



Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Women in the Armed Forces follow-up, HC 404

Tuesday 18 March 2025

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Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Mike Martin; Jesse Norman; Ian Roome; Michelle Scrogham; Fred Thomas; Derek Twigg.

Questions 118 - 193

Witnesses

I: Alistair Carns DSO OBE MC MP, Minister for Veterans and People, Ministry of Defence; Admiral Sir Ben Key KCB CBE, First Sea Lord; General Sir Roly Walker KCB DSO, Chief of the General Staff; Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton KCB ADC FREng, Chief of the Air Staff; Sam des Forges, Director of Conduct, Equity and Justice, Ministry of Defence.



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**This evidence session includes content that some may
find distressing.**



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alistair Carns, Admiral Sir Ben Key, General Sir Roly Walker, Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton and Sam des Forges.

Q118 **Chair:** I call to order today's Defence Committee evidence session on women in the armed forces. It is a pleasure to have with us a very distinguished panel. I will introduce each of them in turn. First, once again, we have Alistair Carns, Minister for Veterans and People. That is twice in two weeks, Minister. Thank you very much for taking the time. We also have the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Ben Key; the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Roly Walker; the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton; and Sam des Forges, the director of conduct, equity and justice. Thank you very much for taking the time to appear before us for this hearing.

In fact, I understand that this is the first time that we have had all three chiefs for a Defence Committee evidence session since 2011. It is 14 years in the making, and I am very grateful to all of your good selves for accepting my request last year and appearing before the new Committee.

In today's evidence session on women in the armed forces, we will be discussing many aspects of horrendous and horrible behaviour, and some harrowing accounts. At the outset, I just wanted to say that we know most of our armed forces give impeccable service, but it is our job, as the Defence Committee, to ask those difficult questions to make sure that those behavioural changes are there, based on the excellent work of our predecessor Defence Committee.

To any young women and girls watching out there, I do want to encourage you to apply to join the armed forces. It is incredibly important. I am hoping that the previous Committee's work, as well as the work of this newly elected Defence Committee, will make sure that the working environment and atmosphere will be a lot better for you. It is our job to expose some of that wrongdoing.

Given that we have quite a few members on the panel, I would request that not everyone needs to answer every single question. There is a lot of ground to cover. Members may also wish to direct their questions to a particular member of the panel.

With that, to get things started, you will be aware, Minister, that it has been nearly four years since the work of the previous Committee and the Atherton report were published. Have there been any meaningful, measurable improvements in women's experiences in the armed forces in that time, and if so, can you give some examples? What is your measurement framework?

Alistair Carns: First of all, any unacceptable behaviour is unwelcome in defence. We have to make defence the most welcoming and positive place for anyone to come and work, whether that be for a woman or otherwise. Since the Atherton report in 2021, we have accepted and addressed all the recommendations.¹ There are only two left. The first is



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the sexual harassment survey, which we are due to push out in the next two or three weeks. We are just working on some of the wording with that. Interestingly, we would also like to align that to the rest of Government, so that we could pull the whole of government statistics together and have some comparisons there. The second one is the female veterans' strategy, which we will cover later on. The new veterans' strategy will have a female-specific section to it.

There are three that we have not accepted, one of which is all sexual offending being referred to civilian police, which we can talk about later on. Another is the recognition of military sexual trauma. From the Atherton report, we have done quite a lot in the last four years. We have been in for only nine months, and that is progressing really well.

The statistics that we have to measure the lived experience of women in the armed forces go through a variety of methodologies. One is what comes through the service justice system. Another is through complaints. Then we have the AFCAS system. Interestingly—this is something that we can discuss later in more detail—we have had an increase in some of those complaints, because some of the procedures that we have put in place now make it far more acceptable for women to make those complaints. They feel that they will be dealt with in a more effective manner and, indeed, brought to resolution, which is creating an increase in the number of people coming forth with that information.

Q119 **Chair:** Thank you. General Sir Roly Walker, do you have any initial comments? Have the measures that you have taken improved? How do you know that they have improved? What is your measurement framework?

General Sir Roly Walker: This is my first appearance at any House of Commons Committee, so thank you for the opportunity. I am very glad that it is on this subject. It is a matter that is very important to me personally as well as professionally, and I have been involved with the subject in at least the last three appointments that I have had. It has forced me to do some pretty deep thinking about why we are in this situation and what we can do about it.

Specifically, there are a whole host of changes that you will be aware of in the written answer. What I would call out is the measurement framework, interestingly, which is a new initiative in the last year within the Army. It is trying to baseline against industry standards for how you measure culture, behaviour, attitudes and perceptions, how you can ingest as much of the data that we have through surveys, reports and statistics as possible, and how you can do the analysis of that to draw deductions.

¹ Clarification from the Department: "Defence accepted 33 recommendations, partially accepted a further four and noted 13 conclusions. These have been addressed over the past two years by Defence and single Service activity. Defence instead seeks to address the three remaining recommendations' underlying concerns in other ways."



The point of it really is getting to the point where we are looking at very specific interventions where the data takes us to where we still need to do more work. That is an area for further development. It is beyond a proof of concept for us as a service, but it is one of these things that we would look to scale.

Q120 **Chair:** First Sea Lord, do you have any initial comments on what has been happening?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: First of all, I would just like to echo and support the Minister's views that we are absolutely determined to create a Royal Navy in which people are judged for their professional conduct, welcomed for the contribution that they make, and accepted for who they are. Behaviours that run counter to that will not be accepted, and particularly those around unwelcome sexual behaviours.

We have made a number of changes in the last two and a half years, particularly since the former female submariner Ms Sophie Brook came forward with her allegations in the *Daily Mail*, which were then reported by me last October. I also issued a public apology for the treatment that she had clearly experienced.

We did not wait for those investigations to conclude. We have established a culture and leadership cell headed up by a one-star. We have engaged broadly with our sister services, and externally, to put ourselves to find best practice, to work out what is the most cutting-edge academic thinking that we can embrace, and not to hide behind, "We are a seafaring service; therefore, we are special and unique." We are not. We are different, but we have to work out how we embrace those.

We have opened up other ways for women to raise concerns about inappropriate behaviour. The introduction of a centralised email box and of accessibility through an app for raising complaints have all seen an increase in the number of service complaints. The service complaints ombudsman, Mariette Hughes, who has reported to you, has seen rising confidence in a system where people's voices will be heard.

I know from my own informal conversations around the units that I visit that the fact that we have moved the admissibility away from the chain of command into a central admissibility system, that we have done much more to train the people who do all the investigations, and that, for all of the cases now around unwanted sexual behaviour, a single two-star director of personnel and training, Rear Admiral Jude Terry, is the deciding body, has brought much greater consistency into the way that we look at it.

We have removed people from the service, including those who have commanded, where we have discovered that their behaviours were not appropriate, or we have removed people from positions of responsibility before situations have got out of hand.



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We are seeing a change, but also a positive one. We are seeing a slow but positive increase in the number of women expressing an interesting in joining, we are seeing positive career progression, and we have an increase in the number of female role models at senior rank across the service, including the first woman to command an aircraft carrier.

Chair: We will come to those aspects later.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: It was just to put the context that there is, "How we are getting after", and also, "What we are doing to improve".

Q121 **Chair:** That is why I wanted to make sure that each of your good selves has the chance to set the context, just as I set the context for the meeting, so that you can lay on record some of the work that has been happening. Air Chief Marshal, have you taken enough steps? What has happened, especially since, for example, the harrowing accounts from the Red Arrows and so on? What measures have you taken?

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: Building on what my colleagues have said, our fundamental job as the armed forces is to defend the country and to have an Air Force that is ready to fly and fight. That demands that we have the best team we can to do that. That demands us creating an atmosphere where everybody in that team feels that they can give their very best. That is how we will be operationally successful and deliver what our citizens and Government expect of us.

Sadly, we do get cases of unacceptable behaviours, and you have identified some already. The damage that this can do to those victims and survivors, as I have seen personally, can be enormous, and so our job, as leaders, is to reduce the likelihood of that happening. That is about changing culture, which takes time, and building trust for women in the system about how that system operates.

We know that we have not always got that right, but we are making improvements. From an Air Force perspective, we created a dedicated team to conduct investigations on complex unacceptable behaviour cases, which is the model that, as you heard announced this morning, is going to be rolled out more broadly to defence.

Chair: We will come on to that later as well.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: We have an RAF climate assessment team. We publish the case outcomes on a quarterly basis, so we are very transparent about that and can build trust in the system. We have reconfigured our service complaints system, so that it delivers speed, fairness and independence from the chain of command, and similarly with our disciplinary system.

You were asking about evidence and data. If you look at representation rates, over 16% of servicepeople in the Air Force are women. Our retention rates are up, so a smaller proportion of women than men leave.



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Our recruitment rates for women are up, and the number of applications is up.

Q122 Chair: We will come to recruitment and retention later, so you will have the chance when members question on that particular issue. I just wanted to bring in Ms des Forges briefly as well. In terms of your experience as the director of conduct, equity and justice, would you like to make any brief introductory remarks?

Sam des Forges: When we look at this sort of organisational change, any organisation of this size and complexity has to go on a bit of a cultural maturity journey in so far as you need to have certain interventions at the early stages. You then need to tweak and adjust those interventions as you move along and as the culture of the organisation starts to change.

As colleagues have touched on, we are seeing a lot of green shoots. The expressions of interest from women is really positive. There has been pretty much a doubling of service complaints coming through over the last three years. Stats are really valuable, but you will have also seen the anecdotal evidence that we have been able to confidentially share with you from folk who have used the victim and witness care unit. We are seeing increasing confidence to take things forward and to raise them. In the support, we are seeing far more women moving up through the chain of command as well.

There are a lot of green shoots of data. None of us is under any illusion that this is solved. This is ongoing work, but we are starting to see that come through in the data.

Q123 Chair: It is good that you have set the context. Minister, the correspondence that I and the Committee have received, for example, from the MOD trade unions is quite counter to the narrative that has just been set out.

In terms of sexual harassment and assault in the defence sector, I quote: "We've been perpetually disappointed by the response to this by MOD. The severity of the complaints is only matched by the poor response". According to them, this has to stop. The MOD must be made to tackle the issue and not be given a choice to simply hold perpetual meetings to discuss it. Are there too many meetings being held? Are there too many discussions, and not enough tangible action?

Alistair Carns: There has been a lot of action. If I was to lay out what we have delivered in the armed forces since 2022, we have taken the defence serious crime unit out of the single services, and created an entity that is separate to the single services. That is now held in very high regard.

On top of that, we have the victim and witness care unit. We have created zero tolerance, which has reduced anybody's ability to get out of being held to account. We have created the My Complaint app, so that



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people can separately come in and make complaints. We have mandatory training now, which I went through when I was serving, across everybody within the armed forces. We have service complaint reform in all three of the single services, and we can talk too about what we are doing. This is what has been done already.

We have made sure that women are on every court martial board and ensured that the complaints system is already separate to the chain of command; i.e. your lieutenant colonel or your wing commander in charge will not be the individual dealing with your complaint. It will go sideways and upwards.

Specifically, when we are talking about the civil service, which is the issue, I have sat down and spoken to trade unions twice on this. This is about ensuring that, when defence works together with the civil service, in particular within main building—the Department—we have the right culture. While this cultural change has been going on within the defence sector, it has not necessarily been going on within the civil service, and we have more work to do there.

Q124 Chair: I know that you have taken on board your brief very recently, and you are having those engagements with the unions, but the evidence that we have received thus far seems to run counter, so there is a lot of work to do there.

General, I want to come to your good self. There have been horrendous examples of behaviour uncovered by some excellent investigative reporting, including from Becky Johnson and Rebecca Spencer of Sky News. The measures that you have talked about do not seem to have had the effect that is required and have not increased the confidence of servicewomen. How would you respond to that?

General Sir Roly Walker: I would respond with a great deal of sympathy and acceptance of that. To one of your points at the start, when we look at the raw numbers, which is to perhaps over-rationalise the fact that there are real victims who fear perpetrators and predatory behaviour, most people in the Army are able to come to work every day and go about their business without being bullied, harassed or discriminated against. From our records, all the offences and the misconduct are carried out by only 4% of our personnel, and so, by definition, 96% of our staff are able to come to work and do their job without fear or favour.² Four per cent is still a large number of people when you consider the size of the British Army, so I absolutely recognise that we still have work to do.

There are some recurring themes that we are addressing. Self-evidently, there continues to be a prevalence of bullying, harassment and

² Clarification from the Department: "4% of Army personnel are responsible for all allegations of disciplinary offences and misconduct."



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discrimination within our ranks. Any number of reviews of the complaints and testimonials tell us that that is true, so that is absolutely accepted.

The other angle to this that we need to confront head on, as you touch on, is a lack of confidence in the complaints process, where people either feel that complaining will have adverse repercussions on their careers or do not have confidence that those complaints will be taken seriously. I recognise that; we recognise that. We are doing what we can to understand the data and where those hotspots are, and to work out what those interventions are, as I said before, being led by the data.

Inevitably, we have to recognise that there are still some cultural and structural barriers. There is an association of masculinity with soldiering, as has been identified in the Wigston report. We have to recognise that that is a barrier to integration. We have to find a way to begin the decoding of that association and a recoding around professional behaviours and operational impact, much like my other service chiefs have all said.

Q125 Chair: So you will ensure that those women will get justice and that those changes are being made. Admiral, I want to go on to WhatsApp groups, if I may. Is there a policy around WhatsApp groups? I was reading through some of the evidence that we had received in 2023, for example. According to one young woman, there was horrific commentary on military WhatsApp groups, inappropriate images sent via work messaging groups, racist and sexually discriminatory language, bullying and harassment, and much worse thereafter. This could be the next big scandal to hit the MOD. If we are not careful, all it takes is for somebody to leak some of the commentary in those WhatsApp groups, for journalists to get hold of it, or for those to be hacked. What has been set in place to deal with WhatsApp groups?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We are entirely clear that, if information, such as this, is brought to our attention that people are exhibiting unwelcome behaviours, thoughts or language, we will deal with it. We can deal only with the evidence that is brought to us.

I recognise that you have had evidence given to you that exists, and I do not deny for one moment that there will be people out there who are putting on WhatsApp groups messages that we would all feel extremely uncomfortable with. We are completely clear that, when that has an impact upon others, we will take action if it is brought to our attention. This is not, in any sense, a tolerance of these sorts of behaviours.

A huge amount of education goes on through the culture work and the visits to units. The education now at every training course includes activity to specifically show not just what we expect, but also how people's behaviours can have an unintended impact upon others, where we need to hold up that mirror and help them understand that what may have been acceptable before they joined the service is no longer acceptable now.



We also expect the chain of command and the people around them in that community to call it out whenever they come across it, because it can have that injurious impact, even if, for everybody else on that WhatsApp group, it would be considered acceptable. Otherwise, they would have said something about it themselves.

You started your question with, "What is the policy?" I do not think that we can set a policy that says, "You cannot have WhatsApp groups".

Q126 **Chair:** Rather than being about not having WhatsApp groups, it is about having policies to make sure that something is done proactively to stop people engaging in banter, especially if they are somewhat testosterone-fuelled, as has been conveyed to me on occasions.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: As soon as anything like that is brought to our attention, as we now have evidence to demonstrate, whether that is through the email box, through talking to the chain of command or through using the MyNavy app, there is a centralised system for triaging it and seeing what is the most appropriate route for investigating and dealing with it.

Alistair Carns: There is an education and communication programme that goes on now across all of defence. Every individual has to go through that mandatory training, which sets the standards.

Chair: Let us hope that we do not uncover anything horrible.

Alistair Carns: We also need to be honest that we cannot eradicate it whatsoever. We are trying to reduce this behaviour as best we can, but we have to accept that we cannot rule it out completely. There is every chance that stuff will come up, but, when it does, what I would say is that defence will treat it with the absolute severity that it requires.

Q127 **Chair:** Air Chief Marshal, we have seen the announcement this morning from the MOD, which, by the way, neither I nor Committee members had any prior knowledge of. Some of us were remarking earlier that it is very interesting timing that that should be announced this morning before our evidence session.

I wanted to come in on concurrent jurisdiction. It is said that Army complaints are going to be taken out of officers' hands, but not all aspects of the process will be completely independent, so there is that particular thing. It is also a matter of record that the jurisdiction within civilian courts has led to better outcomes for servicewomen than simply when they are going through the military courts and the court martial. How are you going to ensure that servicewomen get justice?

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: Which elements will not be independent? What are you talking about specifically? There is centralised admissibility for service complaints. If it meets a criminal threshold, it is investigated by the defence service complaints unit,³ so that is completely independent. I am not quite sure what you are asking about.



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Q128 **Chair:** My question is around, for example, the mother of Gunner Jaysley Beck and the demands that she had made, which were not fully met. The announcement is only partial. It is not a case of a completely independent process, but rather a bit of this and a bit of that. It is a mix. Rather than the kind of justice that somebody in a civilian court will be able to have, a brave servicewoman will not have access to that same justice.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: I think your question is about how we have a service justice system and there is a civilian criminal justice system, and so there are two routes by which people may be investigated and prosecuted. Sam is the best person to talk about it from a defence perspective, but victims have options about which justice system they wish to see their complaint investigated under.

Alistair Carns: Some 42% of all those cases go through the civilian court anyway. If you are an individual and you are going through your witness protection programme, you have a choice to go through the service justice system or, indeed, through the criminal justice system. We do not want to close either one of those off. It is very much down to the victim to choose which avenue they would like to take.

Sam des Forges: I think that your question was talking about two slightly different things. If we talk about service complaints—thinking about that in a civilian context, you might call them workplace grievances—the changes made in 2022 were that, instead of those complaints being dealt with by your local chain of command, they were taken away and dealt with by central admissibility teams within each service.⁴ The announcement that the Minister has made today is to say that the most serious complaints—workplace grievances, if you like—are being taken out of the single services and moved into a separate team to be dealt with. They are not in the single service chain of command.

Concurrent jurisdiction is around justice. If we think about the civilian justice system and the service justice system, there is a different element, which is crimes. Service complaints are not about crimes, although someone might raise a complaint that is a crime and then should be referred across.

Chair: I am aware of the distinction. It is just the conviction rates.

Q129 **Mike Martin:** I have a question for General Walker. You are aware of the more than a thousand women who shared stories on Fill Your Boots, which is a social media account about being raped, abused and harassed.

³ Clarification from the Department: "CAS intended to say Defence Serious Crime Unit"

⁴ Clarification from the Department: "This conflates concurrent jurisdiction with Service Complaints, which are two different means of holding people to account for allegations of wrongdoing. The Service Complaints system deals with allegations of wrongdoing (amongst other matters) but not criminal allegations, which would be passed to the Service or civilian police. Concurrent jurisdiction relates to both the civilian justice system and the Service justice system to dealing with criminal offences."



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I am going to read some of them out here, just to put them on the record.

"I used to hold my breath in my room at night when they were trying the door, to make them think I was out".

"I was being bullied and harassed by a senior commissioned officer. I raised it but it was ignored".

"A sergeant kicked me to the floor, pinned me down, acted out a sex act on me in front of a warrant officer and nothing was ever done".

"I was coming back from the toilet one day when a bloke came out of the showers, pinned me against the wall, dropped his towel and told me that he knew exactly what I needed".

It goes on. "One time I had not locked my door. The man walked in, looked me dead in the eyes and smiled at me. When I didn't smile back, he moved forward until I yelled at him to get out and thankfully he did leave", but then nothing was ever done.

So much of what we have heard this morning from you and your colleagues, General—and those complaints relate to the Army, which is why I am asking you the question—is around process and structure. Process and structure are important. They are necessary, but they are not sufficient.

These allegations, if proven true, to really get to the heart of the matter, are about command and leadership. They are a command and a leadership responsibility. In your responses to these, you said that senior ranks might even have been actively complicit in those cases. In cases such as this, what does command and leadership mean to you? What actions should the chain of command be taking to make sure that this does not happen? Should that involve, frankly, removing or sacking people from service for acts such as this? Is this not the only way to deal with this kind of behaviour?

General Sir Roly Walker: I can tell, by the way you are reading those stories, how upset they make you feel. They make me feel angry. I am ashamed, as the head of the Army, that those are what our soldiers are reporting. We have soldiered together. We know what this feels like. I come at this from a position of anger, of emotion and of a desire, like you, to see some form of justice or reconciliation.

It hurts me. Young people volunteer to join our Army, and citizens volunteer to fight for this country. Combat is hard enough as it is, when everything is on the line, and the only thing that you have is your teamwork around you to keep you safe. It angers me that those people are having to fight their own people before they get in front of the enemy, so I am with you. This is a chain of command responsibility.

That chain of command has to be robust, resilient, disciplined and effective under the most tremendous loads of combat. We have to



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enforce and ensure that our chain of command does its job. That is why I wrote a very specific letter to my chain of command. This is on us.

In the Army, as you know, the greatest risks are carried by our most junior soldiers, probably with the least amount of experience. Our motto as an officer corps is, "We serve to lead". We serve those who we lead. It is our job to make the difficult and dangerous tasks that they have to deal with as easy as possible for them to do, but it is never an easy job.

I am absolutely committed to making my chain of command, from the most newly promoted lance corporal to me as a four-star general, collectively responsible for making sure that our soldiers can come to work without fearing their own people.

There are a whole raft of measures that were already under way through the service inquiry into Jaysley Beck's tragic death, as well as reflections of the testimonials we heard, which are not just from the Army, but from across all the Services, both veteran and current. We have to onboard that, but that is why I say that it is my chain of command.

Q130 Mike Martin: Sorry to cut you off, but how many people have been sacked from the Army in the last four years, say, because of allegations like this?

Sam des Forges: Overall, over 100 people have been kicked out of the armed forces for sexual offending, unacceptable sexual behaviours, or sexual relationships with trainees.

Q131 Mr Bailey: And yet there has been no change in the AFCAS reporting of bullying, harassment or discrimination three and a half years since our report. Clearly, a policy of zero tolerance is meaningless, because the culture is a manifestation of leadership, accepted standards and values.

Sir Mark Rowley, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, faces similar organisational challenges. In doing so, we have a list of evidential actions, including the removal of leaders, as was just discussed, and his testing to the limits of our law in trying to address the culture that he sees within his organisation, yet we have seen nothing similar from you.

You ask leaders like me to be accountable and to be active bystanders. You told us to challenge the group captain in a room of 100 people who denigrated female colleagues by saying, "She's a good girl. She does sport and the weather". You asked us to challenge the same individual when they denounced the need for International Women's Day and, in the room, publicly questioned the services' values that you asked us to uphold.

You asked the victim to speak up and to trust the system when she was sexually assaulted. You perpetuated the system that meant that informal resolution would time her out, meaning that the problem, which she would think very carefully about raising, would result in her exiting the service, so that, like all the other victims, they sit on the outside



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watching those who have failed them being promoted.

These people have been baked into the culture of your services like volcanic ash in tree rings. We know who these people are. You know of whom I speak. You choose not to act, but we remain active bystanders. Unlike Sir Mark, I do not see any leadership. I would like to see evidence of a desire to change. To change the culture, do we need to change the leadership?

Alistair Carns: Just on statistics there—

Chair: Minister, I think the Admiral wanted to come in on this as well.

Alistair Carns: If I may, I absolutely get where you are coming from. We take these issues exceptionally seriously. Just on AFCAS reporting, marginal though it may be, we have seen a decrease in the percentage of personnel experiencing bullying across the armed forces. What is really important—and this is where we talk to Mike's point about structures—is that we see a 3% increase in confidence to make a formal written complaint. That has resulted in a spike of complaints.

As you have seen recently, we have taken advice, which has gone on now for probably four or five years, to put the service complaints system into a tri-service pot. It is addressing some of the leadership through our "raising our standards" programme, which we can talk about in a minute. In terms of the structural space, we are taking the tri-service complaints system out of the single services for the first time in history, which is fantastic.

The second piece is something that I always say to a young marine joining up. If you ever wanted to make a complaint, your corporal was the individual you went to. He went to the sergeant, who went to the troop commander. There was never a place to go left or right to make a complaint if you, indeed, were being harassed in any way, shape or form, especially if you were a female or from a minority.

That is why we are also putting in place a violence against women and girls taskforce, held by and working towards me, so that we can implement best practice in all the single services. That has been supported by the single service chiefs and will be an egress point outside of the chain of command, so any woman or girl who has an issue can go left or right, highlight the concern, and go straight to the top, to me, and then back down. Without that, it is very difficult to do in a command chain.

Chair: Admiral, did you want to respond to Calvin Bailey?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Yes, I did, because there is one point where I take a slightly different line. Ms Brook had left the service when she went to the *Daily Mail* and raised her concerns, and we treated her as if she was still serving. We set up an entire investigation team to meet with her and to hear her allegations, which she was kind enough and brave



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enough to put forward. We investigated every single one of them as if she was still serving. We recognised that others would want to come forward, and we established a confidential mailbox so that that would happen.

As a result of the number of recommendations that that extensive investigation revealed, we directly discharged three people from the service, based upon the poor leadership and behaviours that they had exhibited. During the same period, we discharged another 18 because of the wider evidence that came forward.

I recognise that there is a huge amount to do. We still have some distance to go in bringing confidence to all of the women in the service that they will be heard, but to say that we are not taking action and that we are timing people out while I have been First Sea Lord is not true. We have acted wherever we have found and people have been willing to come forward and give us the evidence. We have then pursued that through and dealt with those who have transgressed.

I would also observe that doing things after the fact and later does not help those who are experiencing it at the time. One of the things that we now do is that culture visits and climate assessments are regularly taken of all units, particularly those coming back from long deployments, to find out whether the leadership on board was appropriate. They are trusted mechanisms. We have had to double the number of teams that we have doing it. That gives us a far quicker feedback loop on those who have met our standards and those who have not. We then make a judgment about how we help and mentor to improve, where it is a question of rehabilitation, or we act when people have been found to have deliberately transgressed.

Q132 **Mr Bailey:** Admiral, that is all very positive. However, that is all in response to things that have happened. We need to see evidence of proactively picking people off in the way that the commissioner of the Met has done. He has observed that there are problems with culture and has picked those people out to make the organisation acceptable to people coming in.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: As a result of one of those culture visits, we removed a commanding officer, not because of a direct complaint made by an individual but because the culture visit identified that things were not right. Therefore, that commanding officer was removed.

General Sir Roly Walker: In part to the questions before in terms of discharge, with regard to the zero tolerance of sexual offences, 31 were convicted, of whom 28 were discharged. Three were not discharged but subject to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act.⁵ That is pretty definitive.

⁵ Clarification from the Department: "Of the 3 service personnel not discharged, two were prevented due to the RoA 74, the third was not discharged due to other reasons (not disclosed due to GDPR)."



In terms of the new policy around instructor-trainee relationships, where there is a zero tolerance for that, all of those whom we have investigated have been discharged.⁶ In terms of unacceptable sexual behaviours, 188 cases have been investigated under the zero tolerance policy, of whom 23 were discharged and 37 have been awarded a sanction lesser than termination of service. Importantly, 128 have been dealt with through informal resolution at the request of the complainants, which we understand from the SCOAF is an example of best practice.

To the challenge that we do not deal with this and that people are not discharged, they are. In terms of your generic point of removal from positions of command, we do that, irrespective of rank. We have discharged generals, we have discharged colonels, and we have discharged majors.

Q133 Michelle Scrogam: Could I just clarify something, Admiral? When you say that the commanding officer was removed, do you mean moved elsewhere or sacked?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: In this particular instance, removed elsewhere. There is a difference between responding to unwelcome sexual behaviour that has happened, in which we discharge, or the presumption is of discharge, unless there are significant extenuating circumstances—for a commanding officer, I cannot remotely think what those would be—and the proactive work, which is to identify that the command culture does not feel quite right.

That does not mean that deliberate acts have gone awry, but it still feels like that individual is struggling to create on board the sort of climate where people feel acknowledged for what they contribute and recognised for who they are, and can feel perfectly safe about coming to work and giving of their best. If what has been set on board is something that is counter to that, which can often then lead to people being fearful to raise their hands if they encounter inappropriate behaviour, which then leads to the sorts of horrific examples that have been read out by two of the members of the Committee, we need to proactively change the leadership on board in order to create the right climate, so that there is that safety net.

To pretend that all this behaviour has been eradicated, as the Minister has said, is naivety of the first order. We have to be really clear and to act swiftly when it is encountered, but, most importantly, we have to create a climate and a culture where we reduce the chances, as the Chief of the Air Staff said, of it ever happening, because either it is going to be dealt with informally and called out at a local level, so that you get the informal resolution that most people would want, or there is an absolute acceptance by those who attempted to behave poorly that, if they are

⁶ Clarification from the Department: "Investigated and found to be guilty have been discharged."



found out, they will be dealt with. There is very much an affirmation of what is right and a sanction for what is wrong.

Q134 **Michelle Scrogam:** My concern is that we are just moving the problem elsewhere. If there is an issue with that commanding officer in the way that they deal with something in one position, is that not just moving it somewhere else? What checks and balances are going in place?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I would draw a distinction between a commanding officer who has not handled something correctly, which, arguably, is a tolerance of wrong and, therefore, would inevitably lead to an administrative sanction of some form or another, and a commanding officer who is just falling short of creating the right culture. In other words, they just do not have the wherewithal. We may not have selected them correctly. All the evidence would indicate someone with the right potential, but they have just fallen short. You either then provide mentoring to help them recover that position, or, if you feel that they are not going to make it, remove them.

That cannot be a career jeopardy because they have not done anything wrong. I see where you are coming from, but it is just that we have decided that they are not up for command. They cannot lead broader groups of people. They have not done anything wrong, so to then career-check them so completely would feel inappropriate and potentially open for complaint back the other way. We are trying to balance both of those.

Q135 **Mike Martin:** Minister, where does the treatment of women sit within wider defence priorities?

Alistair Carns: From my perspective, it is in my top six. It is in there and is all about cultural change, of which this is a key strand. We have been working really hard over the last six or seven months to push forward some change. It takes quite a long time to change some of the structures in defence. You talked about leadership and behaviour. Within the first couple of weeks of coming in, Sam and I, and a key group of women leaders in defence, sat down. We have launched our "raising our standards" platform, which is not about maintaining the standards but raising them up. There are principles that sit below it.

Under that, we put in place two key themes. The first one is a tri-service complaints programme to take that complaints system away from the single services, and we mentioned that before⁷. That will go some way to giving people confidence that the Army, the Navy and the Air Force are not marking their own homework, which is really important.

The second one is the violence against women and girls taskforce that we are pulling together. We have worked with Jess Phillips on that. I sit on the violence against women and girls taskforce. It sits across

⁷ Clarification from the Department: "The Changes include a new specialist Tri-Service team for taking the most serious complaints, such as bullying, discrimination and harassment, outside the single Service chain of command"



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Government. We have pulled some of those lessons into defence. That body is going to work to me. It will then have its tentacles down into the single services. If anyone has any issues, they can go to those individuals and propel it right to the top really quickly. It is really important to us.

Q136 **Mike Martin:** Sam, what does good look like? We are doing all of this. I accept that we are not going to get rid of it entirely. Any organisation is always going to have problems, but what does good look like?

Sam des Forges: This is something that we quite often talk about with our international colleagues, because this challenge is faced by armed forces across NATO, Five Eyes, et cetera. There is a mix of the data. We have talked about a 100% increase in service complaints over the last year. We would expect to see those complaints going up. We would expect to see them then plateau and drop. There are data points from AFCAS, et cetera, that will show us that.

Ultimately, we do not want things to happen in the first place, so we want to have really strong education about that, and service colleagues can talk in particular to some of the changes that they have made in the last couple of years in that space. When they do happen, we want folk to be confident in reporting and confident that something will happen in response to that report. We are talking very much about 100% action.

Another lesson that we have taken from a number of our international colleagues goes back to making an intervention at an earlier rather than a later point in the journey. We have to change them. There is something very much about the assurance. How are we really confident that, as the whole of defence, we are following these approaches and delivering what we think we are delivering?

One of the other things that the Minister has asked for is an independent KC review of the zero tolerance cases where we have retained folk. There can be some really correct and fair reasons for doing that, but let us get some independent assurance about how we are doing that.

Working with Jess Phillips and colleagues across Government, one other thing is the opportunity for rehabilitation. How can we create an opportunity whereby folk have perhaps not stepped over the line but a bit close to it? We look at the stats coming out of the world of education, where some of the highest levels of allegations of rape are among 14-year-olds, recognising those challenges and gateway behaviours that can lead to some of the worst behaviours. How can we really make sure that we are recognising and understanding that? In our phase 1 and 2 training, right the way through, we are putting interventions in place.

We have a long way to go and we cannot be naive about that, but we all regularly engage with our servicewomen's networks—a number of them are here today—which provide some of that challenge. I am looking forward to the day when they say, "Do you know what? It is great".



Alistair Carns: What looks really good is when women turn up to work, can enjoy work and have a great time, and go home without any concerns about any predatory or unwanted sexual behaviour. That is what good looks like. How do we measure that? It is through AFCAS. It is through complaints. It is through the offences system, to ensure that the hockey stick that has gone up just now, which we think has gone up because of the confidence in the system to report, comes down. All of the facts and none of the understanding is really dangerous. It is a balance.

Q137 **Mike Martin:** What is the metric? Give me a number—by what date and what level?

Alistair Carns: There were 3,000 offences in the service justice system last year. Of those, 33% were disciplinary, 24% fraud, 19% theft, 12% violent offences, and 8% sexual offences. We would like to bring that down over time. We would like to bring it down straightaway.

Q138 **Mike Martin:** To what?

Alistair Carns: To the minimum possible, but I am going to be really honest. As I said earlier, the ability to bring that to zero in a population that we have within defence is going to be exceptionally difficult.

Q139 **Mike Martin:** Could we bring it to a level commensurate with that in the civilian population, for instance? Could we balance out sexual offences to the same level that they occur in the civilian population?

Alistair Carns: Interestingly, there are two points on that. On offences, we would absolutely like to do that. On complaints, it is slightly different, for the simple reason that, in the complaints system, certain organisations usually work on an AIM principle. That AIM principle puts unwanted sexual behaviour in three brackets: inappropriate, problematic, and abusive and violent.

With our zero tolerance policy, everything goes into the right bucket, which, in some cases, skews the statistics in comparison to civilian organisations. We deal with it and have zero tolerance of it, so it pushes it to the right of the arc, whereas those that are problematic or inappropriate may not even be mentioned in other organisations.

We have to be careful of statistics and how we compare them. That is why, when we take our sexual harassment study that we want to push out, we want to do it not just in defence. We want to make sure that every other part of Government does it using the same process, so we can balance it all and provide the data.

General Sir Roly Walker: To your question of what good looks like, I am completely with you. The kit fitting, or people not being discriminated against at work, is not good. That is the minimum that we should be expecting. To quote the team from our Army Servicewomen's Network, it is really simple. They just want to come to work and feel safe physically and in terms of their healthcare.



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Q140 **Mike Martin:** That is hard to measure, so should we put a number on it? Would you commit to putting a number on it in the Army?

General Sir Roly Walker: That is their perception. The second thing is that they just want to be valued for the equitable contribution that they make. There is a high degree of subjectivity to this. Therefore, to me, the litmus test is that network and the feedback that I am getting. Are we making the right interventions? Are they seeing the changes that they need? We need to recognise that there are some things that are the minimum standards and not settle for the minimum being considered good. That is just the entry level that they should expect.

Mike Martin: It does feel hard to measure though.

Q141 **Fred Thomas:** Minister, sexual misconduct against women, as we have heard this morning, is a problem across our military. Which of the three services is it worst in?

Alistair Carns: You can ask, "Which is it worst in?" but each service is a different size, with different female populations, and so saying that it is statistically worse in one over the other is the wrong way to look at it. For example, of the 1,300 complaints by women, 81 were around sexual harassment and bullying. Those 81 complaints are the ones that the violence against women and girls taskforce needs to get involved in at the earliest stage to ensure that they are dealt with in the most appropriate manner.

We have seen harrowing cases in all three services. We are trying to reduce that as best we can. I go back to the facts and the understanding. We have to use the facts to hold us to account, but there is also the understanding. I met just recently with the women's network. I have met with Jess Phillips and the violence against women and girls network. I have met with charities such as Forward Assist. When they turn around and we get a positive feel from that, that is some of the understanding. Combine that with the facts, and that is when we can say that we are improving.

The risk is that, if you take either one of those, based on some of those comparable points that you just made, in isolation to the understanding, you skew the system. That is not the right way of looking at it.

Chair: Thank you, Minister. I am glad to hear that it is in your top six priorities, but, unfortunately, some of the numbers do not quite match with your aspirations. While you have been having various meetings with Ministers and others, the RAF executive leadership team discussed this only once. The reason why I am rattling off these stats is that our Committee asked the tri-services at the end of last year to provide us with stats as to how often they had discussed issues pertaining to women and organisational culture. I can rattle off stats in terms of some of the others, where they have met only twice.

Also, you alluded earlier to the sexual harassment survey, which was



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supposed to be launched last year. Unfortunately, it has been delayed, and we have been told that it is late summer of this year. The Centre for Military Women's Research pointed out that it had not seen any reporting of the outcomes of the 2023 sexual harassment survey. There are so many holes and so much work that needs to be done in order for your aspiration to be met. I am sure that you will, no doubt, cogitate on the lacklustre stats that the Defence Committee has received.

Q142 **Michelle Scrogam:** I will put this to all of you. How confident are you that women in the armed forces are as safe from sexual violence and harassment as they would be in civilian life?

Alistair Carns: Just quickly on meetings, we have a meeting in my office in excess of once, if not twice, a month on this subject. That cascades down into multiple meetings at different levels.

The reason that I have delayed the survey is that I want it to be rationalised across Government. There is no point us looking internally into defence and not having the ability to cross-reference that with all of the other Government Departments, particularly in terms of the police, et cetera. We would like to see one standardised sexual harassment survey go out across Government, so that we can pull the statistics and the data together to get a proper analysis.

That goes back to answering comments from Fred and Mike about how we measure our effectiveness. It must be comparable. We cannot do a comparison if the surveys are different, so we are getting on that.

Sam des Forges: One of our real challenges, if we look at this through a justice lens, is comparing the civilian and the service justice system. These are recorded in very different ways, so there is a risk that it is quite misleading in terms of comparisons.

Q143 **Michelle Scrogam:** It is more about your own personal confidence. How confident are you that women in the armed forces are as safe from sexual violence and harassment as they would be in civilian life?

Sam des Forges: Having worked in the private sector, in the public sector and in defence, defence has some challenges that are very different. I am conscious that I am in a senior role, which means that I have to really reach out and talk to folk who are in more junior roles to understand their experiences. I am not naive to the fact that there are some people who are not having good experiences. What we are seeing is that there is far better support for those folk now, and certainly far better than in the civilian justice system.

We are seeing increased confidence. Interestingly, as Mariette Hughes mentioned when she spoke to you recently, there is something about critical mass. Where we have particular teams or formations that have a critical mass of women within them, they often report a really positive culture. Where some of our concerns are perhaps greater is in the ones and twos, or the loneliness element, where folk might feel more isolated



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in a way that they would not necessarily feel in the public or private sector. Those are the areas that we are really interested in.

The Army has been doing a piece of work at Sandhurst around critical mass. If we can get after that critical mass, that could be a real differentiator for enabling that.

Q144 **Michelle Scrogam:** Are you confident that they are as safe in those services as they would be in civilian life?

Sam des Forges: In the vast majority of cases. I still continue to worry about some of those isolated folk.

Alistair Carns: In comparison to civilian life, in some sections of defence, where there is not that critical mass, I would say no. I would say that, when the critical mass is there, yes, absolutely. There are lots of women who have a fantastic career, some of whom are sat in the audience here, and get to the very high ranks within the military with no problem whatsoever. We have to focus on ensuring that people have an offset, so that individuals who have an issue can make a complaint outside of the chain of command and it can escalate rapidly, especially in areas where there are small numbers of women and they do not have enough people to provide that mass.

Q145 **Michelle Scrogam:** Are you confident that they are as safe in those services as they would be in civilian life? It is black or white.

Alistair Carns: I do not really have the knowledge or the understanding of the police, the fire service or comparable organisations that are similar in structure, shape and work profile to the military, of which there are very few. What I can say with absolute confidence is that we are working exceptionally hard to make sure that women or any other minority in the armed forces get everything that they need to be able to deliver what they need to for the armed forces.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: You are asking a question about how we feel, but could I just take us to hard data? I asked myself this question in preparation. I got the crime survey for England and Wales. What that shows is that 3.3% of women aged 16 years and over were victims of sexual assault in the year to March 2022. That is a higher rate than we see in the armed services, so there is objective evidence around that.

In terms of whether we are confident, the very fact that we have described a system that still needs to be evolved and developed tells us that there is more for us to do and we cannot be complacent, but the hard numbers show that women in the services do not suffer a higher rate of sexual offences.

Q146 **Michelle Scrogam:** With respect, I would say that the thousand who came forward, according to last month's figures, are doing so after something has happened. If they do not have confidence to report that, I



am not confident to say that those figures are accurate. If people cannot come forward, you are not going to get the same numbers that you would in civilian life. That is why I am asking how you personally feel, not what the numbers are telling you on the surface. Are you confident that women in the armed forces are as safe as they would be in civilian life, based not on your numbers but on your personal feelings?

Alistair Carns: Those comments came in on particular websites. We saw a cascade of stuff come in after Gunner Beck, and we have taken that really seriously. We have built a small taskforce inside the serious crime unit to look at and deal with those.

Q147 **Michelle Scrogam:** This is why I would rather have somebody give me their opinion, not what your numbers are telling you, because those numbers could have been masking something. How do you personally feel? Do you think that women in the armed forces are as safe as they would be in civilian life? It is a very straightforward question.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: We have more levers at our disposal. I am not confident that we have done enough, but am I confident that we are trying to do everything that we can, and am I confident that, where somebody raises a complaint, it will be investigated and they will have access to justice in an independent sense? Yes, absolutely.

Q148 **Michelle Scrogam:** I am hearing “no”.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: That is not what I am saying. You continue to ask us whether we are confident to make a statement about a world outside of the armed forces that we have no control over. Some 798,000 women were subject to sexual offences. I do not know how many more went unreported. We cannot judge that. What we can tell you is about what we care about, which is making women feel safe in the work environment and doing everything we can to make sure that the armed services are as operationally effective as they can be, because that is what the country expects of us.

Michelle Scrogam: General Roly, you mentioned earlier that 4% in the service are responsible for—

General Sir Roly Walker: All of the collective offences, yes.

Q149 **Michelle Scrogam:** How can you be confident in those numbers when there are clearly an awful lot of people who are not reporting or are being shut down when they do report, so that it does not get any further?

General Sir Roly Walker: I recognise where you are going, in that people do not have confidence in the complaints system or are not going to come forward, in which case we are not going to know about it. What you are really getting at is how confident I am that we are getting at those.



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My engagement with the Army Servicewomen's Network and my personal experiences tell me that we should have low confidence that we are creating the environment where servicewomen can come to work and feel valued for what they do, in a way that is treated equitably with their male counterparts, and feel safe. Self-evidently, through the complaints, they do not.

I would say that I have mid to low confidence that we know the whole story. I have high confidence that I have a chain of command that is committed to getting under the skin of this as best it can. Interestingly, there was a survey that went to all servicewomen, but not all responded. The key theme of unwanted and unacceptable sexual behaviour was on the list, but it was not number one. There were other things that mattered more. One was fairness in the workplace. Another was managing being a mother and being a soldier.

That is not in any way to say that it is not important. It is just that there are lots of other things that we are trying to address to improve the experience that women have in service. Self-evidently, there is a lot more to do, and let us do it with the networks.

Q150 **Derek Twigg:** Can I just ask each chief, just for the record, how many victims of sexual harassment and abuse you have met in the last 12 months?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I spent a very uncomfortable 90 minutes with Ms Sophie Brook, in which she talked very candidly about her experiences.

Derek Twigg: That is one.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I have informally met a couple of others who have talked to me about their experiences, but not as a result of a direct investigation. Because there was an investigation ongoing, that would have been inappropriate. Every time I go and visit a unit, I will go and find some of the women on board and ask them how they feel and how they experience service life. They tend not to, at that moment, turn around to a service chief four-star and say, "I have been directly attacked".

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: I have met with four.

General Sir Roly Walker: I would say 15 to 20.

Q151 **Derek Twigg:** Can we move on to probably the most vulnerable group of people, which are the under-18s, and look at the Army Foundation College? Can you tell me how many complaints have been made about bullying, sexual harassment or assault in the last two years?

General Sir Roly Walker: I do not have that immediately to hand, but I can get back to you with the statistics.

Q152 **Derek Twigg:** Do you not think that you should know, given that it is in the report? Given that you were coming here today, you do not know



that.

General Sir Roly Walker: Apologies, but I do not want to give you misleading data.

Q153 **Derek Twigg:** What about the Navy in terms of in terms of abuse and harassment complaints made by young people, new recruits and those in training?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I do not know the answer to that. I will have to get back to you.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: Could you just spell out the question again, Mr Twigg?

Derek Twigg: My question is in terms of new recruits.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: How many new recruits who are under 18, or how many new recruits?

Q154 **Derek Twigg:** How many complaints have been made by under-18s about sexual harassment or abuse?

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: I am not aware of any complaints made by under-18s. There are about 140 under-18s in our system in the Royal Air Force. I am not aware of any complaints.

Alistair Carns: In terms of AFC Harrogate, from 2019 to 2024, there has been one conviction⁸.

Q155 **Derek Twigg:** I did say complaints, not convictions.

Alistair Carns: Apologies. I will stop there.

Q156 **Derek Twigg:** Can I turn to the issue about training? I will come back to you, General Walker. We had a debate on this Committee in 2023 with Minister Murrison about the threshold at the foundation college for, basically, removing people who are involved, so the trainers, from their job. There was an issue about what the threshold would be. Where someone is convicted, that would be very clear, but would sexual banter, for instance, be a reason to remove someone who is in a training position for a young person? What Minister Murrison could not say is exactly what the threshold was. He said it was still debatable. I just wonder what the current position is. If someone has that very important role of training a young person, who is very vulnerable at that age, would sexual banter mean that they will be removed from that position?

General Sir Roly Walker: It would qualify by definition as unacceptable sexual behaviour. The presumption of a complaint, if proved, is discharge. That is the zero tolerance policy. Where that has been applied

⁸ Clarification from the Department: "This figure relates to the number of charges at Court Martial of rape involving people working at Army Foundation College Harrogate which resulted in a conviction."



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where trainers have been involved in USB, they have been discharged, to the number of four.

Q157 **Derek Twigg:** How many have been discharged?

General Sir Roly Walker: Four.

Derek Twigg: Four in the last—

General Sir Roly Walker: I would need to get back to you on whether it was in the last 12 or 18 months. I will get you all the statistics that we have on this.

Q158 **Derek Twigg:** Can you tell me what they were discharged for?

General Sir Roly Walker: I will not be drawn. Because of the risk of identification of the people involved in the low numbers, it might begin to give opportunity for identification. We need to be careful about how we go in this session, but I can certainly follow it up.

To the point about banter, this would be down to the specific case. The presumption is discharge. It would be down to the deciding body, which, as we have heard, is done independently, not by the chain of command. If this were to happen in a training session at Harrogate, and a complaint were made, it would be dealt with outside of that chain of command. There would be a range of mitigating and aggravating factors, but the mitigating factors would need to be very strong indeed.

Q159 **Derek Twigg:** So it is not automatic if a trainer engaged in sexual banter with a trainee.

General Sir Roly Walker: That would have to come down to the specifics of the case and what were judged as the mitigating or the aggravating features. If I can just elaborate, because I just want to make this point, a mitigating factor may well be the view of the trainee. It may well be the degree of remorse shown by the instructor. It may be the degree to which this was not intentional to offend.

Sam des Forges: One of the other changes that the Army has put in over the last couple of years is a comprehensive change in terms of how it selects and trains—

Q160 **Derek Twigg:** I do not mean to be rude, but we are limited for time. We have got it clear that there is still not a clear guide and that it is not automatic. Admiral, what about the Navy?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We operate to exactly the same standard, which is that, where unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviours are exhibited by any instructor towards a trainee in training, regardless of age, there is a presumption of discharge.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: We are exactly the same.

Alistair Carns: That is the zero tolerance policy.



Q161 **Derek Twigg:** How many have been discharged in the Navy?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: I do not know. I can get back to you with a breakdown. Aha, as if by magic—

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: From an Air Force perspective, while the First Sea Lord just looks at the data, I know that we have not had any complaints and discharges of people in the training machine. We take a great deal of care in our selection, training and development about training people.

Q162 **Derek Twigg:** So it is working perfectly in the RAF.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: What I just described to you are the facts of the case.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We had three cases with three discharged.

Q163 **Derek Twigg:** When was that?

Sam des Forges: Since zero tolerance came in.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Since November 2022, when the zero tolerance policy came in.

Alistair Carns: Under zero tolerance of sexual offences and unacceptable sexual behaviour, there were 57 offenders, of whom 49 have been discharged or dismissed. Two cannot be administered a discharge, due to being awarded a punishment at court martial, which is immediately rehabilitation. So 49 out of 57 have been removed.

Q164 **Derek Twigg:** Minister, coming back to your announcement today about the central violence against women and girls taskforce, which aims to drive cultural improvements, you are going to lead that. Who is leading each of the services and at what rank?

Alistair Carns: From our perspective, we are going to build a taskforce that will sit with us.

Q165 **Derek Twigg:** What rank will lead each service?

Alistair Carns: At my level, we will run the—

Q166 **Derek Twigg:** I get your level. I am talking about the services.

Alistair Carns: If you will allow me, I will explain the whole structure, because it may be taken out of context and, therefore, not really understood by everybody else who is listening.

The violence against women and girls taskforce will be held at my level. Going down into the single services, we will have individual strands of people who can be approached or are open to any discussion on violence against women and girls, or sexual harassment, who will be outside of the chain of command. They will be independent to the chain of command, so they will not be a rank. They will not be in the system.



Sam des Forges: The defence serious crime unit and the victim and witness care unit are going to be closely aligned to this. One of the real advantages of the victim and witness care unit, according to feedback that we have from folk, is that they are civilian, because that, again, gives them that further independence.

Q167 **Derek Twigg:** I may be confused and perhaps it is a shortcoming on my part.

Alistair Carns: Perhaps I can explain it then. Let us start at the top. At my level, there is a violence against women and girls taskforce.

Q168 **Derek Twigg:** Sorry, but I want to be specific. There must be somebody who you want to drive this for each single service to work together as part of your taskforce, so I am asking at what level.

Alistair Carns: What I would like to say is that the violence against women and girls taskforce that we are creating will set the strategy and culture. That will drive it down through the people departments that sit within the Army, Navy and Air Force, which is usually—correct me if I am wrong—a two-star.

Independent to that, we cannot have individuals in the violence against women and girls taskforce who are in the rank structure. We have been really clear that we want individuals who are outside of the single service—the Army, Navy or Air Force—but who are attached to it, outside of the command system. If I am a young lady corporal coming through the system and I have a complaint, and I do not want to go to my corporal, my sergeant, my troop commander or even the welfare officer, I can go to the violence against women and girls taskforce office that sits on camp and speak to the individual, and that complaint will be raised rapidly up the side of the system without going through the chain of command.

Q169 **Chair:** General, I am absolutely flabbergasted that you do not have stats on Harrogate. As far as I can see, we have a problem at Harrogate. As Derek Twigg mentioned, we are dealing with the most vulnerable young girls under the age of 18.

I read through a whole load of stats before today's session. These are not just current stats. In 2021, 37 girls were victims in sexual offence cases opened by the service police. There were nine reports of rape, not to mention two complaints of sexual assault and another two of voyeurism. If we just put that into context, that is 12.8%, or 37 girls out of 290. That compares with 1.2% in terms of women across the adult female personnel. What is being done to get to grips with the situation? Failures in the system have literally led women and young girls to attempt suicide. Do you acknowledge that there is a problem at Harrogate?

General Sir Roly Walker: The official line is that these are low numbers of instances, and I will get back to you with the specifics. There is a risk



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of identification of victims, and we have already named the place, which narrows it, so I do not want to dwell on that any further.

The general point with regard to AFC Harrogate is the start state of the junior soldiers in terms of the prevalence of exposure to sexual material, sexualised behaviours, abuse, domestic abuse and violence prior to arriving. We have recognised that there is a significant transition for junior soldiers arriving at Harrogate, where not only do they need to onboard the much higher values and standards that we have for our armed forces personnel, but there is also a recognition of their experiences that have got them to that state before.

We have a much more front-loaded programme of preparation. Prior to arriving at the Army Foundation College at Harrogate, all entrants will go through a programme of understanding the Army's values and standards.

Q170 **Chair:** When did you initiate that change?

General Sir Roly Walker: That was in 2022. We have seen a 500% increase in the time allocated in the first five to six weeks of their time at Harrogate, where they go through specific training and education focused on consent training, values and standards, and acceptable behaviours. You have a much higher rate of safeguarding at Harrogate than you do in any other military establishment. It has been praised, as stated in the written response. The college has been recognised by Ofsted, as well as the local education authority, for the high standards of safeguarding. None of that is in any way to dismiss—

Q171 **Chair:** Ultimately, young girls are being let down because those safeguarding measures are not in place. I am not a professional statistician, but the stats just do not bear recognition to what is being—

Alistair Carns: Chair, may I interject ever so slightly on the statistics? In Harrogate, we employ the zero tolerance policy, which means that all allegations of inappropriate behaviour are automatically referred to the police. That could be a comment in the dinner queue. It could be inappropriate touching. Cases at other colleges around the country would not be referred to the police.

I go back to the AIM principles of inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent. We push every incident in Harrogate to the police. In some cases, the statistics have not been broken down into those three categories. We could adopt that, but 12% of junior soldiers come from the most deprived social and economic backgrounds; 80% come from lower to middle social economic backgrounds. We have hard yards to take those individuals in and inculcate the culture of zero tolerance on that group.

There is more work for us to do. I went to Harrogate two months ago to look at the command chain and to really give myself a feel of whether I thought that individuals between 16 and 19 were being looked after and had the right network around them. I was really impressed. I would love



HCDC as a whole to come and visit Harrogate, because, until you see it, it is difficult to understand.

Chair: Yes, definitely. I could delve into this a lot deeper, given the information that I have in front of me. It is interesting, Minister, that you should mention the dinner queues and so on, because it includes racist abuse against black staff. I have had discussions with the Centre for Military Justice. I know that we are not delving into racism in this particular session, but some of the women have gone through horrendous experiences, and they have a problem in terms of intersectionality. They are getting a double whammy. They are being discriminated against not only because they are a woman, but also because they are an ethnic minority. Because of the lack of time, I will not be able to delve further into that, but I do hope that that is being seriously looked at, because we will, no doubt, be coming back to this.

Alistair Carns: Yes, 100%.

Q172 **Fred Thomas:** Thank you very much to all of you for laying out in some detail and on the record the action that you are taking within your respective services or within the Department to try to get a grip of what we can all acknowledge is a serious problem. You have put that on the record, so we have heard those things. I am grateful for them.

I am going to ask a question about barriers now. I would very much encourage you to bear in mind that we have heard all the positive steps that you are taking. Admiral, what is your understanding of what the barriers are that stop women making formal complaints? Why is it that so many women sit on experiences of harassment or sexual misconduct for years and years, and maybe never report it? Maybe it comes out on social media years later, or maybe it is a known fact among the unit, but they never report it in any of the formal structures that you have mentioned.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Thank you very much for that question. If I can just come back to Mr Twigg, no complaints by under-18s under the USB regulations have been registered in the Navy.

What are the barriers? To answer your question, the barriers have been cultural and confidence, some of which have been well rehearsed by Mariette Hughes. The confidence ones were that they would not be listened to or would not be taken seriously, because, very often, the complaints were going to be overseen by someone who was in their immediate chain of command. We have removed that. Any complaint is now triaged, separate and independent of the chain of command. On occasions, that was because the chain of command was felt to be implicated. On other occasions, it was just the lack of confidence that the system would even be listened to. We have taken all of that out now, so that the chain of command does not have a role.

Secondly, there was a feeling that raising a complaint would, in some way, become career injurious to that individual. By taking that and



making it independent, with an independent determination, and then being really clear on the actions that we have taken and the manner in which we have upheld our policies, which have also changed in recent years, that has started to instil a greater confidence that a concern that is raised will be investigated and appropriate action taken. That confidence is beginning to instil.

It was very much my experience with the former Lieutenant Brook case, and this is reminiscent of what we experienced with the Fill Your Boots feedback, that people reported stuff that predated a number of actions that have now been taken. Through the climate team and the culture team that we have set up, and the leadership activity that we are doing, whenever I am on board a ship, one of the things that I ask groups of women is, "Do you feel confident that, if you had a problem, you know the route to having it raised, and that you will be listened to fairly and effectively because of that independence?"

Clearly, I recognise that I am a number of ranks up, and I may get feedback that they think I want to hear, which is why we double check this with the climate surveys and all the rest of it. In the main, we are getting a stronger voice being played back to us. It is not universal, it is not unanimous, and it is not volume 10. We have distance to go, but we are getting a stronger voice.

If I could just give an example of where we are changing, the MOD external challenge panel visited one of our submarines recently. They went down into the torpedo shop, and the female petty officer engineer, with her team, was explaining what goes on, how we move torpedoes around and load the tubes, and all the rest of it. Then the challenge panel deliberately asked, "How do you feel as a woman?" She said, "I am a team. They have my back. I have my back. The only thing that matters is that I wear dolphins".

We are getting a different sort of language being played back to us. I do not, for one minute, want to sound complacent, and we still have a lot to do. Every week, a new group of people join the Royal Navy who are coming from a background where we have to say, "Whatever you used to do, these are our values and standards now. This is the way we behave. If you fall short of that, we will take action".

Q173 Fred Thomas: That is certainly a positive outlook. You mentioned the submarine service there. In your command, there very different structures. The Royal Marines, on one hand, are very heavily male-dominated infantry soldiers. Then there is the submarine service, which you alluded to there. Can you talk a bit about some of the challenges around discouraging sexual misconduct and bullying, particularly in submarines, and what is distinctive about that? So many people listening to this hearing will not have been in a submarine. What are the particular challenges that you face there?



Admiral Sir Ben Key: As you know from your own service, what is required of that unit, depending upon what we are asking them to do, how we are asking them to live and the sort of environment that they are going to operate in, requires subtly different means in order to come together and to be the most effective fighting unit that they can be.

Fred Thomas: Particularly on submarines.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: On board a submarine, we have made a number of changes now to make sure that women—

Q174 **Fred Thomas:** Respectfully, I do not mean to interrupt too much, but just because of time, rather than the changes you have made, what are the challenges of that unique environment? Why is it that there is a public perception that submarines breed—this is not my perception, but you understand that it is out there—a very distinct type of bullying and negative culture? Could you speak to the challenges for a second, just to acknowledge that they exist?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: The challenges are living in a very enclosed space during a dive, for extremely long periods, when you do not have any contact with the outside world. These people are isolated from their loved ones, more so than even the people on the International Space Station, because at least people in the ISS can Skype home. You have put a really enclosed community together, living in very confined conditions, and that requires remarkable leadership in order to create the right climate.

You need to invest in the leadership teams. You need to make sure that they are appropriately balanced. We use a huge amount of mentoring and assessment to make sure that they are prepared for whatever we are asking them to do, and then we do checkbacks during the training programmes and all the rest of it. You also make sure that there are sufficient female role models and routes through where younger sailors can raise their concern.

Then we are slowly but surely demonstrating what is expected, and also dealing with those who fall short. It is true to say that, with women having gone to sea in submarines many years after we took women to sea in surface ships, we were caught off guard by thinking, “They go to sea on surface ships. Therefore, it will be easy to take them to sea in submarines”. We did not make enough of that early investment to really set the conditions for success.

I pay huge tribute to the leadership of the submarine service and the courageous things that they have done to root out poor leadership with a number of discharges from the service and, at the same time, to invest in creating the right climate and ensuring that the command teams feel supported in putting that right climate in place.

Alistair Carns: The lack of a safe space is one of the biggest barriers.

Q175 **Ian Roome:** I want to talk about recruitment and retention now in the



armed forces, which is a particular challenge when it comes to females. For example, in 2020, the services set themselves a recruitment target of 15%, which has now been quietly dropped. It was met only by the RAF. Up until 30 September 2024, the recruitment of female personnel was 12.2% in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, 9.4% in the Army, and 15.8% in the RAF. How focused are you on recruiting female applicants to the armed forces?

Alistair Carns: It is absolutely critical we get as many females as we can into the military. I am a firm believer that diversity is a strength, not a weakness. It is essential in planning. It is essential in every aspect of the military as we move forward.

What I would say is that it is quite difficult. There is a whole set of cultural barriers from a societal perspective, but we are making inroads into that. We have seen a small increase of 0.2% in women coming into the military. There are some really positive statistics around women now staying in the military for longer. We have seen OF5, the colonel level, double. At the one-star level, we have seen it triple. Of course, we have the Vice-Chief of Defence Staff right at the top of the shop.

One thing when speaking to the women networks in defence is the availability of role models for those coming up and through the system. They have asked for an effective system for role models that they can see and help them come up and through.

We have a lot of programmes running. The RAF, the Navy and the Army are working on it. I do believe that, while we have said that 30% by 2030 is a target, it is an ambition, and it will be very difficult to hit that ambition⁹. We need to be realistic¹⁰.

Q176 **Ian Roome:** What do you see as some of the barriers to recruitment at the moment?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: Over the last four years, we have seen a 3% increase in the number of women. That is an additional 3%, not 3% on a small number. We have seen an 8% increase in the number of expressions of interest from women, which says to us that the stories that we are trying to tell and the opportunities that we are trying to portray are landing, but we have a lot to do.

One of the big challenges for us is that we recruit over half of our people into technical careers. Young girls in STEM are still hugely challenged for the country as a whole. For a couple of years, we had a female officer placed on secondment into the Department for Education to help us understand how we could bridge that gap, work more closely with schools and create a narrative that opened up that opportunity to say, "Careers

⁹ Clarification from the Department: The 30% by 2030 has always been referred to as a level of ambition and never as a target.

¹⁰ Clarification from the Department: 30% by 2030 is a Level of Ambition, not a target.



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in STEM and technical branches are available in the armed forces, and all of this works to your benefit”.

I make no excuses, but we are trying to buck a national trend in order to bring in the amount of talent. Exactly as the Minister has said, our best chance of achieving that is increasing the number of role models who are telling great stories about their experiences and allowing that to cascade. Two of the three engineer officers on board HMS Prince of Wales at the moment are women with the rank of commander, so they are telling their great stories. Both of them are able to do that, having had children and with a dual-spousal career.

All of that would say to me that we are, slowly but surely, knocking down the barriers that have tended to make it difficult for women to be successful. The increase in numbers of those role models, plus the younger ones, and getting those stories out is the sort of thing that we just need to keep doing time and time again, so that young girls in the school system can look at it and go, “I can see myself as that individual having that sort of life, doing that sort of meaningful work, and I feel completely safe and confident that I will be able to go to work in that environment”. If we get that right, we will find our natural numbers.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: May I just come in there? Retention and recruitment, both of which lead to an increase in the size of the Air Force and the other armed services, are one of the very top priorities, because we do not have the number of people we need right across the services. What I want is to recruit the very best people into the armed services, and it seems to me entirely ludicrous to imagine that women should not be included in that cohort of the very best people.

Just to give you some confidence around this, in 2024-25, the most recent stat that I got in terms of women joining is about 16.5%. We had just over 4,000 applications from women in 2022, 5,700 in 2023, and over 7,000 in 2024, so we are definitely doing something right.

Some 70% of our professions in the Air Force are STEM-related. When fewer than one in five women and girls study STEM-related subjects at A-level and university, that is a real challenge. We have to outperform the rest of society if we are going to do that. Part of the way that we do that is by demonstrating what a great career it is and giving people those role models, along with the phenomenal training that we provide and the responsibility that we get, but the hard data says that we are definitely making progress.

Ian Roome: The statistics are really pretty even. We got 11% intake and about 9% outflow. We are doing something right there. That is consistent with international recruitment as well compared to other forces. However, what specific plans do we have for, say, the 10-year time period? What targets do we have? You alluded to 30% or 40%, but what specific plans are you going to put in place, rather than picking a number out of the air?



Alistair Carns: We hope that, from 2027, the armed forces recruitment programme is going to look at how we do recruitment as a whole, increase our abilities and reduce the time of flight from when an individual puts an application in to the point when they join. That is the biggest reason, whether it is male or female, people drop away. We have to reduce that time of flight to get in. That is not female-specific. That is recruitment as a whole. Sometimes it is taking over 200 or 250 days from an individual applying to them signing up and then turning up at the front gate. That is just too long. We have to reduce that.

In the Armed Forces Bill, we are looking at putting in a spectrum service to make it easier to move between commitment types in particular service categories, which will give people a better balance between family life and work and provide more variable working hours. We have wraparound childcare that is in place. Each single service has its own programme to increase the recruitment of females across all of the services.

It is worth noting, though, that women are really well represented in logistics, personnel, medical and intelligence. They are less well represented in the technical trades—we mentioned the lack of STEM qualifications in women in broader society—and, in particular, in ground close combat roles. We talked about the tipping point earlier, when you have a certain number of people within a regiment or a unit, which provides that sort of safe space and commonality with their fellow soldiers, sailors or airmen. I do not know whether there are any specifics you want to cover.

General Sir Roly Walker: To the specific question, at Sandhurst they are experimenting based on the best advice possible. They have been trying to work out the critical mass of action that you need in any given unit that results in the breakdown of prejudice and misogynist behaviours, so that everyone is valued. It is around 30%. They are doing trials on this at Sandhurst to validate the data. You have to make sure you have 30% male to female in selected platoons or companies, and then you see the impact over time in terms of performance, wastage, training and longer-term careers.¹¹ There is a longitudinal side to this, which we need to see playing through in terms of return to service.

To my colleague's various points, we have seen a 6.2% increase in expressions of interest from female citizens to join the Army. We are at a 20:80 split for soldiers regular and reserve. I think I am correct in saying that expressions of interest for officers is nearer 75:25, which is positive. The conversion into what we call trade-trained, i.e. they are in a career as opposed to in training, is less. We clearly have a lag in the overall numbers. As you say, 10.5% of the regular force is female, but that figure is 15% for the reserve force.

¹¹ Clarification from the Department: CGS meant a 30% female to male ratio in selected platoons.



Q177 **Ian Roome:** Can I just come in on that, General? What are your leadership teams telling you about why people are not carrying on from application to conversion and then to being in the job? What are some of the reasons why females are not carrying on with the application? Is it the length of time?

General Sir Roly Walker: That is generic to a lot of young people who are trying to join. Sometimes the time away from home is a challenge. There might be family issues that mean they leave. That is a big reason why junior soldiers leave. Some conclude that it is just not the career for them. Either they are not good at it or they did not want to try it. You see a conversion rate and a level of wastage. The wastage in training, so once they have started a training depot, was around one-third, but we are getting that closer to one-quarter.

In some trade groups, as the Minister said, the success rate is much higher. In most logistical and medical units, it is much higher. I think I am correct in saying that, in some of our medical units, we have nearly a 50:50 male-female split, but that betrays the fact that in some of our ground combat units it is much lower. We are nowhere near a critical mass that begins to make a cultural change in the way they conceive of fighting power.

There is a much more systemic and strategic agenda that I am keen to explore around how we frame basic training. For example, if you frame basic training and the basic military syllabus around infantry soldiering, do not be surprised that that is not what a lot of people wanted to do in the Army. We need to do the basics in recruit training. You need to be able to shoot because you have to be able to fight. You have to be able to move physically on your feet as well as in a vehicle. You have to be able to communicate. You have to be able to medicate. In a sense, our common military syllabus needs to focus on the basics to be a soldier: to survive on a battlefield and to fight for your life, if you have to.

We therefore need to look at how to reframe our training around that rather than overemphasising on infantry being the entry standard because of the barriers that that particular trade group brings not just to women in the Army but to men as well.

Q178 **Ian Roome:** When I joined the Air Force, I was in within six weeks of going into the recruitment office. We had medically trained personnel, doctors, who would sign and take the risks. The recruitment agencies that we are using, without mentioning any names, are most probably just following policy.

We have had an incident reported to us as a Committee where somebody has been waiting three years to be admitted to the forces. Since I have been on this Committee I thought it might have been just over a year, but only last week we were told somebody who was just starting in the forces now applied three years ago. What can we do to speed this up? I know this is a desire from the Government. They announced that to the



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House a few months ago.

Sam des Forges: If you are talking about specific female barriers, there are a number. Some of them are reflected in wider society. There is oft-quoted research about this. If there is a job spec with 10 items, a man will go for it if he can do three of them, but a woman wants to be confident that she can do almost all of them. If you look at pages 63 and 64 of the evidence provided, the Army in particular has some really good examples of work it is doing to build that relationship and that confidence.

When we are looking at physical fitness, in the society that we are in—these are slight generalisations—women are slightly less confident of being able to meet certain physical expectations. There is some really great work that has been going on to look at those areas where confidence is perhaps slightly lower and help build that confidence through coaching, early interventions and the visibility of role models.

Some terrific work has been done on the servicewomen's handbook, which you will have seen, the perinatal handbook that has now come out. We are hoping to launch fairly soon some great work by colleagues in the Army about women in arduous training as well. Those are all really important pieces to help boost that little bit of confidence so folk are less likely to withdraw.

Those are the sorts of things that all the services are doing, which are helping them in terms of seeing a real increase in expressions of interest, converting that through the system and recognising those nuances that some of our women might have. That is going to be a key thing that we will start to see land in the not-too-distant future.

Q179 **Jesse Norman:** Just on that last question, Minister, can you just tell our Committee what the target number of days is for reducing recruitment time over time so people can know they are going to get into the service or not quickly?

Alistair Carns: We need to reduce it by a minimum of threefold. At the moment, it is in excess of 200 days.

Q180 **Jesse Norman:** You want to reduce it to 70 days.

Alistair Carns: We have already put down a provisional offer at 10 days and 30 days. That was announced by the Defence Secretary. We have run that through in several cases. We need to expand that much more broadly.

The issue is about getting hold of medical records. As I am sure you are aware, we have to write a letter to get a medical record back and we have to check it. That process adds 30 to 50 days into it. If you add in all the administration, it expands. We need to reduce that. Once we have someone who is interested, we need to give them a provisional offer and get them through the gate within 30 to 70 or so days.



Q181 **Jesse Norman:** That is great. Sam, one of the things that the armed forces do is to provide incredible amounts of structure and opportunity to young people who might come from very difficult backgrounds. That is something we often forget. Do you benchmark the experience of young people as they come into the armed forces in order to assess whether you are able to have a positive effect on male behaviour towards females, et cetera?

Sam des Forges: Our single-service colleagues, particularly in some of our phase 1 training establishments, are doing a lot of that. We certainly have an ambition to do a lot more. We were just talking about our conversations with Jess Phillips, as Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls. Defence is really keen to lean into these opportunities. How can we learn about some of the things that, across Government, we might want to experiment with, perhaps in the school system? Can we experiment with those in some of our phase 1 training areas?

Equally, some of the statistics and cases you have been quoting are from 2021 and 2022. Colleagues across Government and internationally are learning from the changes we have been delivering in the last couple of years in particular. We are going to run an event with international colleagues and hopefully cross-government colleagues later in September or October. There is a real opportunity here. The service environment is unique; service justice is unique. Because they are small, flexible and agile, we can try some of those things out.

There is some really great work going on, but we are ambitious to expand that. How can we influence men and young boys as well as supporting women?

Q182 **Jesse Norman:** There were an awful lot of words there. I hope what you are saying is, "We take the question of benchmarking young people when they come in, both male and female, very seriously. We can track whether they are coming in with better or less good forms of behaviour, and work out what steps we might need to take to integrate them into the service". That is a yes.

Sam des Forges: Yes, absolutely. There has been a 500% increase in Harrogate in terms of focus on those sorts of areas, looking at those attitudes in surveys.

Q183 **Jesse Norman:** We are terribly short on time. I am so sorry. Minister, we have heard some very interesting feedback. It is a very mixed picture, but the service chiefs are cautiously positive about the decisions and steps they are taking. What measures do you take and will you take to hold them to account to make sure that these agendas are being really driven through the services?

Alistair Carns: We hold a meeting with Sam and a selective group of women across defence once every month. That is really my feedback of, one, how the single service is doing and, two, how the grassroots feel is



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outside the single service. That includes the civil service within the Ministry of Defence. That is really good, from my perspective, to get the understanding. We also have statistics that come through on almost a monthly basis, which allow me to combine the facts and the understanding together to hold people to account.

I will come back to it. We are on a positive trajectory. It is a bit like an oil tanker: it takes time to change. We are pushing as hard and as fast as we can. Some of the measures that we have put in place just in the last couple of weeks, from the tri-service complaints unit all the way through to the violence against women and girls taskforce, designed with Jess Phillips and Co., will provide a safe space for women.

I go back to when I was young. I know you are short on time. When you are looking up, it is very difficult to find somewhere to complain if you have an issue. You have three men here telling you how women feel. It is pretty ironic, but in reality, if I was a woman in that space, who would I speak to? There is no one. Creating this violence against women and girls taskforce will give women a safe space to go in order to raise an issue.

Q184 Jesse Norman: The culture of an armed force is about martial valour and success in combat. We are in a pre-war situation. How you give the prestige and support to female role models in that context becomes additionally important.

Alistair Carns: Yes, 100%. Ukraine, many of our European partners and Israel all show just how valuable women can be in defence, as the UK does. We have some fantastic women sat behind me who are net contributors to defence. They are absolutely at the top of their game; they are the best in the world.

Q185 Jesse Norman: That is great. There is a rather unfortunate iteration where particular subcultures are discovered, often through the media. It could be Harrogate, subs or the Red Arrows. It feels like a surprise to the service in question. It is suddenly backpedalling and then change occurs. How do you get ahead of that? I am not expecting you to name subcultures in the armed forces now, but you could write to us and give us a sense of comfort that you are aware of any potentially emerging problems so we do not feel this is continuously a matter of catch-up. It is not an easy question, but I would be terribly grateful if you consider that.

Alistair Carns: We will write back. I will just cover that off. The First Sea Lord highlighted the need to get ahead of that case. When you pick up on a culture that you think is going wrong, it is usually through a command and leadership channel. You identify it and then you remove that individual before the incident or the culture is set in place. It is absolutely about command and leadership. To remove that individual completely out of the military before anything has happened usually means realigning him or her to a role where he or she has less responsibility over an organisation. I would love to write to you in due course.



General Sir Roly Walker: Can I pile in on that? There is cautious optimism that we are heading in the right direction, but I thought there was a very interesting piece in the Sunday papers by Matthew Syed on misogyny as a feature of society. It is getting harder. Likewise, a few weeks ago there was a piece by Melanie Phillips saying exactly the same thing. In a sense, where we are heading is that this gets harder because of some of these baked-in behaviours that we are increasingly seeing as prevalent in society.

There is absolutely a desire, to your point, Minister, to recognise where the continuities are in the trends and to find a way to get ahead of them. Certainly, as far as the Army is concerned—I touched on it—the framing of how we do basic training makes this even harder to challenge because you are baking in what Mike Wigston called in his report hypermasculinity.

We have to recode how we view professional armed services in the 21st century. There is nothing that I have seen about combat that means one gender is better than another. We need to get over that and recode how we frame this to the society because we need the best citizens in this country to join our armed forces so we can play a full and active role in our responsibility as one of NATO's leading powers. To me, that is it.

Q186 **Jesse Norman:** I have one final question. General, I am going to start with you, but it would be good to go to all three chiefs. What are the specific obstacles that stop women progressing into your roles?

General Sir Roly Walker: There is nothing to stop them coming to my role. In fact, Sharon is now a four-star general and the number two in defence. She moved from being the Deputy Chief of the General Staff to now being the Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff. You saw her last year when she was here as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

Jesse Norman: There are no obstacles.

General Sir Roly Walker: There is no obstacle. The reality, we have to recognise, is that career progression and advancement through the career is a different experience. Again, a lot of the statistics and analysis shows that it can be a harder path for servicewomen in terms of the balancing they are trying to do with lives, particularly around responsibilities as mothers and the dual-serving nature of couples. There are some practical areas where the data tells us we are making this harder for female soldiers and officers.

Q187 **Jesse Norman:** You are trying to lean in on those caring responsibilities.

General Sir Roly Walker: They are. This is a collective effort by us. These officers and soldiers are not just in the Army; they are the Army. We are doing this to ourselves. I have confidence that this is not a top-down, directed-only activity. This is a groundswell. It is almost, "Not in our name do we behave like this. We have to come together collectively



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as a group and sort this out ourselves, because no one else is going to do it. The nation expects us”.

Admiral Sir Ben Key: There is no part of the Royal Navy that a woman cannot join.

Q188 **Jesse Norman:** What are the obstacles to getting to your job?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: There is no policy reason why a woman cannot serve in my position.

Q189 **Jesse Norman:** What about non-policy reasons? What about other obstacles that might prevent a woman from taking your role over time?

Admiral Sir Ben Key: We face exactly the same challenges as the Army and the Air Force. The challenge is to create a completely equitable and fair system in which, whether you are a man or a woman, the career opportunities to advance are the same and you can also enjoy the same factors of life outside wearing a uniform, as I have been able to do. I have been able to get married. I have children. My wife and I have made choices between us. If it were the other way round, that would have been a much harder thing to deliver in the past, particularly if you are in a dual-service couple.

That work still has some distance to go before we can say with complete confidence that it matters not who you are, whether you are a man or a woman or whether you are serving in a single or a dual, because all of those will be managed and taken into account as you go through.

We have to deal with one physiological difference: only women can have babies. We have to build that into our system and accept it. Sadly, when I grew up, some of my female colleagues in that younger era had comments written in their annual appraisals that pointed out that they were women. I look back on that with shame now. At the time, it seemed to be what you did. There were really talented women of my generation who could not go any further or any faster because of those constraints. Slowly but surely, wherever we bump into them, we are knocking them down.

There is no policy reason. We are now into making sure that the system recognises that and adapts accordingly. As all of my colleagues have said, we want the very best of the talent available in the country in order to defend the nation.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: As Ben said, there are no policy constraints, but, as you rightly point out, there are cultural and behavioural aspects that can make things harder. When you speak to senior women, they will tell you that they think it is harder for them. They have to be better and they have to work harder.

Jesse Norman: Than the equivalent male for the same position.



Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton: Yes. In the Air Force, historically the Chief of the Air Staff has always been a pilot. The representation of women in aircrew is low; it is below 10%. Immediately, the pool is somewhat smaller. I am certain that in the future we will see a woman in my role as Chief of the Air Staff.

When we look at the data around promotions and command appointments, which have always been routes to more senior positions, thanks to changes made by my predecessor, more command appointments are opened up to non-pilots and non-air crew. Now 29% of my group captain command appointments are filled by women. Two years ago, that was down at about 17%. In 2010 2.9% of warrant officers were women; it is now 15%. We are starting to see that shift, but we have to do everything we can to make that as frictionless as possible, so that women and men are judged exactly the same way through our system.

We need to make sure that is how it feels to women as well and do all we can to make that happen. We are definitely making some progress in that, just from looking at those numbers.

Q190 **Michelle Scrogam:** In the evidence that you have given us, you have talked about a whole host of initiatives around women's health, menstruation, uniform and equipment, but what we have not heard about are the numbers of women accessing them. Are women using those services or are there still barriers to access? Can you give us some detail?

Alistair Carns: I do not have the stats. Sam, do you have any?

Sam des Forges: Yes, this is something that we talk a lot to our servicewomen's networks about, for example, in order to get that understanding. We have had a few occasions where the messages have not got through to all the relevant folk in terms of knowing that this is important.

We have created those options or those items. We are now seeing them made available on a far more regular basis. When we are going on operations or deployments, this is being embedded in the thinking. We have had a couple of instances where we have not quite got it right, but it is moving forward.

Interestingly, we have worked really closely with our Ukrainian colleagues in this space in order to learn from their experience. That has got us thinking slightly differently about the provision we have found. If I can talk quite bluntly in this space, which I think is important, we have been hearing from Ukrainian colleagues who are on the frontline, operating in a drone warfare world where it is very difficult to get any privacy to look after hygiene and some of those sorts of things. They have really valued the approach that we have taken with those menstrual support boxes, but they have also given us ideas for things to add to them, which, because we have not been in that scenario, had not occurred to us.



There is a real international two-way learning in terms of how we could make that better, but we have certainly had a few occasions where those have not got to the people who need them. That has resulted in the services picking that up and flowing that through the deployment thinking in a far more cohered way. I would really pay particular tribute to the Ukrainian women serving on the frontline. What they have experienced has shown the value of that thinking, but there are also things that we just had not thought about, particularly in a world of drone warfare. The approaches to urination, menstruation, cleanliness and hygiene are different for women. That has been really valuable.

Q191 Michelle Scrogam: With uniforms and equipment, what checks and balances are you putting in place to see how well those initiatives are picked up and used? Do you have a process for measuring that?

Sam des Forges: Our director of safety has created a new working group and I am connecting our servicewomen's networks with her. We have looked at uniform, but we also have to think about PPE. There is a really broad area that we have to think about in this space. The services themselves are doing elements of assurance. I am really keen to go beyond the check-ins that I have with folk who are using this equipment. "Assurance" is our watchword at this point in the maturity journey. That is something we are really keen to get after. The director of safety's work is really going to help on that.

Alistair Carns: Speaking to the women's network, there were some issues around the availability of maternity uniforms, body armour that was fitted and made for women, rucksacks, backpacks and all the kit that the male population of defence probably take for granted. We need to ensure that is fit and purposeful for women, and easily accessible. They should not have to write away and get a central store to send it forward. That was absolutely taken on board. We are looking into that.

Q192 Chair: There are lots more issues that I know members wanted to discuss, but I fear the clock has beaten us. There are many things that I am still not happy with. I raised the issue earlier about concurrent jurisdiction and how complaints are dealt with. The Independent Defence Authority has also rightly raised concerns about the MoD's increased propensity to use non-statutory inquiries, in which more and more things are heavily redacted; they take a long time to report; and they fail to tell victims what has been found and what the consequences have been. In their words, the MoD has failed to listen to the evidence that women were giving.

Last week, the former Defence Minister Johnny Mercer admitted of a colossal failure. He felt he did not argue strongly enough to make sure that sexual offences would be taken away from the MoD and dealt with by civilian police. Minister, in opposition, Labour backed the proposal to transfer serious and sexual offences out of military courts. Can you tell us today whether the Government intend to make that legal change so that women and girls can have that?



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Alistair Carns: In 2021 to 2022, we would absolutely agree, but His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate has already reviewed the service justice system. Giving the choice to a victim as to whether they want the criminal justice system or the service justice system to deal with their case provides the optimal solution for the victim. It should not be on us to tell them which avenue they have to take. Choice is the way forward. If you want to take away choice, we go down one avenue. If you want to deliver choice to them and they can go either way, those options are available. That is the best solution, speaking not only to individuals in the service justice system but the women's networks as well.

Q193 **Chair:** I take on board that point, but it is a matter of fact that the conviction rate for cases that go to court martial for rape and sexual assault is far lower than the equivalent figures in the Crown Court.

Alistair Carns: That is incorrect. We will provide you with the statistics to back that up.

Chair: I look forward to receiving that. That is what our understanding is, including from the evidence that we were provided with by the Centre for Military Justice.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of your good selves for making the time to come and give evidence at today's hearing. I know you are all very busy individuals. You have an important role to conduct in defence at a time when defence is so much in focus. Thank you for your service to our country. As I said at the outset when setting the context, we are here to ask the difficult questions and we will keep probing on certain matters. That is our job. That is what we have been elected by Parliament to do.

I really appreciate the fact that you have made yourselves available; you have ensured that we have transparency and accountability; and, as the very top people who are responsible for the safety and welfare of our brave servicewomen and girls, you have been here to answer our questions. With that, I bring today's hearing on women in the armed forces to a conclusion.