



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Readiness, HC 26

Tuesday 14 November 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 286-346

Witnesses

I: Admiral Sir Ben Key, First Sea Lord, and Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse, Director Force Generation, Royal Navy.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Admiral Sir Ben Key and Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse.

Q286 **Chair:** Welcome to the latest in our sessions on military readiness, which is part of an ongoing inquiry that the Committee is running. I am grateful to be joined today by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Ben Key, and by Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse, who is the Royal Navy's Director Force Generation. I am grateful to you both for your time today.

We have limited time today, so I am going to get straight into the issues before I hand over to my colleagues. The first thing I would like to ask you is how events in the middle east have impacted your thinking on readiness.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: The first thing I would say is, how do we think about readiness? Readiness for the service at the moment is across two areas where it pertains to the middle east. First, do we continue to be ready to deliver all the other tasks that are placed upon us? We are a globally deployed Navy; we operate in a number of areas around the world. A number of you will have experienced the Batch 2 OPVs. You will have seen the number of ships we currently have in the North Atlantic. Both aircraft carriers are deployed, and we can continue to deliver the independent nuclear deterrent. On a day-to-day basis, our readiness is that 50% of the fleet is either at sea or at very high readiness to deploy.

Against that baseline, what does this mean for the middle east? The architecture that we look at is: what are the contingency plans or contingency options we might be asked to undertake, and how are we posturing accordingly? That sense of readiness being an ever-present mindset does not change. What does is assessing a range of likely tasks and setting accordingly, and I would observe that the littoral response group is in the Mediterranean. It has set itself for a range of potential activity. We have ships allocated to NATO. HMS Duncan is currently part of the NATO task group—in fact, we currently provide the one-star commander for the NATO task group in the middle east—and we continue to offer and think through a range of likely scenarios or options that CDS can then work on with Ministers to consider advice and choices for the Prime Minister.

Readiness is something that we do all the time, and then you cleave across that not just what we do today, but what we might be asked to do tomorrow. That is how we balance the readiness question that we have.

Q287 **Chair:** It is another event that adds to the already significant burden that there is on the Royal Navy, though, is it not?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: It is indeed. This Committee has wisely observed that we could do with a bigger Navy. You will always have more tasks for a Navy than there are ships, by dint of the fact that we are a maritime nation. You will all be aware of our dependency upon the sea. The figures



are trotted out very regularly—they have almost become trite—but I think they are worth rehearsing. Ninety per cent of our trade by volume travels by sea, but 99% of our data, and therefore our financial data, travels on seabed cables, so we have a dependency upon the sea both economically and for security, which mandates a Navy that is ready to meet a range of security tasks. The very fact of the uncertain geopolitical context we find ourselves in today would point to that range of tasks being very considerable.

Q288 Chair: It must follow, in the light of the fact that we need a bigger Navy, that the emergence of an issue in the middle east that you will need to be ready for means that you have less time available to ensure that you are ready for, for example, a challenge from a peer adversary.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: That is why, for us, having such a high proportion of the fleet at high readiness or very high readiness is so important on a rolling basis. Maritime readiness is not something you can suddenly magic up. Steve could perhaps explain for the Committee the process, but if you are bringing a ship out of deep maintenance or refit, crewing it, training it and bringing it to a state of readiness, or bringing it out of a maintenance period, that is something that requires time. Because of how quickly events can change, we need to ensure that a significant proportion of the fleet is at high readiness throughout, so that we can respond in a timely fashion. That is within our DNA. If you are forward deployed to some part of the world, as I have often been in my career, and the list of orders you sail on changes, you can't go running back to the UK and say, "Ooh, we weren't expecting that. We'd better have a rethink." You deal with what you have at the time. A broader sense of preparedness, being able to respond, is something that is implicit in maritime power and what I try to drive the fleet to deliver for the Secretary of State.

Chair: Thank you. That is great for an opening section. Let's turn to some of the detail and issues.

Q289 Mr Jones: With the development of the NATO force model and regional plans, what will change in terms of the effects that those will have on the Navy's readiness?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Because we already allocate a significant amount of the operational fleet to NATO under the current model, the shift to the new force model is, frankly, going to make very little change to the way we think. The commitment is already significant. What the new force model and new regional plans mean for me and for the way we force-generate is that that gives us greater clarity on the range of tasks we might have to fulfil and the allies and partners within NATO that we are likely to fulfil them with. Therefore, we can really focus the thinking, both conceptual and training-wise, on those that we could find ourselves under fire with, to maximise the operational capability we offer.

We have been doing this for some time. Members of the Committee no doubt have visited operational sea training down off Plymouth, where a number of our NATO partners send their ships to train. The NATO maritime



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structure for developing warfighting capability is well built and that is not being changed; it is being sharpened by the change to the NATO force model that is coming across. But we already allocate more of our maritime force, proportionally, than almost any other nation in NATO, so for us, that level of commitment remains a truth.

Q290 **Mr Jones:** So it's not about an increase in need; it's within the envelope that you already have, dedicated towards NATO. Is that what you are telling us?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Yes. NATO would like to draw down on it more regularly. I would observe that, in the last year, we have had forces under NATO command and control—OPCON is the technical term. They have been allocated for the best part of a year now. That is including—unusually—at times an SSN and an aircraft carrier. These are significant commitments for us, where we are allowing NATO to determine how these units are deployed.

But the readiness factor that we apply, which is what a lot of the NATO force model is about, is something that we have grown up with. If they wish to draw them down, we merely take those units from what they are doing at the time and bring them under the NATO umbrella. These are choices that can be exercised by the Secretary of State of the day. We just need to make sure that we can continue to fulfil the requirements placed upon us.

The new force model is going to make, I think, some quite demanding statements around the capabilities that we put—that might be something that we cover in due course in the closed session with regard to what that will feel like. But the concept in itself, and that scale of contribution, feel entirely comfortable to me.

Q291 **Mr Jones:** Can I ask about the commitment? Clearly, you have just said that you can't just turn this on like a tap when you need a ship and turn it off again when you don't want it. There is obviously that training cycle and things going through. So in terms of our commitment to NATO, how long does that last, and is it continuous in the sense that you are regenerating something else then to replace it? Can you talk us through exactly how it operates in practice?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Some of the tasking is specific, so there will be a specific capability. Recently, as an example, it was the command platform; HMS Prince of Wales was generated specifically for that task. HMS Duncan, in this calendar year, has been the flagship in the Mediterranean. Others are much more dynamic. So the conversation with my NATO colleagues is an almost daily one, looking at that envelope. Some of it is preplanned: "Can I have a specific capability?" Others are in response to contingency. So it's a trade space with other nations as to who can do what at a particular time. But our training protocols and all that we do are within a NATO construct. As a Navy, we are very able to dynamically integrate within a NATO construct. Our training off the south coast, and off the north coast of Scotland, is all around a NATO



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framework. So our units absolutely can operate hand in glove at the drop of a hat.

Q292 **Mr Jones:** As an example, let us take HMS Duncan, which is obviously committed to NATO tasking. Rear Admiral, can you talk us through what time it spends there and what the recovery time is, just so that we get an understanding of how it works in practice?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: A platform will be generated for that specific task—a deployment. Then, when they come home, the platform fundamentally requires a period of maintenance. Throughout that operating cycle, we operate trickle drafting such that people come and go routinely. It is not a huge, significant reset, as you might see with other armed services.

The ship itself can probably go away again—ideally with five or six weeks of maintenance, but then you can go away again. As we saw on the back of the carrier deployment in 2021, those units that went deployed at the end of January, having been back alongside for six weeks in response to Ukraine. Some of the people have changed, and we have continued training, but the platform can go again, so you can maintain that readiness cycle in a pretty agile manner.

Q293 **Mr Jones:** As our assets come out of NATO tasking, other nations fill in, is that right?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Absolutely. HMS Duncan will hand over to a French unit, a Dutch unit or whoever it may be. That is part of that preplanned methodology.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: That sits alongside the overall readiness scale. You will be aware that NATO demands some things to be available in a few days to move; other things can be at 30 days to move. Provided that we deliver the number of frigates or destroyers that are at 30 days to move, NATO wants to know the names of them, but does not specify the names. We are able to cycle ships through, but once you have generated something out of deep refit and gone through all the stages of training, you can sustain high readiness for quite a period of time before you need to roll it out to be replaced by something else.

Q294 **Mr Jones:** You talk about high readiness. What does that mean in practice?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: High readiness is a way of describing a level of training, a level of sustainment, and a maintenance and equipment availability standard, all of which have been brought together so that you can sit there and know with confidence that the ship or the commando unit is capable of fulfilling a range of tasks, responding at very short notice, and that they have the wherewithal to meet those, so that you don't need to take them away suddenly and put them through another training bit because you hadn't foreseen that.

Q295 **Mr Jones:** Clearly, you know what those tasks are in advance, from NATO? You know that you need to train for A, B and C tasks so that you



know that you can do it?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We do indeed. We have a well-established methodology of thinking through what those tasks might mean—any particular direction the Chief of the Defence Staff will put in his directive to us—and we then generate against that standard, which NATO has full transparency of, in order to say, “This unit is available to you over a sustained period of time.” Agility is an essential part of that, because, as I said earlier, if you are deployed, and a task changes, you cannot come rushing back home to the UK to reset; you have to deal with it at the time.

Q296 **Chair:** Can I talk about some of those issues in a bit more detail and a bit more conceptually? You spoke about readiness in the context of NATO. Essentially, you are saying that there is a range of tasks for which you have to be fully trained and able to deploy in a certain readiness window, which essentially means time. In answer to Mr Jones, I think that you were talking about that in the context of NATO assigned units. Presumably the same would apply to non-NATO assigned units—to anything that we need to do outside NATO.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Absolutely. I think that the story of HMS Dauntless would be a good one, Steve.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: HMS Dauntless generated out of a long maintenance period where her propulsion programme was updated.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Thank you very much.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: The direction came that we wanted to have a presence in the Caribbean during the core hurricane season. With weeks’ notice, we designed a bespoke training package so that that platform was crewed, equipped, trained accordingly and dispatched; it is only just finishing up now and will return home. That was done in a really agile manner in the space of weeks to get a hull into that theatre at the right time. It subsequently had huge success. It was not only there for hurricane season, but for wider work with security agencies out there on counter-narcotics operations.

Q297 **Chair:** Presumably those four or five tasks that you are ready for in a certain readiness window—be that 48 hours, a week or whatever—will be exclusive and will not encompass every possibility? What is the position if a task arrives that is outside that?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: If we wanted to redeploy Dauntless to go into something higher end, we would offer a bespoke training package. We could do that on the passage back across the Atlantic. Some of this we can do synthetically while she’s on transit. We could fly people out there. There is a whole host of ways of doing it, but we would be talking days, not weeks, before that could really roll. Had we had more time in the first place, we could have trained her up for all that before she went to the Caribbean; time was not on our side.

Q298 **Chair:** And that is the essence of the matter, isn’t it? If we are talking about readiness, the question back would be, “Readiness for what?”



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There is everything that you might be asked to do, from peer adversary down to supplying aid for a disaster zone, as you rightly said. The "Readiness for what?" depends presumably on the reporting system that there is with MoD. How agile is that in preparing for different eventualities to shape the advice you give Ministers?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: The MoD's capability assessment readiness process specifies a number of potential scenarios. I am sure that they, again, will be explored in the closed session. Each of those scenarios will mandate certain capabilities in certain platforms, and we will train, equip and store to those.

In some areas, in truth, we must take some risk, because you could spend your whole time just training and not actually doing. In some areas, we will make a risk judgment that says, "The likelihood of that is relatively low," because the demanding nature of training to that level while dealing with everything else is a compromise. But we are aware of it. The point that you can then put into the reporting system is that if a redeployment was required—I think Dauntless would be a good example—some form of top-up would be necessary, but we would minimise that top-up.

If you were to take Dauntless when she gets back, having been deployed for six months, she will probably need a bit of engineering work. How do we minimise that, with some risk judgments? What training can we do alongside that using the simulators ashore? How can you very quickly then recover the specifics that will allow a ship to deploy into a different set of specified tasks? Our baseline is designed so that those top-ups are clearly understood. If something has been prepared to be at high or very high readiness, we have a pretty clear understanding of the gap analysis that is necessary, partly because we need to know that we can close that gap. That is an essential part of the thought process behind the reporting tool.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Part of my formal handover of a platform is exactly that—articulating that delta so that the operational commander knows what that platform is and is not capable of and how long it may take to fill it.

Q299 **Chair:** The operational commander will understand how much risk he or she is carrying, set against a number of possible scenarios.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Absolutely.

Q300 **Chair:** Therefore, Ministers understand what risk they are carrying against whatever they may wish to be doing.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Yes.

Q301 **Chair:** I am glad that you mentioned this point about risk, because presumably, at the heart of this matter, is what your attitude to risk is. You could have everybody at high readiness the entire time, but then you would need a much bigger Navy and much more resource or you would burn everybody out. Has the advice you are giving Ministers changed as a result of recent events?



Admiral Sir Ben Key: I think the conversations that I have with Ministers and CDS have changed, because I have to recognise that, in terms of the advice that CDS is to give, I advise him. The conversations we are having absolutely have to reflect the immediacy of the threat as we understand it and the range of tasks that we have. It would be somewhat surprising if we were not considering those in a very dynamic sense.

For instance, when you look at the ships that have been announced as deployed—at the littoral response group—we will have had a very real conversation about the capabilities they offer, the means by which you could best employ those and where you might be taking a risk envelope slightly higher. I know from my own experience as Chief of Joint Operations previously that risk in an operational context is also a very dynamic thing, because you are looking at the benefit that you want to accrue from the risk that you are willing to expose that platform to. That is actually the heart of the conversation between the operational commander, the Chief of the Defence Staff and Ministers.

Q302 **Chair:** Given that, as you rightly say, the Committee is of the view that we need a bigger Navy, given the number of tasks that you are faced with anyway, and given the increase in strategic challenges—we know what those are, so we don't need to rehearse them—would it not be fair to say that we are carrying much more risk now than we were a couple of years ago?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I couldn't possibly disagree with that because of the level of uncertainty. If we could specify exactly what was going to happen and when, we could manage against that.

Q303 **Chair:** It is not just uncertainty, though, because that's life. We are always in a position where we don't know what's coming next, but we know that we have strategic challenges, and the middle east has presented us with another one over the course of the last month.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: There absolutely are, yes. I agree.

Q304 **Mr Francois:** We will come on to this in more detail later on, First Sea Lord. The job of the Navy is to contribute to deterrence and try to prevent war, but should deterrence fail to win, we have 17 frigates and destroyers on paper. How many of those could fight tonight? How many are operationally available today?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I am not mandated to have all of those 17 available to fight tonight.

Q305 **Mr Francois:** We understand that. Of course, some have to be in refit or maintenance—to be fair, we wrote a report on that—but how many could fight tonight?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We maintain a readiness profile. Some can respond at very short notice and some might require 30 days' notice, which is perfectly respectable. If they have come back from a long deployment and they are not required for immediate tasking, we can allow some more intrusive maintenance to take place. By the definition "fight tonight", they



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would fall short, but they could be quickly brought up to some form of readiness and deployed. In 1982, the fleet that Henry Leach deployed wouldn't have answered the question that you have asked. The number deployed in a 72-hour period was far higher than anything that the readiness profile would have been, but it became a moment of national endeavour and some sophisticated risk judgments as to what you could get away with. I am currently able to meet all the tasks required of me by the defence plan from the frigate and destroyer force that is in the operational fleet.

Q306 **Mr Francois:** That is really helpful, but you never gave us a number.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: No.

Q307 **Mr Francois:** Let's ask you again: how many?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Because the—

Q308 **Mr Francois:** Is it in double figures or single figures?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: A very high readiness is in single figures, but that is because we maintain about 50% of the fleet at high readiness and above. Seventeen divided by two is nine—eight and a half.

Mr Francois: Eight and a half. Thank you.

Q309 **Chair:** The point here is that you say you have a readiness profile that you measure against, and you are able to fulfil the ask that is made of you by CDS and by Ministers. Shouldn't we be democratically scrutinising whether the task you are asked to fulfil is adequate?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: If your question is whether you should be democratically scrutinising whether the tasks are adequate, that is not for me to respond to.

Chair: It was whether the planning assumptions are right.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I don't own the task allocation; I am merely forced to generate forces against that. The range of tasks would be a question for Ministers. As for whether I have sufficient forces to meet the full range of tasks all the time in the way they would wish, as I said at the beginning, there is always a desire to do more than the fleet is actually capable of doing. What we pride ourselves on is the degree of agility that will allow us to rebalance against what the ministerial priorities are at the time.

We could over-squeeze the particular example of Dauntless, but that was a piece of direction by the Minister for the Armed Forces in response to Foreign Office and Government policy to put a meaningful capability into the Caribbean during the core hurricane season. A number of ships were available that could have been re-tasked to do that, each of which came with a penalty, and the Minister for the Armed Forces determined on HMS Dauntless.

Q310 **Chair:** Given that our task is to scrutinise what the MoD is doing and whether it is providing sufficient for the tasks you are able to do, should



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we not be looking at the defence planning assumptions and whether the force that you are able to generate against the assumptions is up to scratch? That would assist the Navy in ensuring that it is ready, would it not?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Because our defence planning assumptions are kept as a classified document, that would be something we could cover in more detail in a closed session.

Chair: Thank you.

Q311 **Derek Twigg:** Just quickly to follow on from the Chair's earlier question, you have already said that you are very stretched and that you can't predict everything. Of course, we could see something happening in the south-east Pacific, in the South China Sea, and then you would be really stretched. We all seem to agree that there should be a larger Navy, and I am not going to press you by saying, "How many more ships?", "How many more assets?" or whatever, but what would you really like in addition to what you have now?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: What I would really like, if I could, would be to accelerate the pace of transformation from the ships and submarines that we have on build at the moment to the new Navy. We are going through a tremendously exciting transformation at the moment: the Type 26, which is a world-leading ASW frigate; the Type 31s, which are a really innovative way of thinking differently about a general purpose frigate; and the new submarines that we have on order. All these are just about to arrive, in strategic terms.

For us, that represents one of the single biggest transformations in the history of the Navy—when we genuinely move from an analogue Navy to a digital Navy. It is something almost as powerful as when Jackie Fisher, my predecessor many back, took the Navy from sail and coal into oil, which conceptually drove a different way of thinking and operating. For me, Mr Twigg, the first thing I would really look forward to is the acceleration to these new platforms, which will be more available than the old ones they replace, more capable than the old ones they replace—

Derek Twigg: But not a bigger Navy.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: And more deployable than the old ones they replace. That is an important first stage in growing the Navy, but we have to get through that transformation from the old to the new first before you then step forward into a bigger Navy.

Q312 **Derek Twigg:** I accept all that, and what you have just said is perfectly reasonable, but I again put the question to you: if you had a choice, what would you like, in addition to what you have now, that would fit into the fact that we would like a bigger Navy?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I would look at the most successful, most productive parts of the Navy at the moment, and at broadly doubling up on those. There is fantastic utility coming out of the offshore patrol vessels in terms of delivering United Kingdom presence around the world in a very



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cost effective manner. High commissioners and ambassadors around the world regularly report diplomatic telegrams about the impact that those ships are having. I look at the journey that our amphibious fleet is going to undertake over the next few years, and recognise the importance of the commando forces. These are really key elements of the future design, and so we should make sure that we are maximising our capacity and capability there. The previous Secretary of State pointed to that programme when he announced the MRSS decision, which will go jointly with the Dutch.

These are the things that give us a chance to do some of the stuff that the Royal Navy is fantastic at, which is thought leadership among other navies. We will never be the biggest—that is not a gift that is going with us, and I do not think that matters—but we want to make a really effective and influential contribution around the world. Those are the sorts of platforms, beyond the plans that are currently in place, that would make a huge difference.

Q313 Mr Francois: First Sea Lord, we appreciate all that, but one of the challenges, for which you as the Royal Navy are not responsible, is that these new ships that you make a great deal of are not always on time. Babcock builds the Type 31, the Venturer class, and the first of those comes into service in 2027—so, four years from now. It is in a financial dispute with the Department about the cost of those ships, but it is apparently keeping to time. The IOC for HMS Glasgow, the first-of-class Type 26 frigate, keeps slipping: it is now late 2028, so it will have taken 11 years to lay the keel, build the ship and bring her into service. The Japanese build the equivalent ship in between three and four years. Again, that is not the Navy's fault, but how are you going to maintain the operational readiness that you need when these critical ships, highly capable though they are, are years late, certainly in the Type 26 case?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We have to be ruthlessly focused on where we apply resource effectively and on the key tasks and capabilities the fleet needs, in order to maintain them. The absolute priority for me is to ensure that we are providing support to our delivery of the deterrent in the North Atlantic.

Making sure that we are maintaining a sufficiently robust and resilient ASW capability means that I need to take, at times, what look like on the surface some very difficult prioritisation decisions against the money that is accorded to me to do so. We have had this discussion before, and not just about the challenges of bringing these ships in. These are complicated first prototypes that are being built here. We sometimes forget that you would not take the first car off the production line and sell it to the public, but we are trying to take the first ship off the production line and bring it into service as quickly as we can, working with our industrial partners.

Q314 Mr Francois: But with respect, it is also a challenge for the Japanese. They suffered from covid too, yet they manage to do it in a third of the time.



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Admiral Sir Ben Key: I am very happy to explore this, probably out of Committee, but I am not sure the like-for-like comparison stands up to being a third of the time. I have certainly had conversations with my Japanese opposite number about this.

Mr Francois: Well, it is a lot quicker.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: If your fundamental point is about whether it is going to be a challenge for us to keep some very old ships going all the way through into the early 2030s as part of this transition, yes, it is.

Q315 **Mr Francois:** Fine. Let's quickly move on. You have to run the Type 23s on until these new ships arrive. Some of them will have to serve for 35 years in order to make everything fit, and that is way beyond their service life. You refitted Iron Duke—well, you didn't, Babcock did. It took four years. It cost over £100 million for one ship, and she is finally rejoining the fleet. There are strong rumours that HMS Westminster will not be refitted, because she is in such a poor condition. She is so old—poor thing—after many years' loyal service to the Crown that you have written her off, because it is not economical to repair her, so we are down to 16 for the next few years. What is the status of Westminster, and have you written her off?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Work continues today with Westminster in preparation for her upkeep. No decisions have been made. I absolutely recognise the age of those frigates. Some of them have already served 30 years or so, and we will have to manage it. It goes back to the conversation about risk and how much you use today, and our advice to Ministers and through CDS is exactly that. We have learned a lot, through recent ships coming through upkeep—this is part of the transition that we are desperate to make—about how we can maintain our ships differently, and we spoke about this previously when we met in the Ministry of Defence. We need to embrace a more commercial and agile model, rather than what you would recognise as boom and bust, whereby there are long refits, as you have just described. We are seeing the fruits of that in some of the 23s already, and that is what we are going to have to embrace over the next eight, nine or 10 years.

Q316 **Mr Francois:** I understand that. The problem is, there is never enough time in these hearings, so I apologise for cutting across you, but we need to try to get to the nub of it. Four years to refit a frigate—even by British standards, you could build one from scratch in as much time. Babcock certainly seem to be on target to do that. We spend four years refitting a very old ship. We could build a new one just as fast. Why don't we build more of the new ones and stop refitting so many of the old ones?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: This, Mr Francois, is one of the choices. When we count up the fleet, what we have to focus on is: have I got enough operational fleet to deliver what I need to do, and are we setting for the transition to the new so that we can, as seamlessly as possible, bring in the new to replace the old? If you sit there and count the number of ships we have—it is going to be a minimum of four years to refit Westminster,



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we think, but that work is going on at the moment. That takes us to 2027. We will be on the verge of a new one, but we are not counting HMS Glasgow in that emerging fleet.

Q317 **Mr Francois:** You can't—she doesn't come in till '28.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: The point is that next year I am going to count her in that four years, because that looks like the overall fleet numbers we have. We have a tremendous fleet that is coming in build. The question is, have I got enough to deliver against the range of tasks in the operational fleet? Have I got enough ships?

Q318 **Mr Francois:** Again, for the record, it is mainly industry that has done this to you, not the Royal Navy. It is important to emphasise that. You have not said that you are not going to refit Westminster, but you have not said that you are. I think we are long enough in this game to know what that means: we are down to 16. When we did an inquiry into procurement as a Sub-Committee, we gave three examples, with one from each service, of where it had gone horribly wrong: Ajax for the Army, Wedgetail for the Air Force, and Type 26 for the Royal Navy. Can you please assure us that you are doing everything you can in private to keep industry up to the mark? So far, they are letting you down.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We are working extremely closely with industry. They fully understand the concerns. We have regular conversations, not just about how this is a shipbuilding programme, but about how it is about delivering greater maritime capability to cope with a range of increasing challenges in the North Atlantic and globally deployed. There is an end point to this, which is beyond just the delivery voyage of HMS Glasgow or any of her sister ships. This is so that we have world-leading capability to deal with those who may wish us harm. When it comes to getting that sense of purpose into BAE Systems, to their credit, it feels very different up at Govan now, in terms of the overall commitment and the workforce engagement in this, as it does at Rosyth for the Type 31s and just as I am sure it will do at Harland and Wolff.

Q319 **Mr Francois:** For the record, we went to Govan to see for ourselves, and they only admitted to us as we were going out of the door to race for the airport to get our flight—we spent a whole day there—that the IOC for Glasgow was slipping, so I don't think BAE were as transparent and open about the problems as they might have been. We were literally about to load the bags on the minibus when they coughed it up.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: One of the other things that I really hold BAE Systems to account for—and we do—is that, whatever is happening to Glasgow, the rest of the class must not be affected in the same way. I am not here to defend the shipbuilding industry, but they are also fundamental to the Royal Navy being able to do this, so they are partners in this endeavour. What is really important is that we don't see a knock-on effect, but that the learning that they take from the journey of HMS Glasgow translates into HMS Cardiff, HMS Belfast and the Batch 2, which is now on order as well, so that the drumbeat picks up. Providing that we see that, then from my point of view, and notwithstanding some of the



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frustrations that you point to at the moment, I think we will see ourselves set on a stable path quite soon.

Mr Francois: Lastly, your predecessor in that job described managing to juggle all this, and keep the schedules going and a number of ships available, as “alchemy”. I think that, to some of us on this Committee, it is starting to look like fool’s gold.

Q320 **Derek Twigg:** Admiral, can we move away from operational readiness to warfighting readiness? Can you tell us what you have done in the last two years to make the Navy better for that? Maybe you also want to comment on munition stockpiles. We heard the CGS say last week that that is what keeps him awake most at night.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I think you are referring to the transition from being porcupines into something of increased lethality, and greater combat availability. We are definitely on a significant journey. We really welcome the investment that has been made with the NATO Strike Missile and the contributions that the Norwegians are making to allow us to increase our strike capability across the frigate fleet. That is a tremendous step forward. We continue to look at what the future weapon mix will need to be. When you look at some of the opportunities that are going to emerge—through AUKUS Pillar 2 or other tech innovation programmes that are going on at the moment, so that we can better understand hypersonics and directed energy weapons and the like—it is all part of the mindset that we need to adopt, as part of this sort-of permanent transition that is going on.

Right now though, very much like my fellow Chiefs, we are looking carefully at the lessons we can draw from what is going on in the Black Sea. Our Ukrainian partners are fighting, and learning, with incredible courage and tenacity in that environment, and have been very generous with the observations and lessons they are sharing with us about what that means. Stockpile management is a good example of that. We are making sure that we are not kidding ourselves that some of our assumptions in the system are unduly safe. That requires us to work very closely with our supply chain—our industrial partners—to make sure they understand the imperatives of what is going on. In many areas they have responded really strongly to the challenges we have placed upon them, so I am confident that we are on a journey of improvement—

Q321 **Derek Twigg:** In terms of warfighting?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Yes. Would I wish to be further down that journey than where we are at the moment, when we see what is going on currently? Yes, of course I would; but I have been very grateful for the accelerants that we are now enjoying the benefit of.

Q322 **Derek Twigg:** Is the munitions stockpile a worry for you?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: It is a concern for all of us, because one of the things that we have to be ruthlessly honest about is that what we have



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seen taking place in Ukraine and off the coast of Ukraine in the Black Sea, and all the rest of it, has challenged a lot of us in the way that we thought about future conflict in the European theatre. For a number of reasons, over a number of years, driven by national financial envelopes or whatever, a number of risk positions were taken in operational capability. They were clearly ones that my predecessors were content to take at the time, but you have to adapt when circumstances change. No one was predicting war in south-east Europe to be as we find ourselves today, so we have to observe and learn from that, and adapt as quickly as we can to ensure that we are not found short should the conflict there broaden out across wider Europe. We can have a separate debate another time about the likelihood of that.

I would also observe that if we do find ourselves in a NATO setting, we are not doing this alone; allies and partners will be with us. We must not allow ourselves to get sucked into a conflict that says the Russian navy has got all of this and we have got all of that. That is a completely false comparator; it becomes part of an alliance effort, should we find ourselves in that sort of a conflict.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: The other part of this is the training. Over the last two years our training has changed significantly with our understanding of the threat. The training is a lot more 21st century—it was probably lagging, in some respects.

Q323 **Derek Twigg:** To be better warfighters?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Better warfighters, yes. You are talking about synthetics and virtual, where you are training our junior operators against threats that are realistic hypersonics. Those are not aircraft flying at 200 knots; they are now targets flying at 1000 knots. The training is much more realistic and demanding on our people, so I can look the operational commander in the eye with far more assurance of the capability that they are getting.

Q324 **Chair:** That takes me to the point about the amount of tasks available that you can do, given that the more you are asked to do the less time there is and space in the programme for you to do that training.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Yes, but the way we are doing our training now, in synthetics, is a much easier way of doing training. Before, it was quite procedural: a ship would have to go to sea; it would spend a period at sea doing that, and it was very much sequential activity. Now, with virtual training, an operations department in a warship can be training for warfighting alongside, while the engineers on that platform are doing routine maintenance, so it is now concurrent activity. I am not saying you save half the time, but it is a much more efficient way of generating a platform. Previously, when a hull came out of refit, it take periods of months, close to a year, to generate it for operations. We have cut that right down now and the quality is far better.

Q325 **Sarah Atherton:** Can I talk about the submarine service? There is something about boats being tired, reported fires on board, overstretch



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with the maintenance schedules versus your commitment. One of the bombers has just returned from a deployment of 196 days. I am told the longest deployment is 207 days underwater. What risk assessments are you making about the morale, operational effectiveness and behaviour of your submariners when deployments are getting longer and longer?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: If you were to ask me what keeps me awake at night, it is the wellbeing of the people we ask to go to sea on our behalf, and of their families. We make a huge demand of them. The submarine service go through significant periods of social isolation from the people they love. Always at the forefront of my mind is whether we are supporting them and their families as best we can, to ensure that the pressures that are inevitably felt by them are mitigated, eased or supported. At the moment, I don't think any of us feels particularly comfortable with the really challenging length of submarine maintenance periods that are necessary and what that plays out. It is a great joy that HMS Vanguard is currently going successfully through the sea trials in her long period of maintenance, but it is no secret that that period of maintenance was many years longer than it should have been, and that has had a concurrent knock-on into other parts of the submarine service.

There is a huge amount of work going on between us, the Submarine Delivery Agency and our industrial partners to work out how we can be more targeted, more effective and, frankly, more productive in the necessary maintenance that we have to put into submarines that are old. These very complicated, complex bits of kit have a very demanding safety case associated with them, and meeting the requirements of that safety case is, to my mind, absolutely critical, as is the operational capability we want within them. We have to find ways of being as effective as possible, so that the burden that is felt by the sailors and their families is minimised.

Have we got that right yet? No, we have not. Have we got more to do, and are there more ideas in the mix? Absolutely. I have a tiger team reporting to me tomorrow, who have been told to think as freely as possible and without any constraint. They were supported to break off some of the shackles of having been in the service a long time themselves, so that they could think the unthinkable. We may find that it is not unthinkable; it is just difficult and is not the sort of thing we would wish to do. I have not had that brief yet, so I am not in a position to speculate on what their ideas are. I have been told that some of it is extremely imaginative, but some of it is going to be a completely different paradigm from the way we have thought. If that is where we need to go, I am absolutely determined to go there, and I know that I have full ministerial support in that endeavour.

Q326 **Sarah Atherton:** Can you explain what effect sea growth and algae have on protective tiles? It is well publicised that Vanguard came back white and green. What impact did that have on stealth and operational effectiveness?



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Admiral Sir Ben Key: We clearly keep under close analysis the signatures of submarines. We survey them on a regular basis, and the things that we will learn from the recent and very long patrols being undertaken by a number of submarines will no doubt be reported to me in due course. But forgive me if I don't sit in a public forum and say whether or not I think there is mitigation of that. That is for the closed session.

Sarah Atherton: I have said it, Admiral—that's all right.

Q327 **Mr Francois:** Respecting that, let's talk about SSNs—attack submarines—and leave the deterrent for another time. The Navy has always prided itself on the fact that those who volunteer for the submarine service—those who wear dolphins—are volunteers. We now read that you have run out of volunteers and are having to get people to serve in the submarine service who did not initially volunteer to do it. Is that true?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: At the moment, everybody who comes to serve in the Royal Navy is a volunteer. Not all of them will necessarily get their first choice of fighting arm when they come in through the front door. That is not new news; it has been the case for some time. When I was a junior officer going through a very early officer of the watch course, I think there were eight of us. Three of us were liable for submarine service, and there were only two volunteers. One of us was told that he was going into the submarine service. He went on to serve for many years very happily, but it was not his first choice. He wanted to go into the fleet air arm.

Q328 **Mr Francois:** Thank you for clarifying that; that is a very clear answer, First Sea Lord. On the attack boats, it is widely publicised—it was all over the internet, and it was in Navy Lookout—that a couple of months ago we did not have a single one at sea, I think for the first time in living memory. That is operational failure, isn't it?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: If there was no need for those boats to be at sea, that is not operational failure. On that particular day, we were meeting the readiness profile that was required; you can be alongside, and at very short notice to sail. If that is the right place to put a boat at the time, that is entirely sensible. If the photograph you are referring to had been taken two days later, it would have no doubt painted a different picture.

We have to be very careful not to confuse being at sea with readiness. This is one of the reasons why the letter to the shadow lead for defence, John Healey, talks about a different way of measuring the productivity of the fleet. Days at sea is quite a simplistic measurement, because of what it doesn't demonstrate. A ship alongside, HMS Spey, in Tonga, providing disaster relief after it has suffered a typhoon, scores zero. What it means is that a Type 45, HMS Diamond, alongside at Gotland island, supporting the Prime Minister as he hosts his Swedish opposite number scores zero.

Q329 **Mr Francois:** With respect, First Sea Lord, we are not talking about patrol vessels; we are not even talking about high-end Type 45 destroyers. We are talking about attack submarines, which cost £1.5 billion each—a go—now. There are two Astute-class ones still to come. There are very long delays in the programme. And now you can't monitor Russian



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submarines, which you often tell us are very active—we believe you. You can't monitor Russian submarines in the North Atlantic if you are tied up alongside.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Equally, if there are no Russian submarines in the North Atlantic, why would we need to deploy one of our own submarines? Then, we are burning up core time; we are burning up sailors' time; we are using time that could be used more efficiently and effectively elsewhere. We deploy those submarines when we need to, which is built into an intelligence picture that we share with our allies and partners under a very sophisticated operation, which has been running for some time. Again, I would be very happy to explore the details with the Committee in closed session.

Q330 **Mr Francois:** Come on, sir. Not having one SSN at sea is an embarrassment.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: No, I refute that. There was no need for any of those submarines to be at sea that day. Would I like the fleet to be more broadly deployed all the time, doing active things? Submariners want to be busy and active; of course they do. But we have to manage against a likely range of tasks, so that we are deploying our small number of SSNs as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Q331 **Mr Francois:** Let's ask you the same question we asked about surface vessels. Your answer was eight and a half. We have six SSNs, five Astutes, one very tired Trafalgar-class submarine and two Astutes yet to come. How many of those boats could put to sea tonight?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I can put to sea the number I am expected to put to sea. If we took some risk judgments around the maintenance profile of those that are at lower readiness, then in some order—I am not an expert on these things—I am sure we could put more to sea, because their crews are available. This is a profile. I am not expected—I don't think you are expecting me—to be able to say I could put all those submarines to sea today.

Q332 **Mr Francois:** No, but I want to know that you can at least put—

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I can meet the numbers that I am required to put to sea today.

Q333 **Mr Francois:** We are not expecting you to say you can put all of them to sea—we know better than that—but we would like to know that you could put half of them to sea. Could you put three to sea?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I can put three to sea, I am absolutely sure; that is half the fleet.

Q334 **Mr Francois:** You could do that.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Yes. Whether I need to do it is a different matter, because of the compromises that we would have to make. I go back to some of the judgments that Henry Leach had to make in 1982 in order to achieve the task group.



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Mr Francois: These are sensitive matters, so we will leave it there. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you, Mark, and thank you, First Sea Lord. We have a number of other topics to cover and very little time to do it in. Gavin Robinson.

Q335 **Gavin Robinson:** Admiral, good afternoon; it is nice to see you again. This is the table that you are referring to in the letter to John Healey. From my perspective, it is thoroughly useless. That is not to dismiss the point that you wish to make, which is to distinguish sea days from days of readiness. That is a fair point to make, but the aggregate data doesn't give you any sense when it gets down to individual ships, or effective readiness. We are into some of the detail that Mr Francois was asking about. It is not there in that form. If you are able to explore that in private session with us a little more comprehensively, that will be good. The most disappointing trend is that over the last 10 years, in each and every area there is a marked decrease in readiness.

The next point I wish to make is this. It is a truism that we are in NATO and have allies to rely on and therefore we don't need to be in a position where we are singly deploying all the time, or to present ourselves in that way, but when the United Kingdom is a significant contributor and NATO is relying more and more heavily on that rationale, there is a problem. It is an increasing part of the MoD's lexicon, and an increasing part of the services' position, that you can't be expected to, nor should you be in a position to, deliver all tasks required. We are relying on that more and more, and that concerns me. I wanted to share that.

In terms of readiness, we have talked about operational readiness and warfighting capacity. You have also mentioned, as did General Sir Nick Carter when he was here, the need to consider sustainment. Could you outline for us what you consider sustainment to mean?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Sustainment is an ability to remain deployed and effective, which brings up a range of factors: the onboard holdings that you have; the holdings that you have available in the locality or task group; what your supply chain looks like and whether it can ensure that you remain deployed and readily capable; and, ultimately, as we are discovering where we have forward deployed for very long periods, your ability to undertake maintenance in various parts of the world without coming back to the United Kingdom. That combination gives you a sustained basis on which you can deliver warfighting capability from the range of platforms that you have.

Q336 **Gavin Robinson:** What is your assessment of the Royal Navy's sustainment?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: With the new ships—the Type 45s coming through PIP and all the rest of it—we are moving into an increasingly better position, because we have younger ships. They are well supported and the



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supply chains are maturing. The Batch 2 OPVs forward-deployed around the world have very high levels of availability. We are also now able to do capability upgrades to ships in the deployed setting, as we are seeing with the Spey and the Tamar, which is not something we had necessarily done in the past.

We have to be honest: the sustainment of older ships is an increasing challenge. The old 23s are very demanding ships to maintain, and their supply chains are under a huge amount of pressure. When it comes to keeping those ships available, the focus is on the engineers onboard, and their professional skill and resilience. I absolutely applaud all naval engineers. I am a very proud grandson of a naval engineer; I know there is a son of a naval engineer in the audience. They are phenomenal men and women who, in sometimes tremendously uncomfortable circumstances, do a great job of maintaining sustained capability for us, but we shouldn't take our eye off the fact that for some of them, it is a very tough ask. Steve, is there anything you want to add?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: We have been sustaining a Type 23 forward for a number of years, and MCMs in the Gulf for over 10 years, and our Batch 2 control vessels are into their third year. We are also one of the very few nations in the world that could deploy a carrier task group to the other side of the world in the middle of covid with very little host nation support anywhere, and sustain that for seven months. I would slightly challenge your point on NATO. A number of NATO nations want to be with us because we can do it and they can't. They therefore see us as the convening power to come with on deployments.

Q337 **Gavin Robinson:** Thank you, sir. Admiral, you mentioned that maritime engineers are a particular pinch point. Is that down to overtasking of naval assets, insufficient numbers, or a lack of recruitment? What do you put it down to?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I think it is down to the fact that the nation is short of engineers. We invest people with skills and capabilities that make them very attractive in the broader marketplace. We have learned this lesson over many years. We know that if we do not properly enable them to be engineers by providing them with the right tools, the right spares and the right support at the right time, that can be a very frustrating experience for them. Then add to that the demands of operational programmes, which can lead to periods of separation. Although they and their families are very proud of the fact that they wear Royal Navy uniforms and they feel that they are making a huge difference, there are those professional frustrations. They can look very attractive to other people, because there is this national shortage of engineers. Not surprisingly, we can find ourselves losing out. We are not complacent about that. I don't wish it to be the case.

We still have a lot of young people wishing to join the service, because the apprenticeship scheme and the training we give is very attractive to them. It is a really positive investment—and what an exciting way of doing an apprenticeship scheme! I met some of the young apprentices onboard



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HMS Prince of Wales just a few weeks ago. They were living their best life, my goodness me. They were operating onboard a fifth-generation aircraft carrier off the eastern seaboard of the United States, flying jets by day. Just occasionally we went alongside, and maybe they got to have an ice cream ashore. What a fantastic investment. If we can bottle that enthusiasm, keep them properly supported and make them feel appreciated for their contribution, then I think we have a fighting chance. But we have to be honest that in recent years we have occasionally taken our eyes off the ball on this, and then, not surprisingly, we are reminded of their value to us.

Q338 Sarah Atherton: Admiral, you talked about young, talented people living their best life. A young officer has been in the Navy for five years and is now on his second 18-month holdover. In five years, he has been to sea for eight days. He has completed his Sea King and Jupiter phases and was waiting for his operational flying training on the Merlin. He believes he will be over 30 by the time he is operational. He has completed his initial training on Juno and Jupiter and is also on his second 18-month holdover before starting Wildcat training. They are suggesting that is due to lack of observers. I do not know whether that is one of your recent pinch points. What is that saying? How do we keep our young talent? Who is paying for retraining those pilots because of the length of the holdover? Is it Ascent? Is it the taxpayers? What about operational readiness? What are we saying to the future talent of the Royal Navy when that is happening to them?

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: The flying training pipeline you have tracked for a number of years has not been where we would want it to be, and challenges in availability of the aircraft to train on has compounded that to make it a really challenging situation. As the titular head of the fleet air arm, I live and breathe stories like that every day. We are desperately trying to find rewarding employment for them in those holdovers, so that their career is not stagnating. A number of them are doing other things and progressing other strands of their career at the same time—for example, gaining navigation certificates for platforms to make them more employable. We are starting to see that holdover shorten, but there is no doubt about it: in the last few years it has been unacceptable, both in fast jet training and rotary wing, in terms of getting people to the frontline. That is because of a combination of the pipeline itself in its initial phases, and having the aircraft on the frontline to train them on.

Q339 Sarah Atherton: This time, it looks as though it is down to the Royal Navy, and the availability of aircraft and observers, rather than Ascent.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: As I say, there are two strands to this: the initial Ascent training pipeline, and then availability of Wildcat and Merlin on the frontline to train them.

Q340 Sarah Atherton: How will you hold this young talent? At the age of 30, they are not going to want to fly; they are going to work for the commercial airlines.



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Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: I think we are through the worst of that. The stories that you are hearing about these holdovers are now reducing, and people are beginning to come through. In the last few years, it has been a challenge as we have struggled to maintain numbers of aircraft on the frontline to train them on.

Q341 **Sarah Atherton:** These two examples are absolutely current. Two 18-month holdovers, and you say that the situation is improving.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: It is improving now; people who are coming through are not facing that length of holdover.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: For the record, neither of us is saying that we like it. I look at Steve's experience of flying training, and at mine; that is how it should have been. Through a series of decisions made over a number of years, we have found ourselves with a flying training system, which I am sure the Committee has looked at separately, that has been sub-optimal. A huge amount of work has gone on to recover it, and I think we are seeing results, but I am absolutely clear: it is very difficult for us to be anything other than frustrated, because this young talent, which we will need in future to deliver the Navy of the future, is feeling so frustrated.

Q342 **Sarah Atherton:** As long as the frustration translates into action, we will leave that with you.

Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse: Absolutely.

Chair: We certainly have looked at the system, and we will continue to look at it.

Mr Francois: Yes, in the latest report.

Chair: Indeed. A final question on recruitment and reserves.

Q343 **Mr Francois:** Very quickly, First Sea Lord: £3 billion for a carrier, £1.5 billion for a nuclear submarine and £1 billion for a Type 26. None of that works unless you have enough people who are sufficiently qualified. Recruitment is a challenge for the Royal Navy, as it is for the other services. A very long, good article in "Navy Lookout" has just come out all about that. I will not try to read all that out now. The Army do it differently. They outsourced it to Capita, affectionately known to this Committee as Crapita. The Public Accounts Committee described the Crapita contract as a litany of failures. You know where this is going. There is a proposal to have a tri-service recruitment system—the Armed Forces recruiting programme—for which Capita and others would bid. Would you rather keep a unilateral Royal Navy recruiting system, or would you prefer to go into the tri-service system, given the Army's experience?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I breathe a sigh of relief at the fact that, last time round, the Army went it alone, but a huge amount was learned from that process.

Q344 **Mr Francois:** Much of it brutal, but yes.



Admiral Sir Ben Key: Absolutely. I was overseeing Navy recruiting at the time when Army recruiting was grinding almost to a halt. My view is that recruiting will only become more challenging as we go forward. We are in a battle for national talent. It is not that this nation is short of talent; it is that there are many places for that talent to go. We need to make the Armed Forces as attractive a place as it possibly can be for young people to come to and commit to. We need to make sure that the “attract and engage” process is as sophisticated and sharp as it can be, and I support the Armed Forces recruiting programme because that is where it is setting itself to be. This is a regular conversation for Chiefs. We are very alive to the need to make sure that the lessons identified and learned, not just from our experience but from that of the Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders as they have gone to different recruiting systems, are absolutely baked into our system, so that we do not make the same mistakes.

I am absolutely confident that the benefit statement that the Army entertained in 2013-14—whenever it was—will look pretty similar to the benefit statement that we have today. The issue was the implementation and execution of the programme, not the intent. Whatever it takes to give ourselves the best chance of recruiting the talent we need, a diversity of perspectives and young people, I am absolutely up for. I am also pretty clear that sailors recruit sailors, and marines recruit marines. It is the stories that really matter. It is important that, behind the scenes, we employ really modern marketing intelligence, and really sophisticated digital techniques to make sure that we are targeting well. We must make sure that the pipeline to bring people in is as frictionless as possible, in terms of the assessments.

Q345 **Mr Francois:** Very quickly, Sir, because we know that you have to go, the AFRP keeps slipping. We understand privately that it may now not go live until 2026, or even 2027. All the other arrangements are having to be run on. Even if we do go for that programme, are you, as the professional head of the Navy, concerned about how many years it is slipping by?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: If it means that we get the programme right, I am not concerned about the slip. What it does mean is that I need to make sure that my current recruiting system is as effective as possible, and wherever we can draw learning forward, then we need to exploit that. The three recruiting organisations are already today exchanging information and best practice wherever we can, because we are in the same game, which is to encourage people to come in, wear the King’s uniform and serve. I would like them all to be sailors and marines, but I recognise that some might want to be soldiers or aviators. That is fine. I would rather they were coming in and doing that than going elsewhere, because we want that talent. AFRP is part of that programme going forward.

Q346 **Mr Francois:** Lastly, is recruiting reserves more or less challenging than recruiting regulars?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Interestingly enough, recruiting reserves is in some areas proving easier, because what they are signposting is what



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potential terms and conditions of service might look like; it is not the traditional, linear model I have had as my career. The Second Sea Lord has been on record as calling it a zigzag career; you spend some time in regular service, some time in reserve service, and some time out in the commercial world doing something completely different, and then coming back in. We need to be ready to embrace that, because I think it is how people will want to work in the future.

I had one substantive job interview when I was 18, and I have been paid ever since on the result of that job interview. I look at my 20-something sons, and that is just not in their psyche. Looking at the challenges, opportunities, risks and all the rest of it that young people want to embrace, we will have to go further. The Haythornthwaite remuneration study incentivisation programme is a fabulous opportunity for us to rethink those careers. What we see in the reserves is giving us some really interesting pathfinders to what a regular career might look like in the future.

Mr Francois: If I may, I think those recruiters all those years ago made a good decision.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time today. There are a couple of other issues I would have liked to explore, had we time, particularly on reserves, MACA requests, and the multi-domain integration approach. I will write to you, if I may, and perhaps we can explore those issues.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I would be very happy to do so.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for your evidence. I am grateful for your time, and we will no doubt see each other again shortly.