

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Chief of Defence Staff, HC 974

Monday 12 January 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 January 2026.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Alex Baker; Lincoln Jopp; Emma Lewell; Mike Martin; Jesse Norman; Ian Roome; Michelle Scrogam; Fred Thomas; and Derek Twigg.

Questions 54 to 171

Witnesses

[I](#): Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of Defence Staff.

Examination of witness

Witness: Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton.

Q54 Chair: I call to order this evidence session of the House of Commons Defence Committee on the work of the Chief of Defence Staff. Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, it is a pleasure to have you give evidence to our Committee. I believe that this is your first session since taking charge, so welcome, and we are very much looking forward to the next couple of hours.

A lot has definitely been going on in the world, whether it is Venezuela, some of the statements on Greenland, or other tensions in the middle east or across the world. Recently, we have seen a change in the strategic context, with the renewed emphasis on hard power and military capability. Indeed, as I said in the Chamber, we seem to have gone back in time to an era of strongman politics. In your view, how might those changes have an impact on our UK armed forces and your work going forward?

Sir Richard Knighton: Thank you, Chair. It is great to be back and good to see a full house. I think you are right about a change in the strategic context. The Prime Minister, in the foreword to the strategic defence review, talks about a step change in the threats that we face, and that requires a step change in defence.

What I say to our people when I spend time with them in town halls, and speaking publicly to them, is that more is going to be expected of us as a set of armed forces, in a context of greater volatility and greater levels of uncertainty. We can see that play out in a whole number of different ways: in the instability in the middle east over the past few days, and who knows where that will end; very clearly in the threat from Russia; and in the commitment that NATO has made to increase the targets that are set for us, with the commitments that this Government have made to increase defence spending. Those all point to increasing demands on our armed forces, in terms of warfighting at scale and in responding to crisis around the world.

Q55 Chair: You just mentioned the increased tensions. Within that context—a mild way of putting this would be that we are extremely disappointed, but—many of us are, in fact, exasperated that the defence investment plan still remains a working document. It is reported that the reason for the delay is money, or the lack or allocation thereof. We were promised that it would be delivered in the autumn, but we are now in January. There are rumours and widely reported statements that it could be March or beyond. What is going on? Who has a handle on this? At a time of so much tension, we seem to be just trundling along, rather than realising the urgency of the moment.

Sir Richard Knighton: I completely agree with the concerns that you and the Committee have, and that I have heard reflected in Parliament about the delays. I heard some of the statements by Members of the House of Lords, and by previous people who have sat in my chair, on “Today in Parliament” last week. What that represents, or gives you an indication of,

is some of the challenges that we face in a world that is changing, with the programme changing around us, and the need to make sure that we get that right.

There is no point having a defence investment plan that cannot be delivered or is unaffordable. What Ministers want, what the Defence Secretary is absolutely clear on and what Rupert Pearce, the National Armaments Director, who was in front of you before Christmas, made clear is that we are working flat out to try to bring that to a conclusion. I would be very happy, through the session today, to talk a bit about some of the challenges and questions that we are trying to address and how that process works. I think that would be quite helpful for the Committee.

Q56 Chair: We fully appreciate the challenges, but you haven't got a date that you could give our Committee today?

Sir Richard Knighton: I do not have a date for when that work will be finished.

Q57 Chair: I understand that your good self and other senior military leaders met the Prime Minister and you intimated a warning of a staggering £28 billion defence shortfall. That is despite the extra money coming into defence and despite having known about the changing strategic context. Apparently the Prime Minister was livid, since he felt that the strategic defence review was fully costed, fully funded. What is going on there? Can you enlighten us?

Sir Richard Knighton: I thought you might ask me about the speculation in the media about the cost of the programme and speculation over particular numbers, and that is exactly what it is. It is speculation. I am not going to talk about—

Q58 Chair: It is speculation and there is no shortfall? Are you happy there is no £28 billion shortfall?

Sir Richard Knighton: What I will tell you is that we meet the Prime Minister regularly. He has been very clear that defence and security should be a central organising principle for Government and he is personally taking a keen interest in those aspects. I was with him in Paris on Tuesday last week. And I will tell you that we did meet the Prime Minister in December and we did talk about a number of issues associated with defence, including the defence investment plan, but the material that was discussed at that meeting was classified "Secret" and so I am not going to talk about that in public.

I suspect, Chair—we know each other well—that there is a danger that we get into a to and fro today where you ask me about a particular number for a programme that has not been signed off, where decisions have not been made. You can ask me the question as many ways as you like, but I am not going to be able to talk about those specifics, because we are not yet at a stage where we understand precisely what the cost of the programme will be, because there's a whole bunch of judgments that will



HOUSE OF COMMONS

need to be made. As I said, what might be useful is if I talk to you a bit about what is really going on and how we approach these issues.

- Q59 **Chair:** No doubt we will come on to that, Air Chief Marshal, but you will understand that there is a lot of speculation swirling around. I completely understand that you cannot give us a specified number, but can you at least confirm this: is there a funding shortfall, and a significant funding shortfall at that?

Sir Richard Knighton: I think I need to explain to you how this process works, because the cost of the programme depends on a whole bunch of assumptions that we might make, and ultimately it will be a matter for Ministers to make those, based on the advice that I and others offer. It is very clear that the demands on defence are growing; this links back to your first question. The SDR set out very clearly the increasing uncertainty and volatility in the world and, therefore, the risk to our security and the importance of the UK's armed forces to the country and its security. It also made it clear or the Government have made it clear that over the last 30 years, since the end of the cold war, we have taken a peace dividend and we are not as ready as we need to be for the kind of full-scale conflict that we might face.

How we ultimately deter our principal adversary is through being ready to fight and win, and part of that is about how we modernise and transform the armed forces to make sure they are ready for that fight in the future. It is all those things that we have to take into consideration in terms of how we are going to deliver on the plan in the future.

- Q60 **Chair:** I completely take on board that point. The public at large have been advised of a lot of that work through our inquiry reports on the UK's contribution to European security and so on. But my question was: is there a shortfall?

Sir Richard Knighton: Chair, we are going to talk about this to and fro. The answer is that it depends on the assumptions you make. Government Ministers have made a decision about the level of budget that they have provided to us in defence. That is unprecedented in my career; this is the largest sustained increase in defence spending that I have known. The Prime Minister stood up in The Hague and in Parliament and committed to spending 5% on defence and security, with 3.5% on hard defence, and 2.6% by 2027. That is the envelope that we are working in, and that demonstrates the commitment that the Government have made to the challenges we face.

This is huge. On my last day as head of the Air Force, I was at RAF Cranwell, talking to a bunch of people who were about to graduate. I was explaining to them that they are entering an Air Force—a set of armed forces—in a context, which I have never known, of rising defence budgets. What is happening is a big deal.

My role is to advise Ministers, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister about how we rebuild our armed forces with the money that they have provided. It is a statement of the obvious that we cannot do



HOUSE OF COMMONS

everything we would want to do, as quickly as we would want to do it, within the context of the budget we have set. That requires Ministers to make difficult trade-offs. That is the work we go through, and it is hard. That is why we are working so hard on the defence investment plan.

- Q61 **Chair:** My views exactly. I have raised on the Floor of the House that some of us were disappointed that there was not more in the Budget about defence—in fact, there was no new money. Based on your conversations with the Prime Minister, are you expecting further money for defence in the upcoming spring statement?

Sir Richard Knighton: As far as I understand it, the Treasury and the Chancellor have set the budgets for Departments for the next few years as part of the spending review, so that is the assumption that we are working on.

- Q62 **Chair:** I meant with regard to the spring statement. Obviously you made strong statements to the Prime Minister last week, as you said, while you were away. Many of us, especially Defence Committee members, have been asking about this on the Floor of the House. Are you expecting any more money in the spring statement?

Sir Richard Knighton: That is absolutely a question for Ministers. They decide what the allocation should be; they make trade-offs between health, education, defence and all those matters. My job is to set out for Ministers what the threats are and what the armed forces can do in the face of those threats, within the budget that we have.

A whole set of issues will affect your judgment about how much money defence needs. For example, we should, in any Department, hold a degree of financial contingency. The bigger that contingency is, the less money is available to spend, and that then limits what we can commit to. The judgment around that contingency will matter.

There is also the balance in the budget between resource costs and capital costs. Quite a lot of the uplift in our budget has been capital costs—so it is about investment, not about running costs. You will know—I am unapologetic about it—that we gave a big increase in pay for our armed forces, and that is important if you want to retain and recruit the very best the country needs.

We have to make a judgment around the right balance between investing in the transformation that is called out in the SDR, investing in filling in some of the hollows that the SDR referred to, and how quickly we are able to address those challenges and transform. All of that, taken together, is a complex set of circumstances. The judgments you make will determine how much money you need or what you can do inside the cost envelope. It is hard. It is a difficult set of problems.

There have been changes in the environment. You heard the Defence Secretary say on Friday that we are spending money on enhancing capability in case we have to deploy forces in Ukraine after a peace deal. All those factors add complexity and uncertainty. Those are the issues that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we are trying to address through the defence investment plan, and I will continue to provide clear and straightforward advice to Ministers on those things, so they can make the judgment about what that means for capability, international standing and the budget.

Chair: None of us is under any illusion about the fact that you have a very complex and urgent task at hand, but some of us are just mindful that other people in the wider Government, outside the Ministry of Defence, may not be aware of the urgency at hand. I have a handful of supplementaries based on the issues that I have just raised with you, starting off with Derek Twigg.

Q63 **Derek Twigg:** CDS, is there any scenario that you can explain to us where, without cutting the programmes or rolling back on planned work, there would not be a significant shortfall in funding?

Sir Richard Knighton: As I said to Laura Kuenssberg when I spoke to her on Remembrance Sunday, if we are going to transform our armed forces and invest in UK capability, that will require us to make changes to the rest of the programme. It depends on the judgments that we make.

Q64 **Derek Twigg:** With respect, I have been very specific in my question. I take what you said about not wanting to go into the details of the programme at this point, but the question is quite simple: is there any scenario that can be delivered without cutting current programmes or reducing planned work that would ensure we don't have funding shortfalls without extra money from the Treasury? Is there any scenario that you can describe?

Sir Richard Knighton: Are you saying—

Q65 **Derek Twigg:** I am trying to say: is there any possibility, based on what you are currently looking at, which does not involve cuts to programmes or, again, putting back programmes for a number of years, that would not bring about a funding shortfall without extra funding from the Treasury? Is there any scenario?

Sir Richard Knighton: I think your question is that if we wanted to do everything that is currently in the programme and do all the extra things in the SDR, could we do that with the budget that we have got? And the answer is no.

Q66 **Derek Twigg:** So we are talking about cuts to programmes.

Sir Richard Knighton: What you have to do is make judgments about what you prioritise: how big the contingencies are going to be—

Q67 **Derek Twigg:** Are we talking about reducing programmes, changing programmes or taking programmes backwards?

Sir Richard Knighton: All of those things are options under consideration. But so is the level of ambition that we might take. These are just straightforward—

Q68 **Derek Twigg:** So without doing that, there is no way you can avoid a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

funding shortfall. That is what you are saying.

Sir Richard Knighton: That is not what I said at all. You have just put words in my mouth. What I said is: could we deliver the whole of the programme that we currently have and do all of the things that we would want to do in the SDR with the money that we have got?

Q69 **Derek Twigg:** So you would make cuts.

Sir Richard Knighton: We can go back and forth, Mr Twigg, all the time.

Q70 **Derek Twigg:** If you have a programme that you cannot deliver, you cut it, don't you?

Sir Richard Knighton: There are a whole bunch of things that are not yet in the programme, because we have choice over how—

Q71 **Derek Twigg:** You can delay or decide not to go ahead with them.

Sir Richard Knighton: You have choice over how quickly you want to do them, and that is it. It is a straightforward thing. I know you want to put words into my mouth, but it is important that we—

Q72 **Derek Twigg:** It is important that we understand exactly what you are saying. I think we all understand from what you just said that you cannot continue the way you are without avoiding cuts—

Sir Richard Knighton: I did not say that, Mr Twigg. You keep using that word. I am very conscious of the support this Committee provides to defence and how you want the right things to be done. I have been giving evidence to this Committee for 10 years. I am going to speak plainly and carefully: don't try and put words in my mouth.

Q73 **Derek Twigg:** I think I understand what you are saying, and people can make their own judgments. It is now January. We are getting towards the end of the financial year. What is the current underspend or overspend on RDEL and CDEL budgets for each of the armed forces?

Sir Richard Knighton: Under the new system, and I know you have asked a lot of questions about this—

Q74 **Derek Twigg:** Which the Department refuses to answer.

Sir Richard Knighton: I think you have had answers to the questions.

Q75 **Derek Twigg:** They are not answers—

Sir Richard Knighton: One of the few things that I do not have responsibility for is answering parliamentary questions, so I will let you pick that up with the Defence Minister when he comes.

Q76 **Derek Twigg:** Maybe you can answer it.

Sir Richard Knighton: Under the new model the funding flows to the military strategic headquarters—to me and then down through the commands. The total budget for defence is about £62 billion this year, of which just under £40 billion is for the military strategic headquarters,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

which includes the four commands. There has been no point in the year where that budget has been reduced, apart from some reallocation of funding into defence nuclear. Managing a budget in-year is a perfectly normal process.

Q77 Derek Twigg: How much of that went into defence nuclear?

Sir Richard Knighton: I would have to confirm that precisely with you. It was several hundred million pounds. That was about trying to balance the pressures across defence. All Departments have this issue of trying to manage the budget to make sure you do not overspend. Departments are not able or allowed to overspend. As I am sure you know, as we get towards the end of the financial year, Departments are asked to identify their forecast, and there is then a negotiation that goes on with the Treasury to ensure that—

Derek Twigg: With the greatest respect, I understand the process. I am trying to find out whether you currently have an underspend or overspend on each of your budgets in each—

Sir Richard Knighton: Right now, we are in a position where we are forecasting to spend more than the budget we have. That is the process that is being negotiated—

Q78 Derek Twigg: How much is that currently forecast to be?

Sir Richard Knighton: And I am not going to talk about that in public. Those conversations are happening right now between the accounting officer and Ministers and officials in the Treasury.

Q79 Derek Twigg: Either way, you have confirmed that you are overspent at the moment.

Sir Richard Knighton: We are not overspent right now. You are not allowed to overspend. We are saying what the forecast would be by the end of the year if we carried on and made no changes. That is a perfectly normal process to go through with supplementary estimates, and that is the process we are going through right now.

Q80 Derek Twigg: But in the process currently, you do not have enough money to meet what you want to do.

Sir Richard Knighton: We do not have enough money to do everything that is currently in the plan, and that is a perfectly normal position, as you would recognise. It happens every year. It has happened over the last few years, and the Department has been allocated additional funding in supplementary estimates. That process will conclude in the short term.

Q81 Ian Roome: There are lots of items on the list of spending priorities you have alluded to, including the new Type 26 and Type 31 frigates. Given what you said earlier—that you only advise Ministers—what advice did you give to Ministers on the medium helicopter programme?

Sir Richard Knighton: The new medium helicopter is nominally a replacement for Puma, which was taken out of service, as you may



HOUSE OF COMMONS

remember, last year. That is still one of those issues that is in the forward programme. When the defence investment plan concludes, it will conclude on whether that programme goes forward and at what scale. My position on the new medium helicopter is that we have a gap since Puma went out of service, and there is a clear requirement for that. Whether that sits as high up the list of priorities as other things is a matter for the overall defence investment plan, and will ultimately be a matter for Ministers.

Q82 Ian Roome: Where does it sit, from your advice and your interpretation? Obviously, you have lots of experience. Where would the new medium helicopter programme sit on your list of priorities as CDS?

Sir Richard Knighton: Well, there is a massive programme of investment, and there are a whole bunch of programmes on there. I can tell you that it is not as important as nuclear, but it is also not at the bottom of the list either. It will find its place in the overall defence investment plan.

Q83 Ian Roome: One of the reasons why I ask is because it will be discussed under an urgent question to Ministers this afternoon. I was wondering whether you had had a briefing with them this morning to say what their stance should be as Ministers.

Sir Richard Knighton: I have not had a discussion about new medium helicopters with Ministers this morning, or even this year.

Q84 Fred Thomas: You mentioned that you had a meeting with the Prime Minister before Christmas, and said that the figures in that meeting were classified.

Sir Richard Knighton: All the details of that meeting—all the papers—were classified secret.

Fred Thomas: You had a meeting with the Prime Minister before Christmas, the details of which are classified. You define one of your roles as advising Ministers, including the Prime Minister. Do you have the sense that current Government are going to fund defence fully enough for us to be ready for full-scale combat in the next few years?

Sir Richard Knighton: The target is the NATO capability targets. We know that to deliver the capability targets, we need to spend about 3.5% of GDP on hard defence. The Prime Minister has stood up and said that in Parliament, and he has said it alongside other leaders in The Hague. Right now, 3.5% investment in defence feels like the right kind of number—

Q85 Fred Thomas: Do you mean that the Prime Minister has said that we need to spend that, or that he has said that we are going to spend that?

Sir Richard Knighton: The Prime Minister has committed to spend 3.5% on defence. Now, he's—

Q86 Fred Thomas: My question was about the next few years. That commitment is not for the next few years. I am trying to ask you about the next couple of years. Is your feeling, from giving advice to Ministers,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that they will find the funds to get ready for full-scale combat in the next few years? Bear in mind, of course, that if you think answer is yes, we should hear you say yes.

Sir Richard Knighton: I refer you back to my earlier answer to the question. The commitment to spend 2.6% of defence by 2027, and for that to rise in the period beyond, as well as the Prime Minister's commitment to 3.5% of GDP, is unprecedented.

But to be completely honest with you, we will not be able to do everything that we wish as quickly as we might want within that envelope. That is a matter for the judgment of Ministers on the trade-offs they have to make. My job is to make sure that Ministers understand the consequences of whatever is in the programme, and that we spend the money on the things that are going to add the most value and make the most difference.

Q87 Jesse Norman: Thank you for coming in, CDS. I draw everyone's attention to my registered interest in relation to training and technology.

I want to understand what you were just saying a little further. Obviously, I understand that you want to be as helpful as possible to the Committee, given the circumstances, which are not easy for all kinds of reasons. I think I heard you say that you were perfectly clear that the Government could not fund the combination of current commitments to programmes and the SDR. So something has got to give in some way. That might be a level of ambition, it might be pushing stuff to the right, or it might be the word that we do not use, beginning with "cuts". I think that is what I heard you say; is that right?

Sir Richard Knighton: Partially, Mr Norman. The point I am making is that the SDR set a headmark of 2035, and there will be limitations in the capacity of industry and our ability to recruit the number of people we need, as well as financially. My point is that we cannot deliver everything that we might want to in a very short period.

Q88 Jesse Norman: You can imagine that if small in-year savings and additional funding remain as they are, you might have to cut a platform. That would be a major change required to fund other activities. Is that the kind of thing that is being discussed at the moment?

Sir Richard Knighton: There is a whole range of choices that we might have. I laid out some around levels of contingency and the speed at which you might do things. There are things that will go out of service and be replaced, and the question is whether we can accelerate that replacement and bring in new capability and modernise. The First Sea Lord talked recently about the concept of Atlantic Bastion providing additional capability through autonomous systems. All of those are in play, and all of those are things that we can consider.

Q89 Jesse Norman: So there are big capital programmes, as well as small in-year and multi-year revenue programmes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Richard Knighton: I am now talking specifically about the big system. The in-year measures are more where Mr Twigg and Mr Thomas were coming from.

- Q90 **Jesse Norman:** Obviously, one of our concerns—we published a report on it—is current readiness, in the next two or three years. Can you confirm that over the next few years all the services will see an increase in disposable cash flow that they can spend on improving readiness as a matter of resource funding? You hinted that resource funding was coming under additional pressure, but can you confirm that every one of those services is going to see an increase in its disposable cash?

Sir Richard Knighton: The increase in the defence budget is quite significant. It will be about £11 billion more in 2027 than it is this year, and that is in cash terms. A proportion of that will flow through the MSHQ to me. It will be exactly that.

- Q91 **Jesse Norman:** Brilliant; that's great. Obviously, the Government have put a bit of a gag on senior members of the armed forces speaking. Has that been a constraint on you or some of your colleagues?

Sir Richard Knighton: I have not felt gagged in any way, shape or form. It is a long-standing requirement for senior people to get permission from authority to speak or make statements. Tonight, I am speaking at the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces, and I have to get my words or bullet points cleared through the system. It is not being gagged; it is a normal part of the process.

Jesse Norman: They have obviously tightened it up.

Sir Richard Knighton: As long as I have been a senior officer, that has been the process we have been through. There is nothing particularly new there.

- Q92 **Jesse Norman:** On a scale of one to 10—from low confidence to high confidence—how confident are you that any units that we deployed in Ukraine would have sufficient equipment, training and rotation schedules to be able to maintain a safe capability there?

Sir Richard Knighton: I am confident we will deploy people to ensure that they are safe, but you will know, Mr Norman, that there is no such thing as zero risk in operational environments. The job of the military leadership, with the support of Ministers in decision making, is to judge that level of risk and make sure that the benefits we get from deployment outweigh any risk that we might have. You will have heard the Defence Secretary say in Kyiv on Friday that we are committing, in this financial year, a couple of hundred million pounds to improve capability.

- Q93 **Jesse Norman:** But just on equipment, training and rotations, you are feeling pretty very confident.

Sir Richard Knighton: Yes. We will not deploy our armed forces if we are not happy that they are going to be safe. I am confident, having been closely involved in the work on the coalition of the willing planning, that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we have a means of meeting the requirements that have been set, and the additional funding will reduce the risk that they might face.

- Q94 **Jesse Norman:** Can I come back to the important point you raised in relation to NATO? Obviously you have obligations, and we have obligations as a nation, under NATO, to provide specified forces, at defined readiness levels, for defined contingencies under NATO command on a timely basis. How confident are you that we are meeting our operational and strategic commitments to SACEUR in all our various domains?

Sir Richard Knighton: Over the last year or so there has been an increase in what that target is. That is the process that NATO goes through. What NATO has done over the last few years is develop what is called a NATO family of plans—the DDA family of plans—and that has helped to specify more precisely what the requirements are, right across NATO, and they then get disaggregated to each nation. As a consequence of that, we are now being asked to produce more than we were in the past, and we are not at that level yet. That is why we need to increase defence spending.

What I can tell you now is that I speak to SACEUR, sometimes it feels like daily, but certainly weekly, about what his requirements are, and he is very happy with the quality and capability of what the UK provides. But I will be very honest with you, Mr Norman: we have to do more and do better.

- Q95 **Jesse Norman:** That is important. So you are not very confident at the moment, but you are hopeful that the track you are on will get some confidence. When do you think that will be?

Sir Richard Knighton: My point is not about confidence; my point is that the demand on defence has gone up.

Jesse Norman: Right. But when are we going to meet those SACEUR plans that we have discussed?

Sir Richard Knighton: We will need to be spending the full 3.5% before we can meet the full demand, in broad terms, and that process will take a number of years, as has been set out in the strategic defence review.

- Q96 **Jesse Norman:** We will not reach SACEUR's demands until the early 2030s, so if there is a war before then, we are all in trouble.

Sir Richard Knighton: This is where we have to be really careful, because the purpose of NATO is to deter Russia from attacking us. The way we do that is by demonstrating that we are ready to fight and win. There is a heated debate about when Russia might be ready to do something versus NATO. Right now, they are fixed in Ukraine. They are taking an enormous number of casualties—over 1.4 million casualties—and there are some reports of nearly 400,000 deaths this year. The risk position changes over time, and our job as a contributing nation is to ensure that our forces are as ready as they can be, and to talk about those in a positive and realistic manner. That is the balance we have to strike.

Q97 **Jesse Norman:** Right, but I think you are giving us a picture of qualified concern, if I can put it that way, about lack of readiness and upgrade relative to SACEUR plans over the next four or five years. That is what I am hearing.

Sir Richard Knighton: I think the Committee's report on readiness got it right. There are risks right across NATO. We are being asked to produce more, and we will produce more as more funding comes online, so we cannot be complacent. We have to stay focused on those things, but we should also be realistic about the threat that we face.

Jesse Norman: Right. But having more money earlier to address readiness issues will make a huge difference.

Sir Richard Knighton: It would make a difference.

Q98 **Derek Twigg:** I am after your opinion on the Defence Medical Services. When I was a Minister from 2006 to 2008, one of my priorities was to sort out the problems with the Defence Medical Services, so I have some understanding of the issues. I think that, generally, the Defence Medical Services and the NHS kept on top of the casualties we were getting from Iraq and Afghanistan—

Sir Richard Knighton: Brilliantly, if I may say.

Derek Twigg: They did a fantastic job. But the NHS was in a much better position then: it was coming out of a very difficult period and was starting to get a lot of additional funding and make a lot of improvements. If we had twice the level of casualties we had in Iraq and Afghanistan in a future conflict, do you have concerns about the ability of the Defence Medical Services and the NHS to cope with that? I know that there have been exercises, but given the massive pressures now, which are even greater than they were then, do you have concerns about the Defence Medical Services and our ability to treat wounded casualties?

Sir Richard Knighton: I would lay out my concerns in two buckets, the first of which relates to the short term. I know the Committee had a closed briefing session on the Defence Medical Services. In the short term we have a number of gaps in specialist skills. Like a lot of areas across defence, high-demand and highly skilled roles—for example, cyber-space specialists, engineers and some in the medical profession—are difficult to fill. The work that the head of the medical services and the head of the cyber and specialist operations command are doing around financial retention incentives to improve recruitment is all about how we address that. That is a short-term problem that we need to get after.

My second, wider point is that if we ended up in an all-out conflict under NATO article 5 and sustained mass casualties, the defence medical system is not set up for that; it would have to plug into the NHS. That is exactly what we saw happen in Ukraine. Some of you may have heard me speak at RUSI just before Christmas about the need for us to think about how we would respond at a national level and bring all the levers of the

Government's power and authority together to allow us to do that. At the moment, we do not have a full plan for how we would do that.

I have every confidence that we would do that, given the way that the NHS and the brilliant people in the NHS and the Defence Medical Services have responded historically, but right now we do not have a complete plan for how we would mobilise the NHS in the event of an armed conflict at a NATO article 5 level. Those are the two things that we need to address.

Q99 **Derek Twigg:** Do you have any idea when that plan might be in place? I am trying to get the sense of urgency here, and your concerns, because if service personnel are going to get wounded or hurt, we want to make sure that they have the best possible health services available to them.

Sir Richard Knighton: The national health service and our Defence Medical Services already work very closely together, and you will know that the majority of our specialists work inside the national health service, even though they are in uniform. That works well and there is more that we need to do to enhance that.

Q100 **Derek Twigg:** Let us get to this plan. Where are we on that?

Sir Richard Knighton: There is a wider piece of work run by the Cabinet Office about developing our national defence plan and structure, and it would be right for you to talk to the Cabinet Office about that. That is part of their overall plan, and I think we will start to see that evolve and develop into more detail over the next year to 18 months.

Derek Twigg: So you have concerns that, at the moment, we are not there.

Sir Richard Knighton: We do not have a holistic national plan for how we would mobilise the NHS in times of all-out war in Europe.

Q101 **Chair:** Sir Richard, I want to bring you back to the changing strategic context, and particularly Greenland. You will be aware that there have been threats made about the future position or status of Greenland, with President Trump describing it as a "national security priority". In that wider context, have you been involved in any contingency planning, given that what could happen with Greenland may end up shattering the NATO alliance?

Sir Richard Knighton: It will not come as a major surprise, I suspect, that I have not been involved in plans directly to defend Greenland. I can tell you that Greenland is part of Denmark, which is part of NATO and part of our overall NATO area of responsibility. I have heard and seen the reports of what US officials have said about their concern around the security of Greenland, particularly against Russia and China. NATO provides an impeccable security guarantee for all those nations that are part of it. The Danish Chief of Defence Staff is bringing together a range of Chiefs of defence this afternoon—sadly, I cannot go because I will be talking to the all-party parliamentary group this evening. But we look at this as Greenland is part of NATO; that is the context in which we see these issues. Ultimately, anything else is a political matter. But from a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

military perspective, it is part of the overall area of responsibility for NATO.

Chair: I believe Mike Martin wanted to come in there as well.

Q102 **Mike Martin:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for coming, Air Chief Marshal. I want to pick up the theme that Jesse Norman and Tan have spoken about. The family of plans is asking for more, there are higher requirements from NATO, and we are talking about more deployments, about the coalition of the willing in Ukraine and perhaps about NATO training missions or some sort of NATO deployment to Greenland. We also have ongoing commitments in Estonia, and we have effectively agreed to back up Finland. So we have a lot of demands on our time, yet the military is getting smaller and there are funding gaps being spoken about. I want to ask something very specific: in talking about the coalition of the willing—figures of 7,500 have been bandied about, which is 20,000 when you do the rule of three to have a roulement, and the Army obviously has only about 50,000 deployable—where specifically is the risk? We cannot put 20,000 troops, with the roulement, into Ukraine and not be taking risks somewhere else? Is that risk in Estonia, or is it that we cannot back up Poland?

Sir Richard Knighton: It is probably worth me setting out the strategic question and challenge associated with the security guarantees for Ukraine and for NATO. This is a conversation that my chief of defence colleagues, SACEUR and I have had. The agreement that was reached last week in Paris, with the Paris declaration—signed by the UK, France and Ukraine—is remarkable. What is even more remarkable is the commitment that the US have made to security guarantees. I do not know if you saw the press conference, but Mr Witkoff and Mr Kushner both made very firm commitments. It is the strongest security guarantee that we have ever provided.

Q103 **Mike Martin:** Sorry, but where is the risk if we put 20,000 troops into Ukraine?

Sir Richard Knighton: Sorry, let me just describe this for you. We have a set of security guarantees for Ukraine and we also have an existing set of security guarantees for NATO. If it was an entirely zero-sum game, you would clearly see forces taken from one place to go somewhere else. That might affect our ability to respond to crises overseas or to service the contingency requirements—the readiness requirements—for NATO. But Russia, right now, is fixed in Ukraine. Post a peace deal, we do not quite know what the outcome will be, and we will have to make judgments dynamically about where we put the forces and how we service those various security guarantees, because we cannot do all of the things in all of the places all of the time.

I am confident in our ability to meet a coalition of the willing requirement, certainly in the short term. We may want to come on to this in more detail, but the principle around the coalition of the willing is that it enables Ukraine to build up its armed forces, deter Russia and defend itself. So



HOUSE OF COMMONS

this is an enabling force, but part of the way in which we enable Ukraine to do those things is that the US offer a backstop and we offer an opportunity.

Q104 Mike Martin: You are quite happy that Russia is fixed in Ukraine; you are almost saying that that is a good thing, and I agree with you that it is a good thing. But if it is a good thing that Russia is fixed in Ukraine, how is it not a bad thing that we become fixed in Ukraine if we deploy troops there?

Sir Richard Knighton: It depends on the scale, and on the circumstances and what Russia does. You can make an argument—

Q105 Mike Martin: What is a safe number?

Sir Richard Knighton: As we are in a period of detailed planning, and without the security guarantees having been signed and been through the political process, it would not be helpful for me to lay that out in public. Anything I say will just make Putin wiser.

The Prime Minister has committed to having a vote in Parliament about deployment; part of that will be a role for me to articulate what those risks are and for them to be debated and considered both in Government and in Parliament. I will absolutely commit to do that, but right now, before we have the security guarantee settled, it would not be helpful to speculate about what the numbers might be. But as I say, I am confident in the short term that we can meet that requirement.

Q106 Mike Martin: A final question: how many soldiers does the Russian Federation have in Ukraine?

Sir Richard Knighton: If you look at the numbers inside Ukraine or in the region, it is well over half a million.

Q107 Emma Lewell: Hi, CDS. I have a few questions. What do you think the likelihood is of Russia agreeing a peace deal that sees NATO members as boots on the ground in Ukraine?

Sir Richard Knighton: The short answer is that we do not know. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Russia will not sign up to that, but when I spoke to Mr Witkoff and Mr Kushner in Paris last week, they were both optimistic about the ability to get to a deal. I was reading a RUSI article from March over the weekend that talked about there being no prospect of America signing up to security guarantees in Ukraine, and yet here we are with America signing up to security guarantees in Ukraine.

It is hard to be certain what will happen. Clearly, the rhetoric coming out of Russia and Putin implies that they do not want to do a deal. I always say that there is one person who can stop this war right now, and that would be President Putin. But we have moved on dramatically, and pressure on Russia is increasing because of the coalition of the willing and the role that the Americans have played. We will have to wait and see.

Q108 Emma Lewell: Why do you think other members of the coalition of the willing have not given similar security guarantees to those that the UK,

France and the US have given?

Sir Richard Knighton: They will do; I am certain of that. The leadership is with the UK and France, and the decision was to make a declaration in Paris and to lead the way, but I am certain that other nations will make those commitments. We have a whole range of those nations represented in the operational headquarters in Paris, and they are fully involved in the planning. You will recognise that different nations have different legal bases for deploying their forces and they will need to be settled, but I am absolutely certain that others will join.

Q109 **Emma Lewell:** Of course, CDS, you know as well as I do that a vote in Parliament is not needed for any of this—it is royal prerogative. Do you envisage that if things are moving quickly, the vote in Parliament will come after?

Sir Richard Knighton: That would be a matter entirely for Ministers.

Chair: Let us move on to modernisation and readiness issues.

Q110 **Mr Bailey:** Air Chief Marshal, the equipment plan from 2023, which underpins the defence investment plan, had a substantive shortfall of £29 billion, and we can talk about that number. That was the MoD's figure; it was actually a bracket of £7 billion to £29 billion. The NAO said about it was £16 billion. Those figures are all public, so we can point to them.

The NAO was clear that the gap did not arise because of inflation or external pressures; it arose through different behaviours by top-level budget holders and their different approaches to the defence investment plan. The Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy both included full predicted costs where they appeared unaffordable; the Army produced an affordable plan but then accepted risks that capabilities would not meet the Government objectives. The report is quite clear about that, and we tussled over it on the Public Accounts Committee last year. Is the NAO's premise about how the gaps arose something you agree with or not?

Sir Richard Knighton: As you know, Mr Bailey, I am very familiar with the equipment plan report, and the NAO's various reports. The reason why there is a range for the number is that it depends on what assumptions you make. Some of it is about uncertainty on future costs, and some is about what you assume about the ongoing upgrade costs, for example. The NAO has a bunch of smart people, and they are right that, depending on what assumptions you make, you can make the cost go up or down. I am familiar with that.

Q111 **Mr Bailey:** Okay. I will not try to put words in your mouth, but is the premise that came about from the NAO's approach right, that the three different service Chiefs behaved differently, and therefore there were differences?

Sir Richard Knighton: I am not sure you could lay it specifically at a single service.

Q112 **Mr Bailey:** The NAO said quite specifically that the gaps arose through the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force putting unfunded programmes into the programme—that is why there was such variance. The reason why the Army carries such risk is because they cut their programme out. The premise is that behavioural change leads to a divergence in the amount of money.

Sir Richard Knighton: It is not a behavioural change thing. If you cannot afford it, you cannot deliver it, so the Navy and the Air Force will have to make adjustments to their programmes if they are going to live within it. That might be about delay, or about reductions in numbers—there are a whole bunch of ways in which you can do that. I think where you are going with this is that there is some deep cultural difference of approach between the three services. I am not sure I share that view.

Q113 **Mr Bailey:** That is straight from the NAO report. The point I am trying to make is the one you have just made: that there is a need for behavioural change, which was the point of defence reform. The point was that the single service Chiefs should submit in to you, as Chief of Defence Staff, and you—well, your predecessor—should have applied prioritisation across those needs. That £29 billion should not have been something that arrived as part of the DIP, because your predecessor should have prioritised that and presented that prioritisation to your Minister, and ultimately to the Prime Minister. That is a behaviour that defence reform wishes you to get after. Is that something that you will stop?

Sir Richard Knighton: Remind me which year's equipment plan you are talking about?

Q114 **Mr Bailey:** It was 2023. It is a 10-year programme, and we know it is all capital expenditure, so unless there is some big gee-whizz thing that I am not aware of, that £29 billion would still be in the programme as a deficit.

Sir Richard Knighton: Or somewhere between £7 billion and £29 billion.

Q115 **Mr Bailey:** Or £16 billion, if you take the NAO's figures. We know that there were three different methodologies from the three different Chiefs, and that two put in unfunded programmes. The Chiefs all took different approaches. Defence reform says, "We have this quad. CDS is in charge of the lot; he is going to pull them all together and they are going to work towards him." Is that something you are going to propose?

Sir Richard Knighton: That is exactly right. One of many benefits and opportunities that comes with defence reform is the ability to pull together a single integrated force plan that I, as CDS, am ultimately accountable for. Through doing that, we will apply consistency in the approach we take.

That does not necessarily mean that the risk disappears, because you still have to develop a programme as best you can with the best information you have, and things change. I talked about contingency earlier, and the level of contingency you put in allows you to buy out some of those risks. You are absolutely right that the defence reform model offers us the opportunity, with the money and tasking flowing through the CDS into the single services, to make that a more coherent and systematic approach.

Q116 Mr Bailey: Got it. If that is the case and we require all services to submit costed programmes on a common basis, with no uncostered options, to force explicit trade-offs between the services before it reaches Ministers, why have we got an uncostered SDR?

Sir Richard Knighton: Sorry, you will have to explain that to me in a bit more detail.

Q117 Mr Bailey: The logic is that, prior to it arriving with Ministers, the single service Chiefs' behaviour should be to submit costed and affordable profiles. So why are we in the situation we are in?

Sir Richard Knighton: There are a couple of things. First, the SDR was an external report; it was not done by anybody inside the Department. Secondly, the SDR did not go into the details around the programme; that is what the defence investment plan is for. The approach we are trying to take with the defence investment plan is to make sure we understand the associated costs, the trade-offs and the risks we are taking.

Q118 Mr Bailey: That is entirely in line with the evidence that we have received in this Committee. Lord Robertson came before us prior to the SDR and said that reprioritisation of roles, capabilities, activities and support may be made in the current Defence programme, which implies that there should be down arrows and that we should expect to see things stop. However, after the SDR happened, General Barrons came in and was quite cocksure and cock-a-hoop about the fact that the reviewers had not been asked to do prioritisation. So at some point a decision was made to remove prioritisation, which kind of undermines the whole point, because the premise I think we agreed on was that that should not have occurred.

Sir Richard Knighton: As I say, the SDR was an external document. It was presented to the Department by the external reviewers, and they were not asked to produce a costed programme. That is one of the reasons why getting the defence investment plan is so hard, because we have high levels of ambition over long periods of time that we are trying to address, doing some of that prioritisation you describe.

Q119 Mr Bailey: Therefore, you would accept—without putting words in your mouth—that the SDR failed to impose prioritisation and therefore allowed that £7 billion to £29 billion gap, and associated commitment pressure, to flow straight through to the defence investment plan?

Sir Richard Knighton: There are a couple of things to reflect on. First, that 2023 equipment plan was based on the previous budget; that was before the uplift to 2.6% in '27 and the commitment to grow beyond that. So that number will have changed.

The second thing is that although the SDR, as we have both agreed, did lay out priorities for improvement and modernisation, and for filling in hollowness that it reflected on, it did not give us specific areas in which we should disinvest or seek to slow down investment. That is the work that we have to do through the defence investment plan.

Q120 Mr Bailey: Okay, so there was activity and not prioritisation. I understand



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that there is an amount of sensitivity about this, but I have to ask, what are the down arrows? Where are the capabilities, activities or support functions that could be reduced in order to do the thing the SDR failed to do, which is to prioritise?

Sir Richard Knighton: I recognise why you and the Committee will be interested in the detail of that, but I will not go into the details of the options that we are considering.

Q121 **Mr Bailey:** I accept that, but I am here to ask.

Sir Richard Knighton: I can understand why you asked, Mr Bailey—absolutely.

Q122 **Jesse Norman:** I just want to pick up one thing you said there, CDS, which was that the SDR was an external document presented to the Department. We had Lord Robertson in front of the Committee saying specifically that they worked very closely with MoD officials and with the Treasury all the way through, and that specific care was taken that there should be no surprises as to the costing. It feels like a disavowal for you now to say, “Well, there we were going along, and then suddenly this external report gets presented to us and we have to deal with it.” How does that work?

Sir Richard Knighton: I think both things can be true. Lord Robertson presented the report, with the 62 recommendations, to the Department. The Department—the Defence Secretary—accepted every single one of those recommendations and said we would get on with implementing them. That is that is exactly what we are doing—

Q123 **Jesse Norman:** So it was accepted that these proposals were costed and accepted for purposes of procedure, planning and programming, and to move forward on that basis. To come now and say, “Well, hold on a second, we had no idea the SDR was going to create all this additional cost” feels—

Sir Richard Knighton: That is not at all what—

Jesse Norman: Well, obviously the Prime Minister thought it was true, so how is that—

Sir Richard Knighton: That is not what I am saying. My point is that if you look back at the history of these things, when we did an integrated review in 2021, and an SDSR in 2015 and 2010, they were done internally and the policy document published alongside it all was done alongside the detailed investment plan costings. That was not the way that it was done this time.

The Government decided to have an external panel, which engaged brilliantly with those of us inside the Department, but what has had to follow is the detailed costing of that plan. That is the work that we are doing on the defence investment plan. That is very specifically what the Ministers set out that they were going to do.

Q124 **Jesse Norman:** So it was never actually costed? They did some work and they thought it was costed, but it wasn't really costed.

Sir Richard Knighton: We had not done all the detail that we are doing right now to make that work. That was the position; the Government decided that was the approach that they wanted to take, by having the independent review first and then the detailed costed plan to follow.

Q125 **Mr Bailey:** Just to come back on that, whose decision was it to take that out of the terms of reference for the SDR? Where exactly in the Department did that come from? Prior to the SDR, it is in there. The PM says, "Make it costed, make it apply prioritisation, fix the problems," and, at some point, Defence says, "No, it's all right; we'll do that."

Sir Richard Knighton: No; if you go right back to the start of the process, the Defence Secretary agreed with the Prime Minister that we would have a strategic defence review—note that that is a strategic defence review, not a strategic defence and security review—and that the job of that team was to develop proposals for how we would improve and modernise defence. They did not ask them to do the detailed planning. That is why that document talks about a defence investment plan. If you go back, I think the terms of reference are a matter of public record.

Q126 **Mr Bailey:** That is contrary to the evidence that we have received. Lord Robertson was quite clear, when he came before us prior to the SDR, that the prioritisation would be part of the SDR. By the time the SDR came out, they were very explicit that Defence had said it would take the prioritisation. That is why we are expecting the defence investment plan to do that prioritisation, and why I have this big question about what on earth defence reform means if prioritisation is going to come in the defence investment plan and not from the chief—if it hadn't already got there.

Sir Richard Knighton: The defence investment plan, and the decisions around the investments that go into it, will be a matter for Ministers to decide, based on advice on prioritisation that I and others will give to them.

On the point that you are making about Lord Robertson's perspective, I am afraid that is not one that I recognise, and I would have to go and talk to Lord Robertson about exactly what he meant. Bear in mind that I was Chief of the Air Staff at the time, but I am not aware of any point at which the direction to the independent review team was changed to ask them to take out prioritisation. I am not aware of that.

Q127 **Ian Roome:** I have a quick supplementary question, Air Chief Marshal. Just before Christmas, I asked the Secretary of State on the Floor of the House when the defence investment plan was going to be published. He said that it would be with great urgency, and hopefully by the end of the year. That was after the delay in August, and then obviously it has moved to March.

Given what you have been saying to Mr Bailey and Jesse here, what is the learning curve for the future? What can we learn from this? Obviously, you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have a great handle on this, so what lessons can be learned? It is like what our mothers used to say—"If you can't afford it, don't spend it." What I am trying to say is: what can we learn from this with the SDR and the DIP? Should they not just be one document?

Sir Richard Knighton: That will be a matter for whichever Government initiate it.

Q128 **Ian Roome:** Yes, I know, but what is your advice? I am asking you.

Sir Richard Knighton: My experience has been that turning policy ambition into hard, costed capability plans is really difficult. If you can try to do those two things together, you can make those trade-offs as you go through, but I also observe the advantages that we had, in terms of speed and different perspectives, by having an independent panel conduct the strategic defence review. Some kind of blend of that in the future might be a sensible way forward. I am quite a student of these defence reviews, and they are very context dependent. They depend on what is going on in the world at the time, who the Government are and whether there has just been an election. All those things play a part.

Ian Roome: I cannot wait to read your paper on it in five years' time.

Q129 **Fred Thomas:** CDS, I am going to ask you about reserves. Some lofty ambitions on the reserve force were laid out in the SDR, including an increase of 20% in time. In the context of our conversations about the challenges of funding some of the Government's strategic aims, as well as about the increasing threat, I want to ask you about the near term again—I really do not want to get into the 2030s.

How seriously is the MoD taking reforming the reserves? We have had various review documents on the reserves in the last few years, which you will be familiar with, yet numbers are falling, and the real estate, certainly of the Army Reserve, is noted to be deteriorating further. Would you give us your take, now that you are in this role, of how important, or not, you see the reserve force as being?

Sir Richard Knighton: On your final point, the reserve is a fundamental component of the whole force.

Q130 **Fred Thomas:** Why is that? I personally transferred from the regular force to the reserves, as did other Members, and I have noticed that that does not seem to be the case. When you say that it is a fundamental part of the force, what do you mean by that? It does not appear to be.

Sir Richard Knighton: If you go to RAF Wyton, which is a cyber and specialist operations command unit—

Q131 **Fred Thomas:** We are going there next week as a Committee.

Sir Richard Knighton: Well, there you go; you will see. Particularly if you go at the weekend, you will see that the reserves are critical to sustaining and maintaining the intelligence work of that unit over those quiet hours. I was there just before Christmas. I used the place for special

communications, and I know that there were reservists supporting the outputs then.

The reserves do a number of things. In terms of delivering our outputs, they do that day in, day out, particularly specialists. I point to intelligence specialists, including those at Wyton, who can provide additional capacity, particularly at weekends. There are specialist skills that are much more readily available in the private sector that are hard to sustain and retain inside the armed forces. Skills relating to intelligence and cyber are particular examples, and medical is another area. The reserves play a really critical part in those specialist skills.

More broadly, though, as we think about how we are going to mobilise all of the armed forces in a state of rising tension and ultimately up to article 5, that is where we build mass, capacity and capability through the reserves. Lord Peach has written his external review of reserves, and we received the report just before Christmas. They are not at the level we would want them, either in terms of the strength of the reserve forces or in terms of the infrastructure and kit they get access to.

Q132 Fred Thomas: You have just spoken about how integral a part of the overall force the reserves are. In the document you referenced by Lord Peach, which is the 2025 annual statutory report of the scrutiny team at the Council of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations, the No. 1 top finding, based on the fact that every single one of the numbers for strength is down—fewer people are joining, even though the strategic vision is for more of them to be joining—is this: "The Reserve lacks a clear and resourced sense of purpose." They do not know why they are there. They do not know why they exist.

I take your point about niche specialists here and there—they are vital and amazing. This Committee has spent time with other parts of the force where enhancing that has been spoken about, and we all support that. But, overall, the reserve force feels extremely fragmented and poorly resourced, and it struggles to retain people. Clearly, it struggles to recruit people. Do you think it is ready for reform? Or do you think that it works as it is, with its separate reserve force HQs?

Sir Richard Knighton: My personal view is that we have to integrate the reserves much more closely into the way in which the forces operate. My experience at Air Command was that we integrated the reserves into the headquarters at Air Command. We have now docked them under a regular Commander as AOC 2 Group. That model certainly works well in the Air Force, and to some extent in the Navy. The Army has more formed units from reserves and there is, perhaps, a different model.

My core guiding principle for the reserves, which I think should get at your concern, Mr Thomas, is that they have to be part of the plan. We have to be clear what the reserves are going to do and when. That shapes how they train and how we equip them, and it gives that clear sense of purpose to our reserves. I admit that we are not there yet. The SDSR committed to improving the size and resourcing, both financially and in equipment

terms.¹ All of that is something that we will have to improve over the next few years to make sure that we get the most out of the reserves, which we spend a significant amount on every year.

Q133 Fred Thomas: Yes, it is not cheap. It is really good to hear acknowledgement that there is some work to do. I personally endorse the model of having them much more closely integrated with regular units, because otherwise you get that lack of a sense of purpose.

We have been around NATO partners—we have travelled a bit as a Committee—and other countries have what might be called their third-tier echelon force or defence force, or what the Estonians call the EDL, which is the Estonian Defence League.

Our equivalent would be what we call the strategic reserve, which is people who have maybe served in the military but are no longer reservists. They are quite a few years out from having been near a uniform or a rifle. If we did get into a full-scale conflict, what is your personal take on whether you would trust those people? Would they be part of the plan? Are they part of the plan?

Sir Richard Knighton: The SDR lays this out. It says that the strategic reserve is an important part of that wider resilience through our armed forces. I am confident that if we found ourselves in that rising level of crisis, many of those who had served previously and retired or gone into another profession or into the private sector would want to come back.

What we do not have right now is an effective system of tracking and engaging that community. That is part of the work on reserve development that the Minister of Veterans and People wants to deliver as part of the SDR deliverables. That will be an important part of our overall level of resilience. I will be completely honest; we do not have a good plan right now to do that.

Q134 Fred Thomas: Thank you for your honesty. I will move on to a separate area now, away from reserves and on to defence reform. We had your predecessor in front of this Committee twice, I think, including once shortly before he was due to go. He finished, and he then made a speech in his first public appearance since leaving the role. You never quite know what people are going to say once they are no longer—not shackled, but free to speak.

Sir Richard Knighton: Not gagged.

Fred Thomas: Gagged—that is the word I was looking for. He said that he tried very hard to change culture in the MoD and the forces, but he could not—that it was really tough to change culture. Part of the defence reform vision that we have heard is around culture, which could be attitudes to women and minorities in the forces, or it could be culture in terms of risk aversion in procurement, or any number of things.

I want to ask you specifically about risk aversion in procurement, which is

¹ The Witness intended to say “SDR”



HOUSE OF COMMONS

something that multiple defence people have spoken to us about. For civil servants and uniformed people who make decisions about what to trial and eventually procure, there is basically no incentive to take risk, because you are liable to be sued by defence companies and you are putting your career on the line. Culturally, that leads to stasis. Those are not your words, but it is what I have heard from a lot of people. Do you have any plans to try to shift that culture?

Sir Richard Knighton: The short answer is yes—we have to. It is not a matter of whether we want to; we have to, particularly because of speed, and speed of adaptation. I have been out to Ukraine three times in the time I have been CDS, and one thing that is really plain when you go to visit is how everybody throughout the system has a clear understanding of the requirement—the threat and the need to do something—and is able and willing to balance that with the risk that they are able to take.

I am on record as saying that what we have done in defence over the last 30 or 40 years is to optimise a system for driving cost out. We have optimised it for the 20th century, not necessarily the 21st century. That has led to highly transactional relationships with industry, where we have tried to lay risk on to industry, and industry has tried to protect itself from that risk. That was at a time when we were not facing a threat from Russia and did not face the need to change as quickly, and that will not be adequate for the future. I do not think that it is fair to say that no risk is taken throughout the whole defence procurement system. If that were true, we would not necessarily have some of the challenges we have in a number of areas.

Fred Thomas: I do not think I said that, to be fair.

Sir Richard Knighton: How this works in Ukraine and other nations that face these existential threats—and how it worked in the UK, if you read about what we did during the second world war—is that there is real clarity around the need to change, and delegation and empowerment of people to make those trade-offs between the risks that you face in procurement, or maybe even in assurance, versus the benefit that you get from delivery. It is about creating the environment to do that. You will have seen in the SDR—I think Rupert talked about it when he came before the Committee previously—this idea of segmenting procurement.

Q135 **Fred Thomas:** I will just cut in, because as you say, the Committee has heard about segmentation from Mr Pearce, the new national armaments director, and the staff who were with him.

I have a last question. It is interesting that you mentioned the previous panel that the Committee had with the new national armaments director. I asked then whether, culturally, the direction in the MoD is to prepare for some kind of future conflict that might happen in the 2030s—as in 2035, which is one of the dates when we have committed to hit certain funding categories; it is so far away that policy could change so much between now and then—or to get ready to fight and win in the next couple of years? Russia is fixed in Ukraine at the moment, but if there is a ceasefire



HOUSE OF COMMONS

this year—discussions on deals are well under way now—it might shift its gaze and we might be drawn into conflict. Suddenly, conversations about spending X, Y or Z in 2035 would seem a bit irrelevant. I asked Mr Pearce and the staff with him, and they told me to ask the CDS when it comes to funding. That is what they said on the record.

Sir Richard Knighton: I think I read it. The obvious answer is that you have to do both. I talk about being ready to fight today, tomorrow and together. The “today” bit is about how we maximise the output we get from the kit we have today, which is about investing in spares and activity. At the same time, we also have to recognise that our enemy is changing and adapting, and we need to be able to keep up with that. You have to do both.

Partly to Mr Bailey’s point, what defence reform does is provide much greater clarity on the problem statement coming from the military and much greater delegation to the National Armaments Director to go to industry to work out how best to solve that. If that works, it will deliver a faster response to the specific problems we face. We have good examples of where we did this. If you think about the counter-IED fight in Afghanistan—when Mr Jopp and I worked together previously—we did that remarkably well. It was because we had a very clear threat and a very clear requirement to do better. That is the culture we have to bring in.

Honestly, it is difficult. Take someone like me, who has spent 30-plus years in the armed forces. We have been doing it the same way the whole time. To shift that mindset requires real clarity on the requirement and the threat, and then delegating and empowering our people to do those things. When things go wrong, which they might if you take more risks, we should acknowledge that they have gone wrong and say, “It was in the greater good”. I may use that defence in front of the Committee at some point in my time.

Fred Thomas: You would be welcome to in the future.

Q136 **Lincoln Jopp:** We probably had a pretty similar briefing when the Committee went to Ukraine. What was so telling was the way in which they had completely bypassed a load of stuff in order to get the responsiveness to the ever-evolving threat. We looked at what they had cut out. They had effectively cut out the whole of the military chain of command above the brigade level, the whole of the Ministry of Defence and every single regulator.

If you want the responsiveness that you are talking about, consider that institutions get the behaviours they reward. You just said that you spent 30 years in the armed forces doing it one way, which you have now acknowledged to be wrong, but institutions get the behaviours they reward and they have rewarded you by making you CDS. How are you going to meet this challenge? You have grown up and been successful in a system, and you now have to say, “We completely need to change it wholesale, and I am the man to lead it.”



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Richard Knighton: The point I am trying to make is that it is part of the acquisition system which, under the new model, is the National Armaments Director. What I can do, as the head of the armed forces in this new model, is be super clear about what the specific problem statements and requirements are, and be prepared to accept that we won't, in this new model, drive towards precise requirements 20 years in the future, but instead focus on what we are able to deliver this year and next year or this week, next week and the week after. That is the model that defence reform is trying to bring in.

That will require changes in regulation and process, and it will require us to accept failure when it occurs and to acknowledge that it was in pursuit of the greater good. What gives me some confidence around this is that, when we look at the circumstances where we have had a very clear requirement, we have swept away some of the process and regulation that has accreted and built up over 25 or 30 years of the peace dividend. I am not in any way pretending that is easy, and I am not in any way pretending that we can be complacent or that it will naturally just happen, but we have seen the importance of it in Ukraine. We have seen an example of how it can be done in Ukraine.

Let's be honest: the Ukrainian system is not without its flaws or problems. Right now, we are not at war. The challenge is how we create that sense of urgency without creating a sense of panic and throwing all the regulations established by this place out of the window. That will be a consistent effort to carve that away over time.

Q137 Mike Martin: I will touch on homeland preparedness and resilience. You will know very well that NATO article 3 mandates that we should continuously and effectively "maintain and develop" our "individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." That speaks specifically to this question of national resilience, both in a military sense and in a non-military sense. How would you say we are doing on that?

Sir Richard Knighton: Not as well as I would want us to. That was the central element of my speech at RUSI. You, we, those of us in this community are familiar with the issues and risks, and we talk about it all the time, but it is not at the front of our minds right across the nation. The example that I gave in my RUSI speech was an excellent report done by the Royal Academy of Engineering about infrastructure and the need to rebuild infrastructure such as flood defences, railways and so on. I agree with all the elements in that report, but at no point did it talk about doing that to build in resilience for the risk that might come from armed attack or sabotage. We have to bring those things more to the fore.

Following the publication of the national security strategy and the SDR, the Cabinet Office has led cross-Government work to enhance the thinking in those areas, and to deliver those things. But that is not free, and it is not going to happen overnight. I judge—and I have argued—that in a world where the demands on defence and on the nation are rising, where the risks are rising, this is the time that we should be contemplating and examining how we increase the resilience of the nation more broadly. As



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we think about replacing and upgrading signalling on railways, how do we build in the redundancy associated with that? We talked about the national health service earlier, so how do we think about holding stockpiles or building capacity and resilience to support us in mass-casualty events? That work is relatively new and is really getting going. I know that the team in the Cabinet Office has said that it would be very happy to talk to the Committee about it, if that were helpful.

Q138 Mike Martin: You are right: it is absolutely about asking, “Is that bridge built to do X under duress?” A mindset shift is needed as well. I am an MP for a constituency that has suffered repeated water outages, including for two weeks before Christmas. Towards the end of that outage, bad actors were playing in the social media space around the water quality. If you are a water company, you think that your job is to supply water, but all of a sudden you are dealing with malicious disinformation. We actually had to ask the Cabinet Office to get involved there. I agree with you that stuff costs money, but plans are cheap, so do we have a national defence plan?

Sir Richard Knighton: No, we do not have a complete national defence plan, yet.

Q139 Mike Martin: Shouldn’t we?

Sir Richard Knighton: Yes, absolutely, and the Government are committed to doing that.

Q140 Mike Martin: Why do we not have one yet?

Sir Richard Knighton: I think that it is a manifestation of the peace dividend—it is one of the most obvious. Since the end of the cold war, we have not prioritised those matters. As a consequence, for many years, Governments of many hues have not focused their efforts on developing that kind of plan. I am pleased to say that, partly as a consequence of what is in the strategic defence review, that is changing.

Q141 Mike Martin: When are we going to have the plan?

Sir Richard Knighton: I would say that the complete national defence plan is a question for the Cabinet Office.

Q142 Mike Martin: We are mandated to have that plan, right? We have signed a treaty that says we will.

Sir Richard Knighton: Inside Defence—which is a component of it—we have a plan called Op Arculus, which forms the basis of our national defence plan. We will evolve and develop that over this year. It will be an ongoing thing, but through this year we will have a plan that I can point to, where I understand the command and control arrangements and how we will transition through war.

Q143 Mike Martin: Are you aware of any other NATO countries that do not have national defence plans?

Sir Richard Knighton: There are a number. I do not know which nations, and some nations do not talk about it in public. I think it is fair to say that,

although nations may describe themselves as having a national defence plan, those plans have variable depths of detail. Our job should be to focus on ours, and make sure that we have the plan we need.

Q144 **Mike Martin:** But would you say that it is letting the side down not to have one, in terms of our allies and partners?

Sir Richard Knighton: As you said, NATO expects us to have a national defence plan, and that is why we need to work to build it.

Q145 **Alex Baker:** Air Chief Marshal, it is a delight to have you in front of us. I want to talk about defence reform. You have already picked up on that topic in some of your previous answers, but I want to give you an opportunity to put on record how defence reform is going. You have had the programme under way for a year now. How are the new structures enabling you to deliver outcomes, and what difference does it make having the service Chiefs reporting directly to you?

Sir Richard Knighton: As the SDR said, defence reform is the work of a whole Parliament, but our initial structures are in place with the CDS, the National Armaments Director, the permanent secretary and the Chief of Defence Nuclear, and our responsibilities and accountabilities are clear. Work on the underpinning processes, such as the alignment of budgets and, in particular, the establishment of the portfolios of acquisition and how they are organised and what they face off to, is still ongoing. The key date that we set ourselves is 1 April 2026, but there will need to be continued evolution of the systems over the subsequent years.

In terms of how it is helping, if you look at the way in which the Chiefs of Staff Committee has been operating, we now spend more time together, and the conversations are at a more strategic level. A lot of it has been focused on the integrated force plan and how that will fit inside the defence investment plan. Those are positive changes.

Q146 **Alex Baker:** Do you have any clearcut examples of how it has tangibly made a difference so far?

Sir Richard Knighton: The most obvious are when I talk to my ops people, and the clarity that comes with an element in that group being responsible for policy and another element being responsible for military strategy. That provides really clear choices—it brought into sharper focus the choices we are offering to Ministers. When you talk to my folks as part of that organisation, and the permanent secretary's folks, they would point to those opportunities. It has allowed us to spend more time talking about military strategy and how that fits together, and nest that within the policy. Ultimately, the big question will be whether we can drive the pace that Mr Jopp talks about and ensure that we deliver cost-effectively against those requirements. That will take some time.

The other thing I want to emphasise is that, while we talk about clarity of responsibility across the four pillars, I am really clear that we do not deliver for the country or for defence unless we work together. If we think about exports, for example, the National Armaments Director is not going



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to sell very much if the armed forces are not prepared to go and spend time with other nations to describe how we use them. It is collective responsibility that will deliver the overall outcome, but the clarity over those requirements and the sharper dividing line make it easier for us to understand how we are performing. For example, I now undertake quarterly reviews with the commands and their people about what it is we are asking them to do, how they are getting on with it, and how head office and the other parts of Defence can support them to deliver. That was not a thing that happened previously. I hope that will ultimately enable us to deliver more for Defence.

Q147 Alex Baker: Thank you. We will continue to ask this question every year, and hopefully you will come back with more and more tangible examples of greatly improved pace and value for money. My colleague Calvin Bailey asked about you and the Chiefs all being on the same page. For me, it was really clear that you obviously set the demand signal, and they report into you.

You have said that you are on the same page, but it was interesting to see at DSEI the Chiefs being given speaking slots and everybody taking their opportunity to pitch for why their work is important. How confident are you that you can genuinely exercise that central authority, if the Chiefs are continually able to go out to brief their pitch?

Sir Richard Knighton: I want the Chiefs to be talking about their specialist domain. I want Harv to talk about the air domain, Gwyn to talk about maritime, Roly to talk about land, and Jim to talk about cyber and specialist operations. I want them to do that. They are the experts in their domains. They have a really important role to play.

But you can understand that what we have to do is to integrate those things to create an integrated force. The really significant change in defence reform is that the tasking and the money flow through the CDS in a way that they have not in the past, and that provides us with the opportunity to do that, but until we get the defence budget and the defence plan absolutely in balance, it is going to be difficult for us to make inroads. That is why the defence investment plan is so important.

Q148 Alex Baker: I come from the private sector. I am just getting to know how the MoD works, in a way that I did not before. In the private sector, when a business commits to a process of change, generally in my experience the business brings in people who specialise in transformation and change, and specifically finance. You have a team of highly competent people running defence reform, but from what I can see, they are people with military backgrounds, not necessarily with specialist knowledge. Is there a different way of doing it?

Sir Richard Knighton: To be clear, the head of the transformation programme has come from outside defence. Gaby has a mixed team working for her, which includes a small number of military officers and civil servants, but she also has specialist help and a range of external assistance from consultants with specific expertise. They have been brought in deliberately to do the things that you describe.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q149 **Alex Baker:** It is good to hear that some of those skills are being brought in-house. It is important to have them in-house, rather than just consultants telling you externally. Is there scope for more specialism being brought in from outside to drive change?

Sir Richard Knighton: The Government have been very clear that they do not want to spend more money on consultancy and external assistance, but they also recognise that in some areas there is limited expertise inside the organisation. In those specific cases, yes, we will bring people in from outside.

Chair: We have just under 25 minutes left, and we still have a lot of ground to cover. I request that Members and your good self, Chief of Defence Staff, keep questions and answers as concise as possible.

Q150 **Lincoln Jopp:** In response to Alex's question, you said that you think that, as a result of defence reform, the building is better at doing military strategy—

Sir Richard Knighton: No, I said we had more time to focus on military strategy. But keep going, sorry.

Q151 **Lincoln Jopp:** In about June 1943, one of your predecessors, Field Marshal Alanbrooke, wrote in his diary that the thing that was really vexing him was how he could beat Germany in such a way that it could be regrown to act as a counterbalance to Russia in the post-war conflict—obviously, long before Normandy and all that happened. Metaphorically or literally, what are you writing in your diary tonight?

Sir Richard Knighton: I do not write a diary, as I do not have the time to do so. I am always amazed at what Alanbrooke was able to do, given the pressure he was under. The thing I am most bothered about in the near term is Russia, and how we get ourselves to a position where Russia concludes that it will not attack NATO or, therefore, undermine our national security, while at the same time recognising that in holding conflict below the threshold, there will inevitably be Russian activity below the threshold of war. In doing that, we need to work out how we work across all the agencies and all the levers of Government to protect the UK from that risk.

More broadly, beyond that, there is the changing shape, direction and source of power right across the globe. You can see it moving eastwards, and that is even before we talk about changes in US national security policy and strategy, and how we bring those together. Therefore, the question is: what is the role of the UK, and particularly the UK's armed forces, in enabling the stability and security that we have enjoyed over 80 years and that have enabled prosperity and ultimately growth for the nation? That is a key challenge for us. That is the big question we have to wrestle with, and we have an opportunity to do that now, which I am not sure we always did in such a structured way.

Q152 **Emma Lewell:** The defence world tends not to be great at conveying simple and straightforward messages to the public. You have spoken



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about having a national conversation about the risks that we face. Obviously the people in this room are aware of those risks, but how will you reach out to the wider population and have that national conversation?

Sir Richard Knighton: Our armed forces—particularly the leaders but also those right through our ranks—have a role to play in that. As I set out in my RUSI speech, the challenge is how you have a conversation about a complex threat that sits within a wider geopolitical and geostrategic context that is uncertain and challenging. The danger is that you fall back on simple tropes that Russia will invade by 2027, or they will not invade until 2035. The reality is that it is a matter of judgment about the level of risk that we face.

My core argument is that we are seeing an increasing risk as our adversary—Russia particularly—becomes more capable and more battle hardened, and we see a continued desire to undermine NATO and the stability of the west and the rules-based international system. We should have those kinds of debates in public. The polity have a critical role to play in that, and we can support that because of our understanding of the threats, but the role that our reserves, our cadets and our regular services play in talking about what the armed forces do is an important part of that national conversation.

Q153 **Emma Lewell:** Even listening to you there, CDS, if I were someone trying to understand what the risks are, I would have been lost off. If we are going to try to get the average person on the street to understand what the risk is, don't we need to be a bit more blunt and slightly more alarmist with them so that they understand?

Like you said, people are living in the cosy bubble of the peace dividend, and actually that is not where we are any more, but every single time I hear anybody in defence talking about it, I think the average person will be lost off within five seconds and just get on with their day. It is about making sure that they actually understand, and I don't think the public are there yet. If the public are not there yet, how are we going to get them to be resilient?

Sir Richard Knighton: That is a really fair challenge. As politicians, it is your job to communicate with society. My worry about being too blunt is that we scaremonger. My worry about being too relaxed is that we are too complacent. The reality is that it is more complicated than that. I will be happy to take advice from politicians on how to do that in an effective way. If we are too alarmist, that is unnecessary, but equally, we cannot be complacent either.

Q154 **Emma Lewell:** You will be aware of other countries—Norway and Finland have had military conscription for decades. I have friends in Finland, and they all talk quite openly about how they are always ready. They know that is something that, as a nation, they have to do. The Swedish Government have their "total defence" strategy.

Other Governments send out booklets to their citizens to say, "This is what



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you would do in the event of a national attack or an attack on critical national infrastructure.” There is nothing like that in the UK—not even the basics to let people know what they need to do if it happens. I could go out now and ask anyone what they would do in the event of an attack, and there would just be mass panic. What can we do to avert that?

Sir Richard Knighton: I spoke recently about the Swedish model; they provide a booklet—I think it is annually, but certainly regularly—that goes out in simple Swedish and English, and it talks about some of these issues. Some of it is about straightforward national resilience, so I suspect that it would cover off things such as Mr Martin’s constituents’ problems with water supply, but it expands right the way out to armed attack. It feels to me that those are the sorts of things that would be part of that wider national conversation, and they can be reassuring, as well as realistic, about the potential threats that we face.

It seems to me that we have to start with a description of what those things might be, admit that there is a degree of uncertainty about the likelihood of it happening, and then use all the means available to help educate society more broadly on what we might do. It goes beyond straightforwardly thinking about whether you are going to store drinking water at home; it is about how we encourage people to want to serve, or how we have the conversation with the public in which we say, “We are going to spend more money on defence, and that will have consequences.” Ultimately, that is a political discussion, but we can help support that through a description of the threats.

Q155 **Emma Lewell:** I think that is one of the central dilemmas: the public do not accept more spending on defence because they are not fully aware of the risk. That is something that we are always battling with as Members of Parliament. Until we get something clearly out there in an understandable format to the public, they are never going to accept it.

I have another quick question. Do you know when the defence readiness Bill will be ready?

Sir Richard Knighton: I don’t. My understanding is that it depends on finding parliamentary time for it. I know that it is a key focus for the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, Luke Pollard, and the Defence Secretary. They are determined to try to get it in during this Parliament, but I do not have a precise date.

Q156 **Emma Lewell:** Do you have any part to play in advising Ministers on what should be in that Bill?

Sir Richard Knighton: We will do, yes. The military staffs will have a part to play in that and describing some of the issues that we want—and, clearly, it will require specialist drafters, as we do not often do Bills in defence.

Q157 **Emma Lewell:** What do you think should be in it?

Sir Richard Knighton: A range of things, but it will be about how the Government gain access to private assets in times of crisis and how we

shift industrial capacity to particular areas of focus in times of crisis, mirroring laws and rights that other Governments have in other nations—the US is an example. Elements of those will be what we need.

Q158 Ian Roome: Air Chief Marshal, you mentioned in your speech at RUSI on 15 December that people have a critical role, and Rick Haythornthwaite said that “people are a pivotal military capability just as much as any new submarine or fast jet.” You also said one pleasing thing on retention. The Committee has heard from General Magowan, the Secretary of State and General Dame Sharon Nesmith on the issue of retention, and one thing that shocked me from our last report is that we had more people exiting than being recruited. You said in that speech that “the latest figures, just a few weeks ago”—so the beginning of January—“showed that for the first time in four years, more people joined than left the forces over the past year.” I think that is a big achievement.

Can you update the Committee on the Haythornthwaite review and your assessment of where the armed forces are in relation to recruitment and retention? We have had briefings about the pinch points and places where we have had to pay bonuses, particularly in your trade of engineering. At that time, one of questions was: “Are these just sticking plasters?”

Sir Richard Knighton: On the macro point, up to 1 October 2025, which is the last time that we had up-to-date data, more people had joined in the previous 12 months than had left. We have seen increases in those recruited—the Air Force was up to 37%, I think the Navy had about a 24% increase in the number of recruits—and we have seen a reduction in the number of people leaving. I take all those things as positive, but the net increase was only a few hundred over that year. It needs to be bigger to fill the gaps that have been created over the last few years where exits have exceeded inflow.

There is a whole bunch of factors that will have played a part in that. Some of it is the financial retention incentive; some of it will be the pay rises; some of it will be, for example, the defence housing strategy; some of it is about greater flexibility and allowing our personnel who want to extend their service to do so. All of those add up to delivering the shift in position that you have described.

I saw Rick Haythornthwaite last week to catch up with him, because I was involved in his report. Effectively, his recommendations form the basis of the chapter in the strategic defence review on people, and that is what we are driving at.

You will recall that Rick’s report had, I think, 62 recommendations.² That is a lot to get our arms around, so the work, as part of SDR delivery, is focusing on those things that are going to make the most difference in the short term. Part of that is about recruitment and retention—speeding that up and improving our retention numbers. The other part is about providing that flexibility of service to ensure that we keep people in for as long as possible.

² The report had 67 recommendations.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q159 Ian Roome: Lovely. The Committee has travelled to different NATO countries and spoken to serving British personnel who are in NATO positions. I have asked the Ministers this question as well. The SDR is truly NATO first, and we hear the terminology “NATO first” all the time, but I am picking up that sometimes, when serving officers or personnel are sent on NATO roles, it affects their promotion. That is what they tell me, and it is mainly because the commanding officer is from another NATO country, or because the role does not fit within the structures of the career paths set for people in such roles, and they have to come back and have experience of doing that role before they are considered for promotion. If we are truly NATO first, how are you, as CDS, going to ensure that the culture changes so that people’s time spent in NATO command positions does not affect their promotion?

Sir Richard Knighton: Actually, I want to do the opposite: I want to enhance the promotion prospects of people who have been to NATO and then brought that experience back into the UK. That has to be the way we do it. People will believe it when they see it and feel it—that is the trick. We are working hard at the senior appointments committee, and I know the single service promotion boards are working hard, to ensure that those who have that experience have opportunities to be promoted.

Q160 Ian Roome: And you have picked it up as an issue—

Sir Richard Knighton: Oh, 100%. Absolutely.

Q161 Michelle Scroggsham: It is nice to see you here.

Sir Richard Knighton: You have been very patient.

Michelle Scroggsham: I know—especially in this room, which is very hot today. We didn’t turn it up deliberately just for you.

We were told in the House in November that there has been some new mandatory training introduced for senior military leaders on how to spot and respond to unacceptable behaviour. I wonder if you could tell us a bit about that training and what it entails, and whether you have completed it.

Sir Richard Knighton: I am not sure specifically what the reference was in the House. I am happy to write to you if you provide me with the details.

More broadly, in terms of the work on raising our standards, I have been very clear since I started that this is something that needs to be led right at the very top of defence and, as the head of the military strategic headquarters, I need to lead the Chiefs. I have committed to us meeting frequently to consider the overall programme and the progress we are making against it.

There are five elements that I see to the programme. The first is about leadership. It is about leadership from the most senior levels, but right across the organisation. One of the benefits, to Ms Baker’s question, is that the new model under defence reform means that we can be more



HOUSE OF COMMONS

directive about a single approach to leadership right across defence and as we roll that out through this thing called the leadership edge framework. That is about good leadership more generally, but good leadership brings an organisation where people feel valued and feel part of the organisation, and that helps reduce the prevalence of any unacceptable behaviours.

There is also a big element around data and analytics, so that we understand where there are particular hotspots and can track our changes, and we can use that to identify where there might be particular problems with leadership.

There is a piece around communications, to help nudge and develop behaviours. Some of it is straightforward: one of the components is about tracking unacceptable behaviours, dealing with them and tackling them properly. But there is the comms around that, and education of our young people coming out of society into the armed forces is a key component.

Finally, there is a strand of work around training and education. For example, active bystander training is a key part. I did that a couple of years ago and found it to be a very helpful mechanism, just to give you some tools to deal with that situation. I will be tracking that with the Chiefs, but also working closely with our director general, people and the Vice Chief of Defence Staff to drive that through during my time as CDS.

Q162 Michelle Scrogam: This is generally about women in the armed forces and the unacceptable behaviour that they have been subjected to for far too long. This is new training that is coming in; I am quite surprised that you weren't aware of the actual training programme itself. Do you understand the message it sends if you have not taken that training on board and completed it yourself?

Sir Richard Knighton: Absolutely right, but, as I say, I do not know precisely what training was being referred to. There is a whole set of training that we have to do as senior officers, which I am in date with and will continue to do. I will continue to set the right example.

Q163 Michelle Scrogam: This is specifically about spotting those behaviours, and knowing how to respond to them and then support victims.

Sir Richard Knighton: Why don't we work out exactly what it was, and I will write to you and confirm one way or the other?

Q164 Michelle Scrogam: Thank you.

On the messaging in general, I would say that sometimes this is so well-embedded that it is never noticed. On my first visit to Admiralty House, one of the first things that I took away was the fact that there was a huge portrait on the wall of the fourth Earl of Sandwich's mistress, I think. It was a beautiful portrait, but it was glorifying the fact that he'd got a 17-year-old mistress who bore him five children while his wife was in a mental institution. I think some of these messages have been so embedded for so many years that people walk past things like that and do not even notice them. I think this kind of training and awareness is definitely much needed, so I would appreciate it if you could come back to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

us on that.

We heard in December about efforts to test body armour specifically for women—to fit them, rather than it injuring our female personnel. Should the armour be proved satisfactory, will it be treated as an urgent capability requirement?

Sir Richard Knighton: There are some very specific connotations around urgent capability requirements, but we would definitely consider it to be urgent. My understanding is that that trial has gone well and that we are already bringing that body armour into service. There is a special name for it; I will give you that correct name. But yes, we are bringing it into service.

Q165 **Michelle Scrogam:** Is it for the UK, because I understand that it is going to be used for Ukraine as a priority? There has not been any mention of it being prioritised for our personnel.

Sir Richard Knighton: I am not aware that we would prioritise it for Ukraine over our own people. If we have been through the trial and it works, we will introduce it to our people as quickly as we possibly can.

Q166 **Michelle Scrogam:** As far as I am aware, that is the case; they have said that it is going to be prioritised for Ukraine. Now, that is wonderful; we would love to protect the female personnel over there. Again, however, I think that if we are looking at protecting people, that is something that should be prioritised for our female personnel in the UK.

Sir Richard Knighton: I completely agree.

Chair: Finally, Calvin Bailey.

Sir Richard Knighton: Finally!

Q167 **Mr Bailey:** In my constituency of Leyton and Wanstead, I have two wonderful Royal Air Force cadet squadrons—12F and 241, which both have very high levels of people from ethnic minorities. However, when I look at the service's uptake and ability to absorb those young people, I would say it is unjustifiably low. What are you doing to address the low levels of service recruitment of ethnic minorities from communities such as mine?

Sir Richard Knighton: The first thing I would say is that over the last two or three years we have seen an increase in representation of ethnic minorities in the armed forces, which is a good thing.

My whole approach to recruitment and retention is focused on getting the very best people for the armed forces, because that is what the country needs. For me, this is fundamentally about operational effectiveness. It seems entirely ridiculous to me that, if that is the focus, it should mean that we are unable to attract women and ethnic minorities into the armed forces in the kind of numbers that they are represented across society.

If I lean on my experience from being in the Air Force, we know that there are communities across the UK that have very little contact with the armed forces. The cadets do a brilliant job developing that knowledge and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

understanding, but we have to work with those who are called “gatekeepers” in the system—parents, guardians and teachers—to sell the armed forces as a place that is important to the nation and where you can have a valuable career and contribute to society.

Q168 Mr Bailey: That is what I see. When I go to squadrons and units such as my previous air cadet unit—56 Squadron in Woolwich—I see and am swamped by parents who are desperate for me to personally facilitate their children’s entry into the services. To be frank, that is not good enough.

We know that there are stats that link the amount of contact with the military to the uptake. There is very powerful evidence that that is the case, and yet those children and communities are completely written off because the military approach to recruiting does not take the time to put the effort in to try to bridge that gap and recruit from them.

Sir Richard Knighton: I am not sure that I share your characterisation that it is completely cut off. Across the armed forces, I see a determination and commitment to reach communities that do not have ready access or ready understanding of the armed forces. But we do not do enough of that, and we are not doing it fast enough. It remains a source of frustration to me that we do not do better in recruiting.

Q169 Mr Bailey: That is what the community outreach teams and the ethnic minority networks were there for: to help provide the service with that understanding. What are you doing to support them, because, as far as I can see, there has been a significant rowing back on the commitment to support groups that support themselves in the services?

Sir Richard Knighton: The outreach teams still exist in various forms. That was certainly a key focus in the Air Force a few years ago, and I know that the Army and the Navy have similar schemes. I would have to look at the precise details of those numbers.

On the networks, central Government has taken an approach toward refining and focusing the networks across Government, particularly in the civil service—I consider that part of defence—to try to ensure that they are focused on making the most amount of difference.

I had a meeting with the ethnic minority network from the Ministry of Defence in November, and this was a real concern. I am in conversation with the permanent secretary about how we do as much as we can to support the networks that give their time to ensure that members of that network and community are looked after. I would also want to help them support us in selling a fantastic career in the armed forces that is for anybody, whatever their background.

Q170 Mr Bailey: It is also about sustaining and maintaining those people in the services. For people that cannot conceive of this, if you are an ethnic minority person and are sent to Benbecula, you might find that some of the issues and challenges that you recognise do not exist in that place. Do you recognise that the networks remain a valid source of support?

Sir Richard Knighton: Absolutely: the networks do vital work, and I find my time with them really valuable.

Mr Bailey: Brilliant.

When we visited AUKUS, we saw the change of approach that the Australian military is taking towards its non-Australian passport holders. It has made significant leaps that will really challenge our recruitment measures for those non-UK passport holders. We will not have much time to talk about this, but I would really welcome your agreement to engage with that as a pressing issue, because of the high numbers of non-UK passport holders that exist within our military.

Sir Richard Knighton: Will do.

Mr Bailey: Thank you.

Q171 **Chair:** Chief of Defence Staff, we all commend your efforts to increase the recruitment of ethnic minority personnel, but you will no doubt be aware that it was noted in the Service Complaints Ombudsman's 2024 annual report that "ethnic minorities Service personnel remain overrepresented" when it came to complaints relating to bullying, harassment and discrimination. Therefore, in May last year, I wrote to the Secretary of State on behalf of our Committee to raise concerns about incidents of racist bullying and harassment, the use of racial slurs, and the culture in which racial biases disadvantage ethnic minority personnel.

What are you going to be doing personally to ensure that there is a culture change so that we can deal with the current problems within the armed forces and therefore recruit more individuals? If we do not change the culture at present, that will have a devastating impact on our ability to encourage more people to join.

Sir Richard Knighton: It starts with personal leadership and setting the right example; it starts with trying to learn and understand, from members of the networks, the pressures and difficulties for people from particular backgrounds—so educating myself. Then, systemically, it is about making sure that we have a set of processes and systems that identify, call out and deal with that behaviour, and that we inculcate that attitude right through the leadership and training systems that we talked about earlier in the process.

I have a personal responsibility to lead as well as I can and to educate myself, but I also have a responsibility to make sure that the system works as effectively as possible. While that "raising our standards" work may have come initially out of Women in Defence, it actually applies to everybody in defence; it is about making us as good as we can be and getting the best out of our people, so that we can attract and retain the very best people and be the very best armed forces we can be. That is the business reason for doing it; there is not just the ethical and moral reason for doing it.

Chair: Thank you very much.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chief of Defence Staff, you have been very generous with your time. You have now been in the hotseat for over two hours, so you have earned a well-deserved break. Please note that you have our very best wishes as a Committee. Despite the questioning today, we are very much on your side, and we wish you the very best in your service. Thank you very much indeed for your service, and please convey to our brave servicemen and women our gratitude for their service. With that, I bring today's meeting to a close.