



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Readiness, HC 26

Wednesday 22 November 2023

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Members present: Robert Courts (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 347 - 474

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. James Heapey MP, Minister for the Armed Forces; and General Sir Jim Hockenhull, Commander, Strategic Command.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. James Heappey MP and General Sir Jim Hockenhull.

Q347 **Chair:** Welcome to the Defence Committee's latest session on UK armed forces readiness. It gives me great pleasure to welcome our two witnesses for today, the Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heappey MP, and General Sir Jim Hockenhull, to assist us. Gentlemen, thank you very much for your assistance today.

Before we get into the main substantive issues, as we have you here, I would like you to comment, if you would, Minister, on an issue that has been in the news recently—the issue with the Vanguard submarine depth gauge when the vessel reportedly descended towards the danger zone—and on any failures there. Clearly, this is a major concern for the Committee, and for the Royal Navy. May I ask you to comment on that, please?

James Heappey: Not in any great detail, as you heard from the Secretary of State and the Minister for Defence Procurement from the Dispatch Box on Monday. Suffice it to say that the wider safeguards appear to have worked, in that a second gauge was able to avert what was reported to be imminent; but the operational detail of bomber patrols is very highly classified. Even in our closed session—I suspect we can show a little more leg, but there are plenty of former MOD Ministers around the table who will understand that it is an area where you do not show much leg at all, no matter how trusted your audience.

Q348 **Chair:** Minister, we understand the operational sensitivity, but, none the less, as the issue has been reported widely in the media and will cause public concern, can you reassure us that you will look closely at it and at any steps you can take?

James Heappey: I think the commander of the Russian northern fleet should have absolute confidence that the on-patrol bomber is ready.

Q349 **Chair:** Thank you very much.

I will move on to the substance of the matter that we are here to discuss, which is readiness. Minister, at the outset, I thank you for providing the written evidence on readiness, which, I have to note, was late. Not only that—it uses figures that appear to be out of date. The figures referred to in the pinch points appear to be those from April. The Secretary of State had figures from September when he appeared before us last week. Thank you very much for the evidence. We will take you through some of the issues in due course, if we may.

Among the things that the Committee has been discussing, as we look at readiness, we will naturally talk about the number of platforms and capabilities that would be available should we have to fight tonight or next week against peer adversaries or others. One of the decisions that you will have to take, of course, is about your risk appetite. As the Minister, you will set the range of expectations against which our military colleagues have to perform, to protect the public. Can you tell us to what



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extent, and how, your risk appetite has changed over the course of the last two years, as we have seen the return of industrialised warfare in Europe?

James Heapey: Profoundly. That is one of the interesting things about the discussions that you have been having with the chiefs and former chiefs who have come before the Committee. In the period between the end of the cold war and now, we effectively took a view on the risk—the threat—and made a set of decisions about what sort of force was needed to meet those challenges, which were more limited than full state-on-state, peer-on-peer warfare.

As a consequence, things like maintaining, during the Iraq and Afghanistan years, two medium-sized interventions allowed you to say, “We are doing that.” It is about the size of a force, but within those assumptions were assumptions around permanent, well-found operating bases with contracted logistics and very predictable rates of consumption. Instead of being able to make those sorts of limited judgments on limited military capability against a limited threat, we are now transitioning back to where we were in the cold war, where your DPA is everything you have got, thrown at your adversary as quickly as you can possibly throw it at them. That is a very big change.

The difference is that during the cold war a lot of the British Army, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy sat at contingency, waiting for NATO to require them. Now, we are trying to operate with the same force that we are trying to hold at contingency to be ready for full state-on-state conflict. That creates a tension, so each of the chiefs, as they have come through, has said to you, “I am delivering against my DPAs”—which is true. The reality is that politicians ask chiefs to go well beyond what they are asked to provide for. We deploy the fleet and the Army well over what the DPAs require. I do not think that we can make any apology for that. The situation requires it.

Your reports of late have all made a judgment: bigger Navy, bigger Army, bigger Air Force—check. Absent: that happening with the funding that is required. We are just going to have to accept that we will be running the force very hot indeed, and well beyond any reasonable planning assumptions.

Q350 **Chair:** The DPAs—the defence planning assumptions—were predicated for the last 20 years on non-peer adversaries. Asymmetric warfare, of course, we are all entirely familiar with. You would agree, presumably, that if we were to continue with that risk assumption, we would be carrying too much risk.

James Heapey: Not only that. I just think they are really outdated. That was a very different time, when you could say that in an age of counter-insurgency the UK interest might require us to have this sort of force package permanently deployed in this place, with contracted logistics, with no requirement for air-to-air missiles but a very predictable requirement for 5.56 ball because you can pretty much predict how many



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firefights there will be in a summer fighting season versus a winter tour. That is a completely different set of risk calculations from where you are if you are trying to hold a force at contingency for full-on peer-on-peer war fighting.

Nick Carter made a really good observation to you in which he drew the distinction between operational readiness and strategic readiness. Operational readiness is the business of the MOD, and we have an awful lot of work to do to recover the operational readiness that we enjoyed during the cold war, and that we require again now; but strategic readiness—the readiness of the nation to bring to bear all the nation's strength to compete with an adversary—is another part of readiness that I know you will want to consider.

Q351 **Chair:** Minister, you are absolutely right. I am going to come to that point later. It is the readiness of the whole nation. There are wider issues—we will come on to this—such as skills, for example. I appreciate that those—

James Heapey: And the industrial base—

Q352 **Chair:** And the industrial base. I appreciate that they do not lie entirely with you, although the driver does. We can be agreed that the world we face now is far more dangerous and unpredictable with, yes, the non-state adversaries, but now with state adversaries as well. So we would be carrying too much risk if we were to continue with the same planning assumptions and, as you said, they are fundamentally outdated. How can you reassure the public that what you are doing now is addressing that changed world and that we are not simply trying to do more with less on the basis of the resources of the old order, as we face the challenges of the new?

James Heapey: We are certainly not trying to do more with less, because we have more than we have ever had before, in terms of resource coming into defence. The defence budget has just gone through £50 billion for the first time ever.

Q353 **Chair:** But equally we know about procurement failures, cost increases and forex challenges—

James Heapey: Of course, but still, fundamentally, the premise was doing more with less; we are demonstrably not doing it with less.

Q354 **Chair:** In financial terms, but I could take issue on troop numbers and platforms.

James Heapey: We are doing much more, with more. The question is whether we need more and more to do more and more. I just want to push back on that characterisation that the defence budget is less than it was. It is not. It is more than it has ever been.

Q355 **Mr Jones:** From 2010 onwards, the budget was cut by 16%. I accept that in the last few years there has been an increase, but that is just playing catch-up. A projection of, say, just inflation, from the defence



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budget in 2010 to now, would be way more than £50 billion. You had that gap of 16%, which was a political decision taken during austerity. The budget actually fell. You are playing catch-up now, which has led to some of the issues with not just procurement but legacy equipment.

James Heapey: To a degree, Kevan. Governments take decisions based on spending priorities at the time.

Q356 **Mr Jones:** No, I am sorry, I am not going to let you get away with this. There was a political decision to take 16% out of the defence budget. Some of that has been filled in the recent increases, but that does not get away from the fact that the defence budget of that period has been cut. So you are not doing more with more. You are trying to do more in the strategic defence review with, actually, what is basically a standstill budget, if you take inflation into account.

James Heapey: We are doing more. At £50 billion, the defence budget is higher than it has ever been before. The decisions of previous Governments over what they have done with defence spending versus other priorities at the time—and you cannot have hard power without economic security, which I would argue sit hand in glove: we can go round and round on this and have done so at the Dispatch Box many times. The fact is that the defence budget right now in cash terms is higher than it has ever been. You are completely right in saying that there was a time, in the early years of the 2010-15 Government when decisions were taken to reflect other priorities.

Q357 **Mr Jones:** That went right up to 2019.

James Heapey: As far as I am concerned, the investments that have been made by Prime Ministers Johnson, Truss and now Sunak have put us in a position where we have more money than we have ever had before.

Q358 **Mr Jones:** They have on the capital side, but on the actual revenue side they have not, have they, because the revenue side of the budget is pretty flat?

James Heapey: In the interest of getting on to the rest of the thing—

Q359 **Mr Jones:** It makes a difference in terms of readiness. The bulk of the increase is going on capital, which is needed to get kit up to date, but the revenue budget is basically flatlining over the next few years, so there is an issue for readiness. It is people, fuel and things for people to do things.

James Heapey: Across Government, as you have heard the Chancellor reflecting in his autumn statement today, the pressures on revenue budgets remain. The Treasury continues to seek to hold those down. You are also absolutely right to say that the things that you pay for from your revenue budget—support contracts, for example—are every bit as important as the capital outlay that you make on new platforms.



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It is worth noting, though, that you can gain resource savings by having modern platforms that require fewer crew and less maintenance. Old platforms tend to require more maintenance. There are CDEL for RDEL savings in the way that you update the inventory.

Q360 **Chair:** Minister, thank you for that. None the less, you hear the Committee's concern, and it will not surprise you that the Committee will be making the case, in any event, for greater investment in defence.

Can I return you to the point that I was making? Unquestionably, we have a smaller Army and Navy, and fewer fast jets and aviation assets overall—that is the point I am making—yet we see challenges that are perhaps unprecedented in our lifetime. What are you doing—without talking about cash investment—to meet that enhanced level of risk?

James Heapey: The complete transformation of the frontline force is already well under way. To take the case of the Navy, by the back end of the next decade, the Type 45 will be the oldest of the surface ships. Yet those ships will all have been commissioned in the last 15 years or so, and they have been through a power upgrade more recently; there are Type 26 and Type 31 aircraft carriers joining them. The A-boats will all be in service; the D-boats will be coming into service. In the Army, the Challenger 3—unless I have misunderstood your question—

Q361 **Chair:** Those points are, in many cases, capital programmes that have been in train for a very long time. I am asking what steps you are taking to adjust for the change in the risk balance that is apparent in the last couple of years. You are referring to capital programmes that were in train anyway. I seek to understand what you are doing to address the level of risk that the country faces, which is clearly greater now than it was two years ago.

James Heapey: In addition to that complete transformation of the frontline force, you have to get back into the business of ensuring that the tail matches the teeth. The teeth-to-tail ratio over the last 30 years has gone out of kilter, because political expediency about cap badges, for example, has meant that the fighting echelon in the Army has remained bigger than, arguably, the combat support and combat service support parts of the Army would justify.

Before Richard gets concerned that this is a further impact on the infantry, that is a way of saying that we have to get back into the business of holding the strategic enablers that bring credibility to the frontline force—the ability to project the force into the fight; getting the stockpiles to the level where they need to be, so that you can have some confidence that the stockpiles are sufficient to bridge the gap between industrial capacity coming on stream to sustain you in the fight thereafter; and having the people in your first echelon that you need to fight immediately, or at the relative readiness within NATO but, crucially, starting to consider what it would look like to grow a second echelon. These are things we have not had to think about for a generation. All of that is signposted in the Defence Command Paper Refresh.



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You are absolutely right that a lot of the transformation of the frontline force in capital platform upgrades was under way. Other bits have been deliberately accelerated to meet the new threat that we face today and, crucially, to challenge ourselves about how we embrace the technologies that are emerging to go alongside those new platforms to generate mass in a new way, learning the lessons from Ukraine.

Just as important is putting back into the military inventory all the things that we have not had to worry about since the cold war that project and sustain the force, and thus make it credible.

Q362 **Mr Francois:** Minister, we all know where your heart lies in this, but you did mention the autumn statement. The current Chancellor once publicly called for 4% of our GDP to be spent on defence; that is a matter of record. The new Defence Secretary publicly called for 3% of GDP to be spent on defence; that is a matter of record. The Prime Minister has called for 2.5% of GDP to be spent on defence, when we can afford it; that is a matter of record. Yet in the autumn statement today—I took a note—the Chancellor said that we will be meeting our NATO commitment of 2% of GDP. There was no mention of getting to 2.5% or anything beyond that. We realise that you are not the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but where are we now? Are we 2%, 2.2% gusting—2.5%? Where are we?

James Heappey: *Hansard* will show the exact figure that the Secretary of State used, but on Monday, in questions, he gave a number of about 2.4%. I think that is the defence budget plus what we are doing for Ukraine—but I think that counts as defence spend given the impact that it is having on Euro-Atlantic security.

Q363 **Mr Francois:** That is in this financial year.

James Heappey: Yes. Or next year. You would need to read *Hansard*. I do not want to put words in the mouth of the Secretary of State.

Q364 **Mr Francois:** I am not trying to catch you out. I think the point that the Committee wants to make now, up front, before we get on to the rest of it, is that it was slightly disappointing not to hear in the autumn statement today any reaffirmation of that 2.5% target, even if it were over the next few years. The figure from the Chancellor today—without gainsaying the Secretary of State—was only 2%. You take the point.

James Heappey: I absolutely note the concern, and I know that the Committee does great work in campaigning for a bigger departmental budget, for which we are always grateful. Notwithstanding the Committee's disappointment at what was said in the autumn statement, I would just point members towards the figure that the Secretary of State used on Monday, which I think is quite encouraging. That is a number that has been climbing, albeit—because I think it is important not to try to bluff these things—because of the Ukraine commitment being where it is at.

Mr Francois: No, you were very clear.

Q365 **Chair:** It is no doubt a campaign we will continue.



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I will continue a moment or two more, if I may, on my point about risk appetite and assessment. You, of course, are making decisions based on the advice that you receive from the service chiefs. To what extent has that changed over the last couple of years, and are they looking at defence as a whole or fighting their individual services' corners?

James Heapey: Within the MOD head office and the strategic headquarters we make decisions based not on what the heads of the Army, Navy or Air Force say they can do, but on our assessment of the strategic environment and threat. We do so with the benefit of the CDS and the vice chief, and their military expertise, and the senior staff officers and directors general who work within the MoD.

The service chiefs obviously bring to bear their professional judgment by domain, but also, more importantly, what they can realistically deliver from within their budgets, inventory and staffing levels as they are now. When General Jim was CDI, he would sit down with us all and say, "Here is my take on where the Russians are at. Here is the threat that is emerging." We would make some strategic decisions, ask the Navy to do more, and the First Sea Lord would rightly say, "You have already committed me to all these places; where else do I go?"

We are constantly balancing risk and threat, as presented by those who understand it and can articulate what we need to do to keep the nation safe, and the proximity of the threat, and trying as best we can to optimise the force we have to respond to those threats in the best possible way. There is absolutely no pretending that we are not spending resource more keenly than our current force levels would require, but in an age as unstable and insecure as this is—and worsening—we have no choice but to do that. We need to be very grateful to the armed forces for the fact that they continue to be willing to let us do so, and we need to keep making the case to modernise and grow the force, accepting that some of that growth and modernisation might mean it looks different from the forces of 10 or 20 years ago.

Do you want to hear anything from Jim about the way we consider strategic threat?

Chair: Funnily enough, Minister, I do in just a moment. I will bring in the commander of StratCom; he has been sitting patiently.

Thank you for that beginning outline. I want to go into some of the detail of those points later, and particularly on how you are drawing the balance and how much space you are allowing for things like training against new threats, as against the commitments that we already have, but, yes, indeed, Minister, I would like to hear from General Sir Jim Hockenhull and I will ask Richard Drax to take this.

Q366 **Richard Drax:** Before you answer the question, could you, for the viewers, explain what StratCom is? We use acronyms and names here that we understand but many viewers do not. What is StratCom's role in the readiness of the UK armed forces and, in particular, in the role of Chief of Joint Operations?



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General Sir Jim Hockenull: Thank you. It is a privilege to be here today. Strategic Command is an organisation that works across defence, and our purpose is to help defence to integrate its capabilities and to help it fight differently, rather than going back to a model with echoes of the cold war, with the forces and capabilities that we have, making sure we can integrate those forces across all our domains of operations, in a way that means we are more than the sum of our parts.

Within Strategic Command I have what I would regard as some of the jewels in the crown of defence's capability. It includes the Permanent Joint Headquarters, which I will come on to in a moment—effectively co-ordinating defence-wide operations—as well as other things that inform the view, such as Defence Intelligence. I also have those that operate in the space of both special forces and our offensive cyber capability, the National Cyber Force.

Within the organisation I also have a range of enabling organisations: Defence Digital, looking at both defensive cyber operations but also providing the digital capability and digital transformation for all of defence; I have Defence Medical Services and the Chief of Defence Logistics and Support.

I look after our overseas bases, and our global defence network of defence attachés. I also have our defences "brain"—looking at our concepts, doctrine, defence-wide education and how we learn lessons; and I also have an innovation hub.

In all, that is about 26,000 people, spread across the globe in about 100 different countries. We are trying to drive integration for defence. We are trying to make sure that we lead the cyber and electromagnetic domain. Cyber is an important domain—and it is more than just cyber; perhaps we will come to that a little later. We support defence's ability to campaign, in terms of co-ordinating it, informing views of how we do it, and executing some of those tasks.

We are a defence enterprise organisation. We do things on behalf of all of defence, and my job is to work with the frontline commands to enable them to be all they can be through the capabilities that I hold, and by making sure that we operate in conjunction with each other.

Q367 **Richard Drax:** As this is about readiness, do you feel you are ready?

General Sir Jim Hockenull: A lot of my organisation operates at readiness all the time, and readiness does not apply to quite a lot of my organisation. Whether it is the Permanent Joint Headquarters, which manages campaigns on a daily basis and operates 24/7, our global network, our defence intelligence capability, or our special forces, they are operating, often, in contact with our adversaries on a regular basis. In fact, our defensive cyber operators are probably the most engaged individuals in defence, because they are coming up against adversaries in cyber-space every day. For that part of my force, readiness almost does not apply, on the basis that they are constantly engaged in their task.



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There are other areas where, of course, we have weakness. Defence Medical Services is an area where we have had to make some interventions in the light of our ability to sustain war-fighting operations into the future—investments that we have made this year to make sure we can have the right level of medical stocks available. We have increased the level of stocks. Of course, holding those stocks is an expensive business, so we have worked with the national health service to make sure we can rotate the stock from our shelves through the NHS, so that we are not wasting product by having it go out of date on the shelves. There is a range of interventions we are making there.

I still have concerns over our ability to provide the scale of medical cover that we are going to need in the context of a war-fighting operation. That is an area where I am particularly focused.

Q368 **Richard Drax:** And what are you doing about it—because, as we all know, a soldier who is off the battlefield and recovered as quickly as possible is good for morale, apart from anything else? What are you doing to ensure that that can be done?

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: In our high-readiness operations, we have made some interventions, to make sure that we are able actively to support those operations. In the operation for the evacuation in the Sudan, we made sure, through our innovation hub, that we can deploy lightweight surgical teams, to provide expert support on the ground in the most austere conditions, to provide support to our very-high-readiness forces and reduce their risk.

We are looking at scale and capacity to enable us to make sure we can support a larger war-fighting effort. Of course, as that grows in capability across the rest of defence we need to make sure that the enabling elements can support that.

Q369 **Richard Drax:** Does that take into account civilian help, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, where civilian surgeons and so forth came in to help?

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: It could be civilian surgeons. It depends on the nature and level of threat and the environment where they would be deployed. It also means that we need to work—and we are working—very closely with NATO partners. My Surgeon-General chairs the NATO medical council to make sure that in the context of war-fighting operations, as part of a NATO operation, we recognise that many of these enabling capabilities will of course be provided by lots of different nations, and we need to make sure both that we play our part and that we can draw on the facilities of others.

Q370 **Chair:** Thank you. That has been extremely helpful. I want to pick up some of those points a little bit more.

The Minister and I were talking about readiness in the context of, for example, the defence industrial base. There is a danger, of course, that we tend to look at readiness in terms of how many tanks start when you



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put the key in them. Of course, it is much wider than that. We have touched on skills but will come back to that later. I am thinking about things like capability development and integration among the forces and among defence, which you are a part of. Can you address how wide that goes and what you do to ensure that we are ready in that broader sense?

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: I think it is helpful and I am glad that when we think about readiness—as someone who does not own any tanks, ships or aircraft, but owns a lot of other things—we might be able to move away from just thinking in terms of those platforms. There is something about recognising that readiness is not just the availability of platforms but that it includes our ability to generate and sustain the capability.

Q371 **Chair:** When you say generation, do you mean in a force generation sense, or is it deeper than that—

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: I mean deeper than that. When we think about force generation it is very easy to think in the short term: how many platforms do we have available to do particular things at a moment in time? How sustainable are they in the long term? Are they capable of conducting the range of mission sets we want them to do? We may have different choices that we want to make about the nature of operations that they would be engaged in.

To me, there is something about how we broaden our understanding. A good example is in the space of stockpiles, which the Minister spoke to earlier—making sure we have stockpiles available so that we are truly ready for the range of contingencies that we may be required to undertake.

That does not always mean we can count every missile, shell and radio on a shelf, but it is having the assurance that we have the capability that will be available to us in the right timeframe to be able to generate that capability.

Q372 **Chair:** Two points arise. First, how can you say you are truly ready if you don't know how many rounds you have on the shelf? That is the first basic and perhaps fairly obvious point.

Secondly, will you address future capability—the speed at which you can bring something online rather than having it stacked in a warehouse?

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: Those two questions are linked. Let us look at the conflict in Ukraine. The Ukrainians did not have the capability to defend themselves for the length of time that they have. Our assumptions over the duration of warfare—how long it will last—and at what intensity will drive the nature of the stockpile.

Those are assumptions. You therefore need to be able to hedge against an assumption being wrong. As a strategic planner, I was taught that if you make an assumption you always make a contingency plan on the basis that the assumption may not turn out to be true.



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What is our hedge against that? That is the nature of a different relationship with industry where we need to look at long-term pipelines to supply the munitions and stockpile capabilities that we require and the ability to surge. That means a different relationship with industry than perhaps we have at the moment where we contract for a certain thing and when the contract is delivered that is the end of the relationship.

We are beginning to realise that that just-enough, just-in-time approach has put us in a place that limits our capability, our decision space and our options. It must be viewed much more as a partnership where there is assurance for industry to make the necessary investment and industry is ready to support us at times of need, because we may find that whatever assumptions we make about a future conflict are not right. We may well need enduring and surge support to be able to execute against particular contingencies.

Q373 **Chair:** That's what you say. Many of us here may agree. Does industry?

General Sir Jim Hockenull: I have spoken to industry leaders, noting that the majority are probably slightly more in the technical space rather than the heavy metal munitions space.

Industry wants to see a commitment where that partnership gives them some degree of assurance about where risk is carried. Perhaps the way in which we have contracted in the past—the nature of those contracts—is to tend to want to pass the risk to a contractor, or we have adopted the approach whereby we do a fixed-price, fixed-cost, fixed-time contract, and the nature of that is that once it is done the relationship ends. A lot of industry I speak to are interested in a different way of working but want to see the substance of it, rather than us saying that we want to work differently. We need the freedoms and ability to enter into those sorts of agreements and structures.

Chair: We covered some of those issues recently in Mr Francois's report on procurement. I am sure we will come back to it.

Q374 **Sarah Atherton:** I am pleased by what I have seen of your frontline medical operational capability and that the time limit has been pushed back. We have 22,000 service personnel waiting for dental treatment, some at NATO 3, not deployable. We have 500 or more waiting for trauma orthopaedic surgery on an NHS waiting list. What are you doing about getting these people back so that they can be deployed if required?

General Sir Jim Hockenull: You are right: making sure that our people are fit and ready to deploy is an area that is fundamental to defence's readiness and capability.

Our dental challenge has, perhaps, been exacerbated by the necessary support that we provided to the Ukrainian military who have been training in the UK. We have given quite a lot of our dental capability to support Ukrainians' training to ensure they are fit to fight on the frontline against the Russians in Ukraine. That has had an impact on our capacity to treat all our force.



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I hope that we are at the high point of the dental commitment. We are looking to reprioritise back into our force. We have done a lot of reprioritisation of how we triage our patients to make sure that those who have those issues are brought back, dentally fit, for deployment in operations and are prioritised in the system. Other than emergency treatment, we are making sure we address that.

In the longer term, we need to look at our overall capacity. This is true in Defence Medical Services writ large and in our dental capability. We are looking at a variety of options, including employing locums in the short term to give us surge capability, but in the long term we know we need to build a large capability overall, and that is an investment priority for me as we go into our annual budget round for 2024 and beyond.

James Heapey: May I briefly come in, because Sarah raises a good point?

When I was here last I made a semi-flippant remark about sending people to war with a bit of toothache. In the past 20 years or so, we have had that very deliberate operational cycle with six months of training, six months of operational training, six months on operations and six months of recovery. We were able to hold ourselves to absolute standards around dental fitness as we went through that 24-month cycle. It is the same with equipment, too.

In war, there is a war going on. A ship that is 80% good enough is good enough; a plane that is 80% good enough is good enough; and people who are 80% good enough are good enough. When you are in that total whole inventory, whole force fight against another, the war-goer becomes a thing.

That is not how we measure readiness. We owe it to our people to provide them with the medical care that we tell them we will offer. What that really means in terms of the people you put into the frontline if the balloon goes up is a slightly different issue.

I had not heard your point about the number on NHS waiting lists, but it is something for us to reflect on, with the military covenant being applied by various integrated boards around the country. Thank you for bringing that to my attention.

We used to hold many more medics full time within defence. Having our medics mostly out in the NHS maintaining their clinical currency is the right way to go. Having more of them to meet the demands of full peer-on-peer war is clearly a necessary piece of work for Jim and Defence Medical Services, but so too is understanding the point around operational readiness and strategic readiness. How do we tap into the enormity of the NHS quickly to generate a war-fighting medical capability in time of war? That is another piece of work that we need to do.

The final chapter of the Defence Command Paper Refresh was on a national defence plan and on wider strategic resilience and strategic



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readiness. The medical part is such an important part of the moral component of fighting power. That medical bit is an integral part, alongside the industrial bit and everything else.

Chair: That is another extremely important point to consider.

Q375 **Mr Jones:** You just said that you don't own anything, which is self-evident. How do you manage demands from the different services? This is nothing new. I am halfway through James Holland's good book, "The Savage Storm", about the 1943 Italian campaign, in which there is competition between the different forces for air cover, for ships and for things like that. In a war fight, that is going to happen anyway, but how do you manage the different demands on the three services? Do people override them, or do they say, "We are not providing that"?

On our NATO partners, how does that plug into getting the overall capabilities?

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: I take your opening comment in the spirit in which it was made, but I don't think that is quite what I said. I said that I don't own—

Mr Jones: I wrote it down.

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: I said I don't own any tanks, ships or planes, but I explained that I own cyber, special forces, intelligence, operations and a few other things.

How do we exert influence with the services? We exert influence partly through authority, the Integration Design Authority, whereby we make sure that as services develop capability they do so in a way that enables them to operate in the most optimal way and in the most integrated form. We do that through a range of authorities that we hold in terms of our digital capability, making sure that the digital transformation of defence—

Q376 **Mr Jones:** You have been in the Army long enough to know. I was a Minister and I am aware of the internal politics, not just between the three services but internally within your service, for example. How do you overcome that rivalry between the three services?

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: At times of enhanced threat, at times of increased complexity and danger, a lot of behaviours change. The behaviours you speak to are more prevalent when people have more time on their hands and the ability to indulge in them.

My experience during the 18 months in which I have been in Strategic Command is of a group of chiefs who are operating together as a group of six, with the chief of defence, the vice chief, the service chiefs and myself. We recognise that this is a time of extraordinary danger. If you were not doing it previously, and I cannot speak for those who went before, but at a time of amazing demand in what is happening in Ukraine, what has recently transpired in the middle east, the threats that are posed to the far east, then that really concentrates the mind in ensuring



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you are making the best decisions, and those best decisions need to be Defence Enterprise decisions, not those things that are best for a particular cap badge in the Army or for the Army, Navy or Air Force.

Having read the testimony of service chiefs who came to you in recent days, everything I have seen in their statements backs up my experience in personal interactions with them: they are extremely open-minded and recognise that now is not the time for any petty, low-level politics. We are behind an enterprise that is massively committed, that is defending the nation and that is doing a remarkable range of activities on a wider range of operations that I can think of for a long time, most of which, if not all, are co-ordinated through the Permanent Joint Headquarters.

We do that against a threat picture that is incredibly demanding and may mean that in future there are contingencies that could make it even worse. That changes the nature of behaviour, and I certainly see a group of individuals who recognise the responsibility—the obligation—that is on us to be able to operate in a way that is best for defence and best for the nation and its defence.

Mr Jones: That is reassuring. I once had two chiefs sitting in a meeting swearing at each other.

Chair: Let us have a closer look at the defence industrial picture and supply chain.

Q377 **John Spellar:** You mentioned developing a more long-term relationship with industry. Restrictions imposed by Treasury procurement rules are making it difficult to enable that.

James Heappey: I might take that first and immediately qualify that James Cartlidge and the team that works for him will, I suspect, be able to give you more, chapter and verse.

There is no doubt that all sides of the equation—the MOD, Government and the Treasury—will need to be willing to change policy on how we procure, how we work with industry and how we run competitions. Industry will need to change to work with us in the way we want to work in the future.

The speed of innovation means that obsolescence comes about very quickly, and obsolescence could be dangerously close for a platform that is newly arrived in service, given the speed of innovation. The horizon that concerns me the greatest is the arrival of quantum computing. Anything that isn't powered by a quantum computer will be so far behind things that are that it is an enormous concern.

You can see how increasingly—the Command Paper is really blunt on this—we will need to procure evermore versatile or vanilla, if you like, base platforms that have by design a spiral ability, a modularity and a capacity to upgrade quickly. That will transform our relationships.

I was told anecdotally the other day that one of our partner MODs—forgive me; I can't remember which country it was—is having completely



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to reappraise the way in which it does requirement settings on things like UAS. Such is the speed of innovation by everything people are learning in Ukraine that by the time we have written a requirement it is out of date.

There is a need for a complete transformation of the way in which we procure. Our understanding of where industry is at, the way in which we share our defence science and the way in which we share battlefield intelligence all have to transform so that we can move at the pace of relevance.

James Cartlidge and his team are, I think, really close to pinning down what those procurement changes look like and I know that the Committee will be the first to hear and will be very keen to challenge him over the soundness of his judgments.

Q378 **John Spellar:** I am certainly keen to do that. Everything you have said there is looking to the future. Surely you should have made more progress by now. For example, why did it take a year to place the order for the 155mm ammunition when it was glaringly obvious almost from the start of the Ukraine war that it was going to be an artillery war?

James Heapey: As I understand it, the issue was that there was not a going-concern production line and there was some debate about how the manufacturing capacity was going to be funded.

The key issue is that the contract that then needed to be placed requires an amount of ammunition per year, so it is a going-concern production line rather than an all or nothing—

Q379 **John Spellar:** I understand that. That's a statement of the bleeding obvious. The fact is it took them over a year to do that. By the way, there is a production line up in the north-east, and I understand that the filling facility is in south Wales. Components manufacturers are engaged, in the same way as when we went to see NLAW. All this is absolutely correct and you are identifying a problem, but I am not getting a sense of urgency in the Ministry that understands that the nature of the supply chain needs to evolve at pace. There does not seem to be that urgency within government—including, in particular, I accept, the Treasury—about getting us on to an emergency footing, if not a war footing.

James Heapey: I don't want to repeat—

Q380 **John Spellar:** Do reassure me that you actually have a grip on this.

James Heapey: I think you agree with what I said up front in this section of the evidence session.

Q381 **John Spellar:** You scoped a problem.

James Heapey: I am not defining the problem; I am defining the solution. I am telling you that, as we indicated in the Defence Command Paper Refresh, and as I am sure you will hear soon from the Minister for Defence Procurement, we are necessarily transforming the way in which we procure, because over the past two years the pace at which we have



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been able to procure for the Ukrainians and the ability to purchase emerging technology and put it into the Ukrainian inventory have demonstrated that so many of our own processes that take decades are no longer fit for purpose. I am not defining a problem; I am defining a solution, such as it is within my gift to do so before the Committee today.

Q382 **John Spellar:** Given the time you have already had, you should look at the second world war and the pace at which the UK and, notably, the US ramped up production and dramatically changed the way in which they did business. Equally, look at the way in which the Covid Task Force dramatically changed the way in which people administered. I do not detect that from the MOD. Everything you are talking about is future-looking rather than saying, "Well, Mr Spellar, here's the progress that we have already made. This is a contract that we procured, working with the industry to get this product out of the door much more quickly." Where are the examples, after a very considerable period of time?

James Heapey: I think there were two separate issues in there. You gave the example of the war of national survival—the moments of national endeavour to mobilise the nation that you described in the second world war.

Q383 **John Spellar:** Ukraine is fighting a war of national survival.

James Heapey: If I may, John, I will answer the question you just asked before coming to the additional point.

We have discussed the need to have strategic resilience and strategic readiness. Within that is a national defence plan that is clearly signposted in the final chapter of the DCPR and would need to be central to the next integrated review.

In mentioning the Covid Task Force you are talking about things much more akin to what we have done with the Kindred task force—a rapid procurement of capability for the Ukrainians. There are examples of where we have been able to bring into service for ourselves capability that we rapidly procured for the Ukrainians.

Q384 **Chair:** Minister, I will pick that up, as John's point is a very good one. The refresh is aspirational; it is talking about what you want to do. It doesn't tell us how you will do it.

James Heapey: All policy is aspirational when first written: you say, "This is the policy; this is what we are going to do."

Q385 **Chair:** Will you write to us and tell us how you are getting on with implementing the refresh?

James Heapey: As in: how are we getting on with delivering the policy we have set out?

Q386 **Chair:** You have set it out. You have set out what you want to do. Can you write to us and tell us how you are doing it?



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James Heapey: I can write to you and say, as I have already said, that the Minister for Defence Procurement and the chief executive of DNS are looking almost completely afresh at how we procure. A number of Committee members have already been part of the conversation with them about what that might look like, but I am happy to write to you to say that the Minister for Defence Procurement is doing a complete refresh of our procurement policy.

Q387 **Chair:** I would like an update on the implementation of the review. Does that make sense?

James Heapey: In this context, that means you want confirmation that we are changing procurement policy—because we are.

Q388 **Chair:** And how far you have got on. John has given examples under that.

James Heapey: I don't know when James is intending to announce it. I know that they know what they want to do. Clearly with all these things there is engagement around government that needs to be done beforehand.

Q389 **Mr Francois:** You have just said something very important. To prove that we do listen to witnesses I want to make sure that we have understood you.

In November 2021, the Public Accounts Committee said that the MOD's defence procurement system was "broken". We spent six months this year looking at it. We came to the same conclusion. I don't expect you, Minister, to agree with the word, but both Committees did.

The Secretary of State said last week that there was going to be a major announcement on the whole procurement system, probably in the new year. He said we would be invited to see some of it in advance, comment on it and perhaps make some positive suggestions.

You said that the MOD is going to bring about a "complete transformation" of the way we procure. That does not mean that SROs are going to do a longer year. You are talking about a fundamentally different paradigm. It is a change on that scale. Do we understand that to be correct?

James Heapey: Yes, I think that is what is set out as the ambition in the DCPR. That is what James Cartlidge, Andy Start and others have been working on—and necessarily so. I don't think that any western, developed tier 1 military can continue to procure as it has done. If there is a platform-centric procurement process, you will always end up with platforms coming into service 10 or 15 years after you first thought of them, with systems that are completely integrated but near-obsolete when they come into being. The platforms will always take time to procure and build because they are a big industrial process, but that can be quicker and more efficient—it has to be—and needs to be more routinely on time and budget, because time has a value in its own right.



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Beyond that, the systems that go on and off the platforms over the course of their lives need to be procured on an entirely different timescale from anything we have envisaged in peacetime.

Q390 **Mr Francois:** For brevity, the point Mr Spellar was making was that we have heard many warm words for years but we have not seen that many concrete examples. Let us be glass half full—

James Heapey: Fingers crossed for this time.

Q391 **Mr Francois:** You are promising that this is going to be something radically different, and we will hold you and your fellow Ministers to your word. We just hope you are right.

James Heapey: That's my expectation.

Q392 **Sarah Atherton:** Going back to alliances with industry, we just visited RAF Lossiemouth and saw a modern, end-to-end maritime patrol capability, P-8 Poseidon, all based in the Atlantic building. We saw operations training, the aircraft itself, maintenance, etc. Is this the future model of capability delivery and, therefore, readiness—all in one place?

James Heapey: Yes and no. It makes sense at Lossiemouth for there to be a big P-8 737-based centre. You gain economies of scale from that sort of facility. There is a balance to strike between the peacetime, business-as-usual efficiency you get from co-location versus the need for resilience.

One of the interesting things, in preparation for this inquiry in particular and over the last year or so as I have been thinking about the transition back to peer-on-peer war, was that we once had multiple sites that did the same thing. It made a lot of sense from the resilience perspective because it was easier to keep us and sustain us in the fight by making it harder to take out everything we had.

That is just not how modern businesses operate. We sought to emulate a lot of best practice. As a way of generating a P-8 that is brilliant, with fantastic training facilities and everything else, it makes sense to have a big, impressive building like the Atlantic building. I have visited it and it is hugely impressive.

That is absolutely fine as a training facility, but the Royal Air Force, through its Agile Combat Employment initiative, is actively looking at how you might disperse the P-8 force to lots of other airfields to make it physically harder to destroy on the ground. Similarly, we must rethink decisions for everything like our warehousing for spares, ammunition and everything else.

Sometimes there is a need for politics. Sometimes there is a need to recognise that those who went before us made sound decisions given the context at the time. It was an entirely sound decision for the Government of the late '90s and early 2000s to seek to rationalise our logistics, our stockpiles and our warehousing because we were not facing a threat of



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Cruise missiles to the UK mainland, so why worry about that? Why not centralise and harvest all those efficiencies?

People like Kevin O'Donoghue, who was brought in under, I think, Geoff Hoon as Chief of Defence Logistics, was acting entirely on that mandate, encouraged by predecessors of this Committee and of the Public Accounts Committee in order to be more efficient and less profligate.

This is not a political point, but we do now have to recognise that we need resilience and must therefore strike a balance between single-point centres of excellence and resilient warehousing and stores to make ourselves harder to hit.

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: The Atlantic building is a brilliant facility, but it is worth thinking that this is a broader capability. The maritime patrol aircraft is part of our ability to conduct anti-submarine warfare as well as provide an important link of our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability, so it is not just what is in that building; it is how it works with elements of the Navy, our satellite communications, our broader sensors and our networks. The data which comes from those is often fused and exploited in other places. Therefore, even when we see something that looks like an all-in-one facility, it is part of a bigger system and at times we need to zoom out and recognise that a whole load of dependencies also sit around these capabilities.

Chair: We are now going to look, appropriately, at democratic scrutiny of military readiness.

Q393 **Sarah Atherton:** On democratic scrutiny, or what some people feel is democratic opacity, the MOD stopped publishing serious critical weaknesses in force elements in 2014 and defence planning assumptions were made secret in 2015. For us and the public, it is very hard to scrutinise what your aims are. Do you have the right kit, tools and manpower to achieve that? Where are the gaps? Notably, Germany and the US still report readiness to our equivalent committees and their Governments. Would it be helpful to you if we had more oversight and scrutiny?

James Heapey: Probably. Previously, I heard mention of the German and US models. We need to look at the security classification within which those committees are briefed and how they then publish that data. When I read some of this Committee's work in the run-up to "Options for Change", the Committee had clearly been given full sight of the inventory of the British Army of the Rhine, the Royal Air Force, Germany and the Royal Navy. It would appear that the Committee then, 30 years ago, made an agreement with the MOD over the redaction of that information in the report that was published.

Patrick Sanders probably got it right in 2014-15 when the changes to which you refer happened. Although there are some former Ministers around the table who were probably in the Department at that time, I do not think it was a conscious decision made by the ministerial team.



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Patrick was probably right in saying that the deletion of the classification “confidential” meant there was a choice between making it secret or official sensitive, so it just became secret. I might be corrected from your left, but my sense is that it was not a positive decision to make it secret; it is just that, if it was no longer confidential it was clearly not official sensitive and became secret.

Q394 **Mr Jones:** In that case, change it back.

James Heapey: If you are saying “bring back ‘confidential’”, it would be useful to speak to the agencies before making that recommendation as a Committee. “Confidential” was deleted for a reason. It was an incredibly hard classification to judge and therefore to assure. Given that ever more of our business is now being done at top secret because of the cyber capabilities of our adversaries, I am not sure, Kevan, that putting stuff like that back to “confidential” is the right answer.

Q395 **Chair:** I think you said that they were not published; they were official sensitive.

James Heapey: No. You put that question to Patrick—he might have been ACDS ops and commitments at the time—and I think he drew on that knowledge when you asked him why this stuff had disappeared from view, and it might just have been the consequence of the deletion of the “confidential” classification rather than a conscious decision to elevate it to secret and, therefore, out of your sight.

Q396 **Chair:** My understanding is that they used to be published.

James Heapey: But as “confidential”.

Q397 **Chair:** No; they were published so they could be seen—openly in the SDR in 1998.

Sarah Atherton: But they no longer are.

James Heapey: Specifically what?

Q398 **Chair:** We have evidence from Dr Andrew Curtis. Forgive me if I read what he said: “The 1998 SDR was the first review to include planning assumptions, which were constructed around a scale of effort baseline for expeditionary operations.” He goes on to say: “The 2010 SDSR made no reference to scales of effort...The IR and associated Defence Command Paper contain no planning assumptions for the employment of IF30 at all.” From that evidence, it sounds as if the assumptions were published and now no longer are.

James Heapey: We will need to go back through it. What we should do is sit down with the Clerk and go back through what the Committee used to see. If we can find in previous Committee hearings that you were given information that you are not now, we can seek to understand why. I cannot tell you why a decision was taken in 2015 no longer to make that information available in SDSR15 when it had been made available previously. Patrick’s logic that it sits with the change in classification makes some sense to me, but, rather than everybody jumping on Google



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in the middle of the Committee, it might be useful to sit down with the Clerk.

It is definitely the case that in the late 1980s and early 1990s there are reports of this Committee from which it is clear the Committee had been given quite a lot of operational data and then agreed with the Department its redaction before publication, so the Committee members were able to hold us to account, but we need to go back through the classifications by which that was done and work out what that looks like, but it is work that we are very happy to do with you and your Committee.

Q399 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** As I understand it, in 1998 it was not just shared with this Committee; it was fully in the public domain. What we are struggling with is that no one can understand why that suddenly changed, and no one from the Department is able to tell us, either.

Q400 **Chair:** There is a National Audit Office publication in 2005, for example, which clearly looked at it.

James Heapey: My instinct is that it was not a conscious decision made by the ministerial team of the day.

Mr Francois: Off the top of my head, you may be broadly right. I think we are slightly getting ourselves in knots about how much detail was made public in these assumptions. To be fair, the Minister made a good suggestion, which is to go back to cold war days and look at how the Committee did it then.

Q401 **Chair:** Can I take you up on that, Minister? Perhaps we can move on from this point.

James Heapey: I make the point up front. I have seen from all the transcripts the interest that the Committee has in the DPAs. The DPAs were of their time. What the DPAs allowed you to do was to seek to optimise a more limited military resource against the limited threat. In the process, it allowed you to take quite a lot of risk against the war-fighting enablers, because you were making a set of DPAs and saying, "We're not going to war-fight, but we are going to do counter-insurgency at this scale."

The DPAs probably need to be refreshed, or just binned altogether, because we are back into a cold war-type thing, but what you are really about is making a commitment to NATO about what it can have straightaway and the rest of your inventories available to NATO as quickly as possible. That is the kind of DPA of the day.

Q402 **Sarah Atherton:** We have slightly gone off piste. Apart from your evidence being out of date, the Secretary of State told us there are 183 pinch-point professions, of which 61 have an acute impact. It is now very difficult for us to know the percentage of that against personnel numbers and what disciplines and professions they are. We get generic terms—engineers, chefs, cyber and marines—but we read today that infantry soldiers are being offered an incentive of £7,500 to join the Paras because the Paras are now overstretched due to commitments; they are



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on high readiness. Is this tactic working? Is it something you can use across different battalions? Can it be used for the Royal Marines? Is this something you are starting to adopt?

James Heapey: I apologise that the number I put in my written evidence to you was not the same as the one used by the Secretary of State. Obviously, the Secretary of State was right to use more recent stuff. You have got me. Mea culpa for that.

The existence of these pinch-point trades where we have shortages is a real concern. You are absolutely right to speculate that they are mostly the trades that are very technical and, frankly, make the force work. Again, it is a sign of the times, but it is a very different challenge. When we were serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, a lot of the logistics, the signals and everything else was permanently delivered by contract. Now, all of a sudden, you realise that in a war-fighting force your signallers, your logisticians and engineers are absolutely indispensable. You can have all the fighting echelon you want—infantry, cavalry, war-fighting sailors and pilots—but they are all irrelevant without the key trades behind. We have to do some pretty urgent work to fill some of those pinch points because they are limiting what we can do with the force for as long as we are carrying the gaps that we have.

The Chief of Defence People is looking to bring the Haythornthwaite review to life by running a pilot around these pinch points in order to fill some of the gaps, but it is challenging, even before you get into pay and conditions, which may or may not be part of the issue. Haythornthwaite made some really good recommendations, but we are competing with a job market with a lot of vacancies and, therefore, there is a lot of competition for our people.

The Committee is very busy with lots of reports going on, but this is an area of growing concern for us, because when we look left and right at partner militaries in NATO and Australia they are all struggling to recruit, too. Is there a societal shift that is starting to change people's enthusiasm to serve? That may or may not be something that the Committee would want to look at. We are certainly looking at it, too.

Q403 **Sarah Atherton:** That is slightly different. I am talking about the sum of £7,500—a third of a soldier's basic salary—to transfer from the infantry to the Paras.

James Heapey: On that specific point, my understanding is that the Parachute Regiment is more than sufficiently recruited to meet its requirements. Because of the changes in the infantry order of battle—namely, the creation of security force assistance battalions—there are infanteers who are not required in their current unit, so there is an incentive to see if they would like to do what they need to do to become Paras. I do not think it reflects the creation of an internal labour market within the Army where regiments are bidding financially with each other to secure talent. I do not think that is what this represents.

Q404 **Sarah Atherton:** This is not about rethinking the cuts in Army numbers.



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James Heapey: No.

Q405 **Sarah Atherton:** This is about reshuffling the pack.

James Heapey: That is my understanding, but I am reacting to the same story you have seen. I have been learning about it today, as you have been learning about it today, but my understanding is that it is an initiative to persuade infanters who may not be needed in their current units, given the reshaping of infantry ORBATs, to consider a career in the Parachute Regiment.

Q406 **Sarah Atherton:** How is the Ranger force going on?

James Heapey: Good. If only we had four more battalions. One of the challenging things at the moment is that I spend a lot of time overseas talking to countries that are being schmoozed heavily by the Russians in particular, but they want to have a relationship with us. When you look at their navy, army and air force they look like us; their traditions and customs are the same as ours. They prefer to send people to Sandhurst, Dartmouth and Cranwell. The Rangers, the future commando force and those parts of the force you can send off to do capacity building and strengthening relationships are in huge demand. They are the tip of the spear in the day-to-day competition with our adversaries. The Rangers is going gangbusters; it is a fantastic capability. Frankly, I just wish we had more of them.

General Sir Jim Hockenull: There is an important element about short-term interventions that may include the financial incentives that are paid to particular trades to try to retain more, but there is also a range of medium-term interventions that we are making and we know we need to make. In the digital area, we are looking at bursaries for 16-year-olds to encourage them to come into the service at 18, probably with an expectation that they will serve a shorter career than we may traditionally have thought. There is an element of us adapting to our future workforce rather than always expecting that workforce to adapt to us.

The vision is that they will serve for seven years. We will give them an in-service degree. We expect many of them to leave in their mid-20s, hopefully then going out into the UK economy and helping with the right skills, qualifications and approach to life to make them influential members in the digital and cyber business of the UK. We hope they will come back at lateral entry later in their career, and certainly that they will join the reserves. A different approach to how we think about these capabilities is absolutely essential. At Strategic Command, we are certainly looking at a range of interventions that we think we need to make to make up for the fact that we have a differing workforce that is coming and a range of differing things that we want it to be able to do.

Q407 **Sarah Atherton:** Perhaps you could speed up implementation of Haythornthwaite's recommendations.

Mr Jones: As if.



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James Heapey: Kevan has answered the question. We have to do something. There is no point in asking Rick Haythornthwaite to do something as expansive as he has if we are not going to try to implement as many of the recommendations as we can. Our instinct is to do so, but it is not cost-neutral. As Kevan rightly pointed out, there are some pretty severe pressures.

Q408 **John Spellar:** Minister, you mentioned the crucial role of logistics, maintenance and support for our armed forces, but that has been true for the past century. Why has it come as a surprise to the military that that is the case? Should they not have had a stronger training platform in order to remedy that?

James Heapey: I do not think it has necessarily come as a surprise. The pace of innovation and the growth in demand for those skillsets, particularly the CIS-type, is probably a new requirement that we are adjusting to, while accepting that every other major business and huge new sectors in the economy are similarly fishing for the same talent.

As for logisticians, engineers and so on, those of us who have served as Ministers in the past have, frankly, collectively taken a series of decisions to disinvest in that part of the force, which we now have to regrow. The decision to regrow that part of the force was taken only relatively recently and now it needs to regrow pretty urgently.

Q409 **John Spellar:** I actually took decisions to overtrain in certain areas, knowing that some of them would then go out into the wider economy for the benefit of the wider economy. It might have been an idea to continue that.

James Heapey: At the risk of everybody saying what they did and did not do while they were in various offices in MOD, I am not sure it is that helpful, but fundamentally we made conscious decisions to disinvest in various parts of the force because the DPAs did not require them. We now need to regrow this. There is a whole load of skills that are relatively newly needed.

The First Sea Lord, the CGS and Chief of the Air Staff will tell you that quite a lot of pressure has been put on their CIS workforce because the previous Secretary of State, rightly, said we had to populate the national cyber force. I think that was the right decision to make, but it has created some tension and that is the challenge, but we also have to find evermore creative ways of bringing these people into the force, remunerate them in a way that is more competitive and give them terms and conditions of service that meet their expectations. What Haythornthwaite recommended is pretty fulsome. We now need to get on with it and implement it as best we can.

Chair: Thank you, Minister; that's perfect. On another note altogether, Kevan Jones.

Q410 **Mr Jones:** We have talked about readiness and then deployment, but the issue is sustainability, is it not, once you have deployed? What is your



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assessment of each service's ability once they have deployed to sustain capability in field?

James Heapey: In terms of the operate capability it is pretty good. We are learning. It sounds silly, but it took Spey and Tamar being in the Indo-Pacific to realise that the distances in that part of the world are absolutely enormous. Trying to get a shipping container to RV with Spey or Tamar in a certain port is quite challenging. As for our ability to sustain the force in the field as an operating force we are pretty sustainable, albeit having to relearn some of the lessons about operating on the other side of the globe constantly, which we have not had to do for more than a generation. For two generations we have not had to do that.

As for our ability to sustain a war-fighting force, that is exactly the conversation we have been having all afternoon thus far. There is a whole load of stuff that we disinvested in that we urgently need to reinvest in.

Q411 **Mr Jones:** Can I come a little closer to home rather than the Pacific? The Secretary of State made great play when he was before us about the deployments in response to the Gaza-Israel situation. The RAF deployed a P-8 to Cyprus. I understand it was there for 18 days and flew only seven missions. It is now back in the UK. That does not show long deployment.

James Heapey: Just to correct that, the P-8 went to Sigonella from which the US P-8 force was also operating. It flew a number of missions and then recovered to Lossiemouth for operational reasons, but you know the time of year and where our attention is.

Q412 **Mr Jones:** If it is back here, we do not need that capability there any more, do we?

James Heapey: One makes a judgment. With apologies to all of those viewing, if this is open source, I will write to you so you can put it on the public record.

Q413 **Mr Jones:** It is open source. If you go on Flight Tracker you can actually follow it.

James Heapey: Kevan, the movement of the aeroplane clearly is; the operational requirements for where it might otherwise have needed to be might not be. If they are—

Q414 **Mr Jones:** But they cannot be in two places at once, which gets us to the point about deployability and accessing sustained capabilities. We do not need to say what it is, but I can guess. It has come back to Lossiemouth for another task. What are we doing in the Gaza-Israel area?

James Heapey: In what sense?

Q415 **Mr Jones:** We do not have a P-8 there now, do we?

Chair: What has replaced the P-8 capability that has gone back?



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James Heapey: The P-8 can move between the two, relatively straightforwardly, depending on the capabilities.

Q416 **Mr Jones:** I am aware that it is an aircraft. It was deployed in a great fanfare of publicity; somehow we were deploying this, but it is no longer there. Is that because we do not need it there any more?

James Heapey: It is because we have a more important task for it elsewhere.

Q417 **Mr Jones:** Therefore, we are limited in what we can do. Can I come to HMS Duncan? It has been in the Mediterranean for 150 days now, I think it is. You have three 45s currently tied up in maintenance. I think Dauntless is in the Caribbean. Duncan is the only one with defensive air capability. How long can that stay on station? Clearly, after 150 days it will need maintenance and its crew will have to come back for refresh. What is it going to be replaced with?

James Heapey: We do not discuss—I read the First Sea Lord’s evidence to you—where ships are, as you know—

Q418 **Mr Jones:** You can find out; it is open source.

James Heapey: Kevan, you need to let me finish a sentence before you start interrupting or heckling. I was literally about to say that it is open source where ships are, so you know that. Our plans for ships have always been not open source and that will continue to be the case.

Q419 **Mr Jones:** It is the only one with air capability. You have three in maintenance. Dauntless is in the Caribbean and it will have to come back at some time and obviously will need maintenance, etc., as will Duncan.

James Heapey: No matter how many times you rephrase the question, I am not going to take you through our plans for warships over the next six weeks.

Q420 **Mr Jones:** This is important because it comes back to the point that the jam is being spread very thinly. If those two come back, as they will have to, because you cannot keep them on station for a long period of time because of maintenance and crew rotations, we do not then have a capability. What will we rely on? Are we relying on our partners to fill that capability that we have in the Mediterranean?

James Heapey: Kevan, the advantage of being in NATO is that there are always opportunities to burden share within NATO, but there may also be opportunities available to us, which I am not at liberty to discuss with you today, to deploy other platforms.

Q421 **Mr Jones:** No, we cannot because that is the only one with air defence capability; the others do not. What else do we have?

James Heapey: Kevan, I defer to your superior knowledge on the basis that I cannot correct you.

Q422 **Mr Jones:** Now you are just fudging the question.



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James Heapey: I am not fudging the—

Q423 **Mr Jones:** You are.

James Heapey: I am very clear on what the question is.

Q424 **Mr Jones:** Let us try this one—

James Heapey: What you are asking me to do is to say to you whether we are or are not replacing a destroyer in the eastern Mediterranean any time soon. Are we or are we not deploying any other type of destroyer to the region? You know how many destroyers we currently have in fleet service. That number is a matter of public record, but what I am simply unable to do is tell you what the plan is.

Q425 **Mr Jones:** You are not trying to tell me that the Russians and Chinese do not know where our 45s are.

James Heapey: They know exactly where they are—

Mr Jones: Exactly.

James Heapey: As do you, but you are not asking me where they are today; you are asking me what will be where in a few weeks' time and I am not going to tell you that.

Q426 **Mr Jones:** But if you have three in maintenance you will not be able to get them out there, will you? Come to the point—

James Heapey: You are absolutely right. There are three currently in fleet service, but I am not going to share with you what the First Sea Lord and Chief of Defence Staff—

Q427 **Mr Jones:** I come back to this point about sustainability. You can send a ship out, but you cannot keep that capability there longer, can you?

James Heapey: Your macro point about the force working incredibly hard is correct. All three service chiefs as they have come through have said so, and I have already said on a number of occasions in this evidence session that we are asking more of the force right now than it is designed to deliver. No one is disputing that, but I am simply not going to tell you where ships will be in a few weeks' time.

Q428 **Chair:** It is the point I raised at the beginning of this session, which you pushed back on, that you are always asking the forces to do more with less to the extent that it is non-sustainable. That is Kevan's point.

James Heapey: We are asking them to do more with what they have. That was the thing I pushed back on.

Q429 **Mr Jones:** Let us throw an Army example in here. The Prince of Wales's Royal Regiment was deployed to Kosovo at short notice. NATO is now asking for ongoing commitments to Kosovo. If we keep that regiment there, what else gives?

James Heapey: Kevan, I am not going to tell you what the plan is for that battalion.



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Q430 **Mr Jones:** Your coming here is just a waste of time if you are not even prepared to answer that. You are just hiding behind this.

James Heapey: Kevan, that is a nonsense. It has been a good exchange in which we have been able to answer your questions.

Q431 **Mr Jones:** You have not. We are in a situation where it is quite clear we do not have the capability to keep these deployments long term. The point that I was next going to come on to is quite clearly, and you have just mentioned about it, about—

James Heapey: Specifically what stops us—I am not saying that we are, but you are absolutely right that on the type 45 fleet some are in deep maintenance and some in operational service. I did not dispute that; I simply refused to say how we might be rotating them. On the PWRR, I am not sure I understand what it is that would stop us from sustaining them in Kosovo indefinitely. We are not, but I am not sure I understand the premise of the question.

Q432 **Mr Jones:** You can, but something has to give elsewhere, has it not? That is what I am saying.

James Heapey: We have a finite number of infantry battalions.

Q433 **Mr Jones:** Exactly; that is the point I am making. It is the same with the ships. You cannot have a ship in two places at once, can you? You cannot have it laid up alongside in maintenance and then want to deploy it, which comes back to the Chair's point. You used the phrase "We're working these hard." We are not; we are overstretched to the point where we cannot deliver some of this capability. I was going to make a suggestion about our operational deployments, to which Jim referred earlier. We do not always provide everything; we do it on a multinational basis with NATO partners. Is it not now time to become realistic and say, right, the UK will specialise in certain areas and not try to do everything? We will then work with NATO partners across the piece to concentrate the money in those specialist areas.

James Heapey: It is something worth considering. It would be interesting to see whether a group even as small as this could come up with a consensus about what the focus for the UK could be. There is real strategic logic in saying that the UK seeks to have a tier one Army, Navy, Air Force and cyber force.

Q434 **Mr Jones:** But we don't have it, do we? The problem is that unless you have a massive increase in the defence budget all you are doing, given the delusion of global Britain with a full spectrum of armed forces, is spreading the jam very thinly and conning people into thinking you can do everything when quite clearly you cannot. In my opinion, I do not think you should, to be honest; you should be looking at what best we can do with our NATO partners to deliver the capability, which is what is needed.

James Heapey: I think we do.



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Q435 **Mr Jones:** Well, you don't because you can't deploy the 45s. You have already admitted in terms of P-8 that it has been juggled between different commitments. For the UK to try to say it will have a presence now in the eastern Mediterranean because of the Gaza crisis when we cannot even sustain it for very long is not very credible, is it? It might make a headline to give the impression that you are doing something, but if you have only got it there for 18 days and seven missions, with a type 45 which possibly is coming to the end of its tour, and you cannot deploy a similar type 45 in that theatre, that is window dressing rather than having capability, is it not?

Chair: It is the point made to us by Justin Bronk. If the Government are constantly saying they need to reassure this alliance and tick off this need, you are constantly running everything far too hot and not leaving enough space for training and refocusing on the tasks you have to do, and it is just fundamentally unsustainable. If you won't accept my characterisation of doing more with less, then it is doing more with what is available to the point that it is unsustainable. That is the point, is it not?

James Heapey: There has been no complaint about that as a premise. I volunteered in my very first answer that we are asking the force to do more than we designed it to do. I would offer that that is the inevitable consequence of a period of great geopolitical uncertainty and instability. It is inescapably the case that no one platform can be in two places at one time—that is a statement of the blinding obvious—and so we try to work the force as hard as we can. Dauntless will be a great example. It was rushed out of refit successfully to go and furnish a non-discretionary task to be available to the Overseas Territories during hurricane season. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office rightly pushed us on that. Dauntless successfully met the requirement. While she has been there she has been able to do all sorts of great stuff, working with partners in the region doing counter-narcotics and, more widely, flying the flag for freedom, all very valuable. She will come back, refurbish and will be ready again for operations. The tempo at which she has been doing all of that you won't find in any handbook, and the First Sea Lord would rightly say to you that some risk comes with that.

Q436 **Mr Jones:** We have had the strategic review; we have had the refresh. What we need is either resources with ambition or to cut down on the ambition.

James Heapey: I think that the size of the force we have is geared around an ability in the Navy to deliver and protect the deterrent; to deliver carrier strike; and maintain, alongside our allies, freedom of navigation of the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap in the north Atlantic. I think that within the Army we continue to have the yardstick of the ability to fight a division within a UK-led corps.

Q437 **Mr Jones:** We don't.

James Heapey: Kevan, those are our ambitions.



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Q438 **Mr Jones:** My ambition is—

James Heappey: We are procuring the complete renewal of the Army's fighting inventory in order to maintain it. In the Royal Air Force we have a commitment to continue to deliver a number of fast air squadrons to be a part of a NATO force on day one night one of a fight with a peer.

You are absolutely right that you could make a decision to start to revise some of those downwards.

Q439 **Mr Jones:** Are you saying that our position is now very clear—that the ambition is to deliver for NATO a full divisional strength deployment?

James Heappey: Yes. That remains the—

Q440 **Mr Jones:** That was not what Patrick Sanders told us the other week.

James Heappey: What did Patrick tell you the other week?

Q441 **Mr Jones:** Patrick said it was about divisional headquarters, which I thought made sense. Then he said that you plug and play, using our partners into that divisional headquarters, which I think is a sensible way round it.

James Heappey: Was he talking about now, as in what we can do right now, or was he talking about what we are aiming to do once the two Armoured Infantry Brigades and the Deep Recce Strike Brigade are fully constituted in the middle of the next decade?

Q442 **Mr Jones:** In the middle of the next decade, you will never be able to do it.

James Heappey: No, but that is not the question I asked.

Q443 **Mr Jones:** The impression—

James Heappey: You told me what Patrick was talking about. What Patrick was talking about is what our contribution is to NATO right now, given where the British Army is at right now. But that is very different from what I was just talking about, which is that the reason we are procuring this complete renewal of the British Army's fighting echelon is in order to sustain our ability to put a British Division into the NATO fight under a British-led corps. I will read the transcript. If I have got Patrick wrong, I will read the transcript.

Mr Jones: Perhaps read the transcript again. I am not sure that is what he was—

Chair: Let us go back to the transcript and compare. Minister, perhaps you can look at it as well. If it needs clarifying, then we will do that.

Derek Twigg: I won't go into the wider sphere of recruitment because Sarah Atherton had an exchange before which covered some of that and, in particular, the recent review as well. I want to concentrate on reserves, and I know Mark Francois has a specific issue on recruitment.



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Chair: Do you want to do reserves first? I know you have got to go.

Q444 **Derek Twigg:** I will do reserves first, yes. CGS acknowledged, he says, "What worries me most about the reserves is that we are losing reserves faster than we are recruiting them." This is CGS. In talking of sustainment, which we have just been talking about, this is quite a useful comment from him. It was that regular armies start wars but reserve armies—

James Heappey: Could you say it again? Just slow down. It wasn't your fault.

Q445 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry. He said, "Regular armies start wars but reserves end them."

James Heappey: Yes, yes.

Q446 **Derek Twigg:** We know now from what has happened in Ukraine and, very recently, of course, the huge mobilisation of reserves in Israel. I know there are differences and so forth, but that just shows the importance of reserves. We have a major problem with the recruitment and retention of reserves, which affects our sustainment regarding the various elements of our armed forces. What are we doing to change that? What is your assessment of where we are at on the sustainment of reserves?

James Heappey: Derek, what we need our reserves for has been a sort of—we have changed our thinking a lot over the course of the last decade. I think we have still got a bit of a journey to go but it comes broadly into three buckets. One, it is a place where we can bring into the force really niche expertise, people who do not want to serve in the military full time but do want to serve in the military. In many ways, it is in our interests that they pursue careers on the outside in order to keep their skills at the sharpest end and make them available to us part time.

Secondly, we need people within the reserve who are able to become, at relatively short notice, part of that first echelon fighting force.

Then, thirdly, we need a reserve that is the backbone of the second echelon. It is absolutely right that first echelon forces tend not to win wars; it tends to be the second echelon force. So, how do we generate a second echelon?

To some degree, although this was not by design, Interflex is becoming a bit of a mission rehearsal. Interflex is increasingly being delivered by the reserve part of the Army. As a proof of concept about how the reserve quickly grows itself in order to generate the second echelon in time of war, we are learning a lot from that.

You are right to say that we are losing reservists. Some of that is that we are transitioning our expectation of the reserve and people have decided that that is not a reserve they want to be in. But we need to think every bit as hard about our recruitment to the reserves as we are to the regulars, because the reserve part of the force, for the three reasons I



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set out, is every bit as important. I cannot tell you that we will be able to solve that straightaway; we will have to think about the way we sell the reserve and then get out there and sell it.

Q447 **Derek Twigg:** This Committee has obviously been looking at the whole issue of readiness and sustainment. If we cannot fill our regular quarter and we cannot fill our reserve quarter, you can talk about the things Kevan said—ships and aircraft and so forth—

James Heapey: Yes.

Q448 **Derek Twigg:** But if we do not have the people to not only man and staff these things, it will be difficult to sustain any sort of long-term challenge which could occur. We can see in the middle east, for instance, that it will get much worse than what it is now, given that we already have commitments. Obviously, we are supporting Ukraine; there are the pivots to the Indo-Pacific; there is the uncertainty in Washington and the deadlock there over budget. There is all that. Is it not a real worry for you that this sustainment of people that we need in reserves could be a really big obstacle for us?

James Heapey: In a macro sense, the challenge of recruitment full stop is a concern for me, be that regular or reserve.

Derek Twigg: Yes.

James Heapey: I totally agree.

Q449 **Derek Twigg:** I want to focus on reserves.

James Heapey: But what I have found is that I have been routinely impressed, over the last nearly four years, by the number of times that I have walked into some part of defence and I have met reservists that are bringing to bear—

Q450 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry.

James Heapey: Let me make the point.

Q451 **Derek Twigg:** We are really running out of time. I understand all this and I am very impressed with the reserve.

James Heapey: You asked me if I am concerned.

Q452 **Derek Twigg:** Yes, but you—

James Heapey: The answer is that it depends what you want the reserve for.

Chair: Minister, can we just have the question and then you will answer it? I promise you, you will answer. Let us have the question.

Q453 **Derek Twigg:** Yes, I get what you are saying. What I am trying to say, coming back to what you just said a few seconds ago, is: is it a concern?

James Heapey: I said, in a macro sense, I am concerned about our ability to fill our liability. You asked me: am I concerned right now about



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the reserve? The answer is that it depends what you want the reserve for. I think that we are increasingly better at bringing brilliant people with niche skills into the reserve to augment the regular force. We are getting ever better at that.

Are we able to hold, within the reserve, a credible fighting force that is available quickly to be part of the first echelon? That is something we need to challenge ourselves on because I am not sure it is. Are we able to hold a reserve that is able to be the spine of a second echelon and do people want to be part of a reserve that is intended for that? Discuss.

To the point about operation and strategic readiness, we need to have that second echelon spine in mind right at the outset, otherwise we will not generate a second echelon at the speed that we need.

Derek Twigg: That is fine.

General Sir Jim Hockenhull: Very briefly, on the specialised reserves, they are not only vital to what we do; they bring some of our best capability. So, in cyber, in medical, intelligence, we have some remarkable people and we should really value that big opportunity.

Derek Twigg: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. General, thank you very much.

Q454 **Mr Francois:** I have one question quickly on reserves, General, and then we will come on to recruitment. Is it not true that one of the reasons the numbers on the reserves are not as healthy as this Committee would like is that you are now starting to take a slightly stricter attitude about how regularly people attend all the training that they are required to do? You are losing some people who are dead wood. That is not the whole problem, but, because of that, that is one of the reasons the numbers are going the way that they are. Is that right?

James Heapey: I would not necessarily use the term you used.

Q455 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, "dead wood" is probably not a good expression, but people who are not able to attend as regularly as they should.

James Heapey: Definitely the requirement for a reserve, as part of a war-fighting armed forces, focuses the mind about what the commitment is. For some, while we are very grateful to them for the service they have provided over the years, that is not necessarily a force that they will feel able to be a part of.

Q456 **Mr Francois:** Moving on to recruitment and retention, in overall terms—put it this way: you have made the point that even Teeth arms, without the right support, cannot operate effectively in war. It is the same for equipment. If you do not have enough skilled, qualified, experienced personnel to service your aircraft, your ships or your armoured vehicles, at the end of the day they become useless.

At the moment, people are leaving faster than you can recruit them,



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particularly very skilled personnel in an era of low unemployment, who are immensely employable elsewhere in industry. We are very concerned, as a Committee, about the state of recruitment.

The Chief of the General Staff told us very recently that he is having to throw 400 regulars into the recruiting effort because it is not going the way that he wants. At the same time, you have an outsourcing contract with our great friends "Crapita", as we affectionally call them, although after the way they have written to us recently perhaps I should say unaffectionately.

Why on earth are we paying a private contractor a vast amount of money to underperform to the extent where we have to throw 400 soldiers in to reinforce them and we don't get a rebate? What sense does that make?

James Heapey: How Capita are held to account for their performance against their contract is not detail that I am conversant with. I have not had the recruitment part in my portfolio for a few years now, since geopolitics meant that the operational side of the Department is very busy.

Q457 **Mr Francois:** Which Minister does have it?

James Heapey: DPV.

Q458 **Mr Francois:** That is Andy Murrison.

James Heapey: Yes.

Q459 **Mr Francois:** Anyway, he is not here today.

James Heapey: No, he is not, Mark. I will do my best to answer generally. The outsourcing of recruitment has worked in some parts of defence and not worked in others. Some of the regiments that have done well, to use the Army as an example, would point to the fact that they have always maintained their black economy recruitment effort in order to connect the regiment to its traditional recruiting grounds, alongside the work that Capita do.

In the future, we will get to an armed forces recruiting programme that should, hopefully, learn some of the lessons of what has not worked so well over the course of this contract, and—

Q460 **Mr Francois:** Minister, sorry, to save time, because there is never enough time in these hearings; it is the nature of the beast.

James Heapey: Yes.

Q461 **Mr Francois:** You just used a phrase—I hope you will be all right—which you will get away with. Basically, what you are talking about is doing the old traditional things, where soldiers went into high streets and set up a stand. There was a guy with a bunch of medals on and it was, "Come and join the Army." We have done that, one way or another, for hundreds of years, and the reason we have done it is because we know that it works.

Under the Crapita contract, we closed lots of recruiting offices; we put



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people in suits with no military experience, in most cases, in front of would-be recruits. We got rid of lots of soldiers who are doing it. The proof that that does not work, under a direction from CGS, is that we have now gone back to putting 400 people into doing it the old way.

Now the Department proposes to have this new armed forces recruitment programme for all three services, which is essentially based on the way that Crapita were doing it. Einstein's thing about repeating the same thing and expecting something different to happen being the definition of madness surely applies here.

James Heapey: Look, I will offer you some personal reflections as a former Adjutant as much as a current Minister. First, a lot of people's initial contact with the military, as they embark on their recruitment process, is not through high street recruitment branches and is now online. In that sense, having recruiting sergeants or recruiting petty officers in the Armed Forces careers office on a high street is not needed.

Q462 **Mr Francois:** No, with respect, it is both. No, hang on.

James Heapey: Okay.

Q463 **Mr Francois:** Part of the reason with Crapita is that their online system has been very poor. We can go through the stats if you want. They always quote the number of people who have shown an interest. What they are less good at quoting is the number of people who have done a test. Because of all of the weaknesses in the system, a lot of people still come up on a website and go, "I'm interested." What then goes horribly wrong, because the follow-up is so appalling, is that those people then never take the oath to serve the King.

James Heapey: I agree with you that, once you have that initial expression of interest, how you convert that needs to be a really important part of the way that the Armed Forces recruiting programme is designed. There is no point successfully driving lots of people to the website and making them click to say, "I'm interested," to not then find a way of converting them.

Mark, the point I want to make is that my concern is that people's connection with the nation's military, society's connection with the nation's military, not just in this country but across lots of other similar countries around the world too, is clearly moving in a direction that means we are all struggling. My concern is that our military is so busy—we were going through with Kevan's answer. We are sending them away again and again and again to do the day job, which is to be out operating, being ready to fight.

Mr Francois: Yes.

James Heapey: But there is a danger that they become evermore invisible in the communities from which we hope to draw brave men and women who want to come and serve their nation.

Q464 **Mr Francois:** Yes, but Minister, look—



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James Heapey: The point is that, alongside whatever we do with the Armed Forces recruitment plan, we will have to find a way of still keeping the military visible so that it maintains that connection with the—

Q465 **Mr Francois:** A couple more and then I will hand back because we do not want to run out of time; there are other questions. Look, we have senior naval and RAF officers telling us in private that they do not want to touch AFRP with an electrified cattle prod. When this thing has plainly failed, why on earth is your Department proposing to copy it? The Russians, of all people, have a saying, "Never reinforce failure." Why are you proposing to reinforce failure to give a juicy fat contract to a bunch of contractors who are desperate to win it? It has already slipped to 2026/27. The Secretary of State hinted last week that he would review the whole AFRP. Can you tell us today that you might well do that?

James Heapey: If the Secretary of State hinted that, then that is completely in his gift on arriving in the Department. I also read in the evidence that I think Ben Key gave that you said, "Look, do you not need something that works now?" He said, "We will take the time to make sure that what we contract works and delivers what it needs to deliver."

The military still needs to do what it needs to do to connect itself to the communities from which it hopes to recruit. No contractor will ever be able to replace the effect of the Army Display Team or the Navy Gun thing—

Q466 **Mr Francois:** Minister, I am not trying to have the last word, but they are leaving faster than you can recruit them.

James Heapey: You can have the last word. We are in vigorous agreement in that the future recruitment contract needs to work better than the current one. The Secretary of State has clearly got his eye on it. The only point I am making is that we can never outsource completely that spark that connects the military with the communities from which it recruits.

Mr Francois: I get that.

Chair: On that we agree. It is a topic we will come back to, I can promise, Minister. Martin Docherty-Hughes has been waiting very patiently.

Q467 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Thank you, Chair. I thought what was interesting was what is a realistic strategic mission. First of all, if the P-8 is in the north Atlantic—I am not making any assumption about where it might be—as someone north of the border, I am quite delighted with that, given the strategic importance of the Icelandic Gap.

Can we, maybe, go back a little more about some of the concerns that the Committee has, which it shares with the three service chiefs? They have raised the issue about logistics and stockpiles, in particular. It, maybe, links up with what John and Mark asked earlier in the session. Can you say a little bit about how the Department has tried to deal with that in terms of the long-term improvement of logistics and getting



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stockpiles back to a place where you feel happy about it and, more importantly, where the three chiefs feel happy about it? That also comes down to the contracts as well, not just the ones that you have placed but also the ones that you are thinking of placing to increase ammunition and missiles.

James Heappey: Our plan tomorrow, in closed session, is to give you quite a lot of fidelity across ammunition nature types, what the stockpiles should be and where we are at, at the moment, and what the plan for recovery is. In public forum, as we have said in response to these sorts of questions over the course of the last year or so, we recognise that there is a need to re-grow our stockpiles, to grow them to levels that bring credibility to our war-fighting capability, not just our ability to operate in a more limited intervention, such as we have been preparing for over the last 20 years. Within that, there is clearly the need not just to place the contracts that re-grow the stockpile but to place contracts that provide long-term certainty to that manufacturing base, because a going concern is easier to scale.

Q468 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Just to give some assurance to those watching who will not have that session, there are some who would say that the companies involved, the ones who have present contracts, are making their money ensuring that they have as little inventory as possible. Also, at the same time, they are predominantly reliant on the Government for their cash.

You might want to write to the Committee; you might want to go across it tomorrow; but has the Department given any consideration to getting guarantees from these contractors to make sure that they meet a requirement, either to be able to increase capacity and production very quickly and/or retain a level of stockpiles that the military command think is appropriate?

I do not want the Minister to go into any specifics. I think it alludes to what John was saying earlier that the industrial complex needs to understand its role in increasing the MOD's capabilities critically around ammunition.

James Heappey: Martin, it is a really important point. Fundamentally, the point of a stockpile is for the first echelon to fight with for as long as it takes for industrial capacity to come on stream. You need to reach a point in war where your industrial capacity matches your daily consumption. We are a very long way away from that. We have not had to worry about that for a generation.

You are absolutely right that we would want some assurance; we would want to work with people who we know can reliably meet the output that we require. Whether or not we fund production lines effectively in mothball for the break-glass need in war is a really interesting idea, as part of the National Defence Plan considerations.

It is inescapably the case—I think I have made this point in public before—that in the second world war, in the late '30s/early '40s, there



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were huge amounts of domestic heavy industry that could be repurposed from civil shipbuilding to naval shipbuilding, from civil aircraft building to military aircraft building; locomotive factories became tank factories. We do not have a lot of that now in the UK.

Q469 **John Spellar:** You shut it down.

James Heapey: I am not sure I personally did, John. I was born in 1981 and a lot of stuff closed in the '70s.

Q470 **John Spellar:** You shut it down.

James Heapey: There is no doubting that we are in a different type of economy now. What does that mean for our ability to scale to fight? It is a really important point. Whether or not we pay to keep production lines in mothball is an interesting idea. It just needs to be considered as part of that work.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Finally, Chair, I am old enough to remember some of those shipyards; my father actually worked in them.

Chair: Me too.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Maybe not in the 1930s, but in the 1970s, at least; I'm not that old. I might look it but I am not that old.

Chair: You did walk into that.

Q471 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I think the Committee maybe wants some kind of assurance from the Department—and Mark has alluded to another contractor—that, going forward, these contractors have to understand their obligation to the home front.

James Heapey: Okay, right.

Q472 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** And their obligation to meet the requirements of the Department, if it is necessary, given the fact that we are supporting Ukraine in its defence of its own country in seeking to reclaim its independence. Those are issues that I am sure the Department wants to take on, but we want an assurance that with these new contracts you will go in with a heavy boot on them.

James Heapey: We are on a really interesting and, frankly, nascent part of policymaking. The companies with whom we contract to replenish our current stockpiles and bring them up to the level that we deem necessary, as a peacetime stockpile, are on a contract. They have no other obligation other than to produce the ammunition that we contract them to produce in any given year.

Rather than contracting them to produce a fixed amount so the stockpile is full and that is the end of the contract, which is what we have done previously, we contract them to produce an amount per year, which means that the production line remains a going concern.



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They are under no contractual obligation to maintain a capability absent our contract to produce for us. So, how we have the resilience in our industrial base to be able to scale is a really live issue. When it becomes not our concern but the Department for Business and Trade's concerns as to how they mobilise, that is a really important area of policy that we have not had to think about for a generation.

The MOD generates a first echelon force to get us into the fight. A war of national endeavour requires a whole of government, whole of industry and whole of society mobilisation to sustain us in the fight thereafter. No private business has a peacetime contractual obligation. So, thinking through how we mobilise the UK industrial base to sustain us is a really important piece of work. Whoever is in my office, the Secretary of State's office and MinDP's office for the next integrated review will have to have this stuff in mind, because we have not had to think about it since the '80s.

Q473 **Chair:** The question I was going to ask you, and I promised you, in fact, that we would come back to, is this point about the whole of government approach. We talked about skills briefly, bringing in the Department of Education and so on; you take the point: cross-government approach. We are not there yet, are we?

James Heapey: No, and I have no embarrassment in saying that. We just simply have not had to think about this for a really long time. What is the skills base? What is the capacity to generate a second echelon force? How do you mobilise industry? How do you assure your supply chains? What are your access to the critical minerals, the semiconductors, and all the other things that are needed?

The consideration of our national resilience and our ability to war fight will require us to consider what we need to be sovereign and then to start making policy to do so.

Q474 **Chair:** Minister, thank you. I am going to bring things to a close now. I will write to you, if I may, about a number of issues that we have not had time to get to—I am conscious of the time—for example, the role of StratCom and examples of achievements on integration with regard to multi-domain integration, Exercise Agile stance, progress on there and what that has been achieving, and the effect of MACA requests. I will ask you also to give some examples of successes of alliance with industry. There is also the point we touched on earlier with regard to implementation progress on the whole of the DCPR. I will write to you about those, if I may, so that I do not take any more of your time.

If I may just end with one question, it is about the impact that readiness has on deterrence, because our deterrence posture is not just reliant on nuclear weapons; it has to be layered. If we are not sufficiently ready, are we just relying on nuclear weapons?

James Heapey: No, no. I think our conventional deterrence is very strong too. That is a really good note to finish on. The job of your Committee is to hold us to account for the things that we are not doing.



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Our job, as Ministers, is to focus on the stuff that we need to do to be more resilient, more ready, more credible.

It is important to note that within our current inventory, our current stockpiles, our current force design, there is an incredibly capable military force on land, sea, air and cyber-space so that there are not many in the world that would want to take us on, either alone or, more probably, through NATO. The strength of that deterrence, even as we are right now, is incredible, especially when our key adversary, the pacing threat against which we design the assault force, is completely fixed in Ukraine and is being attrited daily by the brilliant Ukrainian armed forces.

In that sense, as good as this discussion is, as much as it exposes the things that we need to do with some urgency to get back to what we had during the Cold War, nobody should confuse that with saying that the British Armed Forces are not ready and able to fight within NATO successfully if the balloon went up now.

Chair: Minister, thank you. We will continue to consider the readiness in different scenarios. We will continue to push the Department to see stronger armed forces, as we would all like to see. I will end on the note, if I may, of giving them all our thanks for everything that they do. Thank you, General, very much for your evidence. Minister, thank you very much.