely that that will be identified until the point at which that family moves out of that SFA.

Q46 **Sarah Atherton:** Thank you. Sadly, you probably know something about relationships that do not go in a straightforward way—for example, break-ups and domestic violence. If a service person moves back into single living accommodation, leaving a spouse, they have 93 days' notice to vacate. That will obviously cause problems. What is the situation on the ground? They are not eligible for housing benefit and it is pretty grim to access properties on the rental market in civvy street. What are you finding on the ground?

Collette Musgrave: It is a mixed picture. We have a small but significant number of families who approach us around this. The 93-days rule can, with local discretion and support, be extended if there is SFA available and there is not pressure on the estate at that point. Some families do benefit from that, but it depends on local circumstances. We are very concerned. You allude to the fact that they are unable, because of the nature of the mesne profit application, to claim the housing element of universal credit, and that has a rolling-on effect in terms of their ability to get the discretionary housing payment from the local authority in due course.

Q47 **Sarah Atherton:** Do you know why they are not eligible for the housing benefit element under universal credit? Why can't they claim that?

Collette Musgrave: It is the nature of mesne profits. Mesne profits are the damage for trespass charges made by a landlord after a tenancy has ended, but the former tenant remains in the property—the service person has moved out, but the family have remained. Forgive me for reading this out, but it is complex: "Due to families occupying SFA under a licence to occupy, separating service spouses remaining in the property are charged mesne profit rather than rent. Being charged mesne profit renders them ineligible for claiming the housing element of universal credit."

Q48 **Chair:** That is a definitional point to do with universal credit, isn't it? You would have to amend that to allow them to be able to claim it.

Collette Musgrave: Yes. Most social housing providers have moved away from charging mesne profit, changing to a use-and-occupation licence, but the MoD has not agreed to make that change. We have raised evidence to the MoD on that. We understand that it is being considered by MoD legal at this point. It is a small but significant number of service spouses who are being discriminated against—we would regard this as a covenant issue—because they are service spouses being charged mesne profit, rather than civilian personnel being charged rent.



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Maria Lyle: I echo that. A number of cases have been brought to us, including a number from Brize Norton via the Citizens Advice adviser there. As families federations, we have spoken to the DWP, which sees it as an MoD-lead issue to exhaust the issue that you talked about—the definitions—before it steps in.

Q49 **Sarah Atherton:** What is the situation on the ground with spouses accessing safe accommodation in instances of domestic violence? Is there any provision, or do they go into the civilian system?

Maria Lyle: Again, it depends on the numbers available at the time. We refer to two main areas. In some locations, RAF teams have some quite good local relationships with charities in their area, in particular for the bigger units, but the two big organisations we would refer to are the Services Cotswold Centre—part of the reason for its existence is to provide short-term housing for people who are at risk of homelessness through all sorts of circumstances, domestic abuse absolutely being one of them—and SSAFA, which also provides some supported, assisted accommodation for families in such circumstances. I know from speaking to SSAFA recently that that runs at a very high occupancy rate throughout the year—sad, but true—so it is a well-used resource.

Q50 **Sarah Atherton:** Sarah, do you have anything to add on those two points before I ask a quick last question?

Sarah Clewes: The Royal British Legion has addressed some of the issues that you have raised. For short-notice accommodation, we would refer to the charity sector—to the benevolent charities, certainly for the Royal Navy—to pick that up and make accommodation available where possible. There used to be short-term accommodation on some of the patches that we have talked about, but that is not always available and is certainly oversubscribed. We look to the charity sector to help out in such instances.

Q51 **Sarah Atherton:** For the 6,000 personnel overseas, many with families, their satisfaction rating for family accommodation and maintenance is much higher: for service family accommodation in general, it is 72% compared with 39% in the UK; and for maintenance, it is 45% compared with 17%. What are they getting right?

Sarah Clewes: We do not have much evidence of what they are getting right, but the numbers speak for themselves. Certainly there must be something we could learn, perhaps at the local level, as we have talked about. It might be the importance of having the right people in the right place at the right time, and of doing something with that information. We do not have much evidence around overseas accommodation, but again, it would make sense to look at the models that we could perhaps learn from.

Maria Lyle: It might be interesting to break down the world, in terms of satisfaction in various places, but you are right that the figures in general are more positive. Certainly when we ran an overseas survey for the RAF, accommodation came out generally as a positive factor. Often, the use of private rented accommodation helps, and people feel that they have a



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more pleasant and modern living environment. More local MoD and service representatives are involved in the management of that housing over there. We get complaints from people in Cyprus, so it is not that everything is rosy—there are some challenges—but I would say that the different model is bearing out in the percentage of satisfaction.

Q52 Sarah Atherton: I have received evidence that the DIO allocates its worst properties to service personnel and families coming back to the UK from overseas, because it does not have the capacity to inspect them before they march in. Do you have any comment to make on that?

Collette Musgrave: We certainly have evidence from not only families from overseas, but any families who don't have the capacity to travel to view a property. That is not limited to those from overseas. It may be because you are travelling long distances within the UK, or you simply don't have the time. You may be working and unable to take time off as a family to go and view properties. Within the category of policies and processes and the evidence that comes to us, certainly something that we see from families is the level of discomfort about not being able to view a property before deciding whether to accept it.

There have been strides made in terms of people being able to view plans, photographs and videos. However, the feedback we get from families is that that is not always adequate if you don't understand the context of where a home is, where it is located on a particular estate or whether it is suitable for a family if they have particular needs, for example. I can't say that we have direct evidence to say that families returning from overseas experience that consistently, but more generally there is dissatisfaction with being unable to view a property before deciding whether to accept it. Sometimes, the first time you are physically seeing it is when you and your removal truck drive on to the drive.

Sarah Atherton: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. We have talked a lot about family accommodation; I would like to talk about single living now. I will ask Richard Drax to take us forward on that.

Q53 Richard Drax: Do personnel in single living accommodation experience different challenges from those in service family accommodation? From reading one of the reports, one of the issues I see is that those with children have problems because they have to rent out hotels or somewhere else to accommodate a visit from children. What is the situation with single living?

Sarah Clewes: Single living accommodation is on our radar. As you say, there are limitations around contact with children and that is difficult. As mentioned before, short-term family accommodation used to be available to enable families to have that precious time together, but that is less available now, which is disappointing. Single living accommodation varies. We get different reports. Some is very good. HMS Collingwood has some very modern modules that can be put together very quickly, and they have been well received. However, Britannia Royal Naval College, for



example, is a very old building and the single living accommodation is not great. We have to bear in mind that these are our future leaders who are coming into the naval college, often from university accommodation that is very modern with great shared spaces and everything you would expect. So when you go through somewhere like Dartmouth it is a sharp contrast, because it is an old building. Across single living accommodation we have some different examples of very good, modern buildings versus some older ones, and we have talked about the lack of maintenance.

Q54 Richard Drax: In the single living accommodation lived experience survey in May '22, 34% of service personnel said that SLA increased their intentions to leave the Armed Forces. That is a very high figure, isn't it?

Sarah Clewes: It is. Again, for people who have joined perhaps from university, it is a sharp contrast from what they have witnessed in a different space. Also, mess life—the importance of shared spaces and going into the mess to eat—is different now. The culture around the way people live is different. They are probably spending more time in their single cabin and not having the social interaction that maybe we enjoyed some years ago. There has definitely been a change in the way people live, but underlying all of that is the material state of some of the blocks.

Q55 Richard Drax: What is being done to counter the increasing risk of people leaving?

Sarah Clewes: There are plans to flatten some blocks and replace them, because there is evidence to say that absolutely needs doing. In all of that is planning what we do with folk while the new blocks are being built. It is a long process, which is very expensive and needs to be planned, so it's difficult. There may be good news on the horizon, when some of these blocks are knocked down and rebuilt, but that will all take time. It's tricky; it needs some planning. Again, it comes down to communication: people need to know what is happening.

Maria Lyle: It is a significant concern for us. Like what Sarah alluded to, the quality of single living accommodation across the RAF estate fluctuates by unit. But I can think of some really big main operating bases where there are significant concerns over the quality of the junior ranks' accommodation, and it will be a factor in recruitment and retention. I am thinking of places like Brize Norton, Waddington, Odiham, Marham, High Wycombe and Digby. At somewhere like Odiham, the newest of the junior ranks' blocks are over 25 years old. When you are looking at managing that kind of ageing estate and infrastructure, that is a big challenge.

I think there is a balance for the MoD. The service family accommodation tends to make it into the headlines, because the headlines rightly focus on families with small children being unable to look after them. I completely appreciate that, but often the junior ranks do not have very much of a voice in this. They are being put in substandard accommodation and they are young people—we have invested in their training and want to keep them in the services. So it is absolutely something where I would be



interested in understanding better the spending plans, over the short term.

Q56 Richard Drax: Collette, is there a similar experience for the Army?

Collette Musgrave: There is a similar experience in the Army, but what I would say about the Army is that there are two multibillion-pound, decade-long programmes that are designed to address this, and significant progress has been made in some locations. As Sarah has alluded to, the modular build gives flexibility. One of the long-term issues has been an unwillingness to invest in locations, because they may or may not be disposed of in due course. This modular build does get over some of those issues, which I think is quite positive; you can lift and move it to whichever location it is going to. It would be lovely to see the same kind of multibillion-pound, multi-year approach taken to SFA, to be frank. But there is a programme for the Army in place, and that has identified issues and has remediation in place.

That is not to say that the experience right now for some of our soldiers is up to scratch; it quite clearly isn't. But this has been identified. There has been a complete review of all the accommodation to ensure compliance with the defence minimum accommodation standard, which was brought in a little while ago. The majority are doing well, and there is focused remediation on those that are not doing so well.

If I may, I will just refer back to your point about single parents unable to have their children. I don't know whether we are going to get on to the new accommodation offer—

Chair: We will do that in a second.

Collette Musgrave: I am conscious that the announcement has not yet been made, but we understand and really welcome the fact that within that, there is recognition of this particular cohort and an extension of entitlement to family accommodation for them, to address exactly that issue.

Richard Drax: That goes back to my colleague's point, made very well earlier. Thank you. I know time is pressing. I hand back to you, Chairman.

Chair: Richard, thank you; and thank you, everyone. I am sorry: I know there are many more points we could go into, but I do want to touch on the future accommodation model, and Derek is going to do that for us now.

Q57 Derek Twigg: We are about to run out of time, so I will be very brief. Is it a good or bad thing? Do you have confidence that it is going to work and deal with the challenges that it throws up? Maybe we could have a short sentence from each of you on that. It is just that our time is about to run out.

Maria Lyle: I will keep it very brief. In general, we are very positive about the potential for the new accommodation offer, as we understand it to be.



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There may well be some significant challenges in people's understanding of it as it rolls out in terms of what we have seen from FDIS, for example. When you turn something new on, the challenge is answering all the questions and allocating people homes based on that new offer. That aside, we are positive about the policy changes involved in that new offer.

Sarah Clewes: We will wait to see the detail, but anything in there that demonstrates that the Armed Forces are a modern employer would be well received.

Collette Musgrave: The extension of entitlement is something that our families have been looking for for quite some time, and I am sure it will be very welcome to those families. Our recent surveys have shown that there is some concern that the offer overall may be reduced for some families with the move from rank to need. We are confident—or we hope—that transitional protection will be in place to support that, but our surveys consistently show that that is a concern for Army families. They also show that they really value having access to SFA, with their high levels of mobility and very frequent moves being taken into account in how any policies and processes are changed and rolled out.

We would also need to understand a lot more about who is going to be able to use the private rental option and what levels of support they will get in doing so. I would just note that the new accommodation offer, as we understand it, will not extend to service families accommodation overseas at this point, so we are concerned. Those families who are aware of this have already expressed their concerns to us that as they move in and out of the UK and overseas, the offer that is part of their remuneration package will be different.

Derek Twigg: I think that answers almost all the questions we were going to ask anyway.

Chair: Thank you, everyone. There are many more things that we could have asked and gone into more detail on, but we are out of time; I am afraid that that is the nature of the game. There are a few things that I may write to you on, if that is okay—questions that we did not get time to ask—and if you were able to contribute on those, I would be very grateful. For now, thank you very much indeed for coming and thank you for your evidence.