

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Afghan Data Breach and Resettlement Schemes, HC 1304

Tuesday 20 January 2026

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Lincoln Jopp; Emma Lewell; Mike Martin; Ian Roome; Fred Thomas; Derek Twigg.

Questions 226 to 349

Witnesses

[I](#): Rt Hon Sir Ben Wallace, former Secretary of State for Defence.

[II](#): Rt Hon James Heappey, former Minister of State for the Armed Forces.

[III](#): Rt Hon Sir Grant Shapps, former Secretary of State for Defence.

Examination of witness

Witness: James Heappey.

Chair: We now resume our evidence session on the Afghan data breach and resettlement schemes. It is a pleasure to welcome back to the House James Heappey, the former Minister of State for the Armed Forces. Thank you for agreeing to give evidence.

James Heappey: Thank you for having me.

Chair: Given that this is a short session, I am going to move straight over to the questioning with Derek Twigg.

Q261 **Derek Twigg:** Before Mike Martin comes in and explores your role in more detail, could you tell us when and how you found out about the data breach?

James Heappey: It is the same answer that Sir Ben gave you. In mid-August our private offices were informed of the content that was circulating on Facebook. Over the week or so that followed, we received a series of updates as Ministers from the Gold Group, which had been convened and was chaired by the chief operating officer. That kept us abreast of the Department as it was rushing, frankly, to understand the scale of what was happening and the threat that it posed to life and departmental interests.

Q262 **Derek Twigg:** Where did your private offices get the information from?

James Heappey: The initial email, if my memory serves me right, was from a duty clerk, and then obviously from the DARR—the Afghan resettlement directorate.

Q263 **Derek Twigg:** Are you aware of how the information first came to light? What were you told about that?

James Heappey: The information first came to light through the Facebook posts. That is what alerted—

Q264 **Derek Twigg:** That is what you were told?

James Heappey: Yes. I think there was a third party that had alerted the Department. Concurrently, there was also a letter or an email that came, I think, to my parliamentary office and also to the parliamentary office of Luke Pollard.

Q265 **Derek Twigg:** What did you do with that?

James Heappey: I am not sure that I found out about that until after I had found out about it through the departmental system—

Q266 **Derek Twigg:** Through the official channels?

James Heappey: Yes, exactly.

Q267 **Mike Martin:** I was fascinated to read your Twitter on 17 July 2025. I will



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just quote from some of it. "Again & again, I said in public what very senior officials & military had briefed me. It is hugely frustrating that proved to be wrong." You follow that up to point out that "The anger across Govt at the MoD over the breach was palpable & justified. There were some pretty choice words offered in meetings."

In general terms, what would you say—I mean this in a non-partisan way—the view is from the rest of Government of the MoD?

James Heappey: I can offer, in quite specific terms. There was a very long-running tension, frankly, between the Home Office and the MoD particularly, over a perception on the Home Office side that we were the answer to all sorts of immigration challenges that they were facing.

The MoD is incredibly good when adverse weather blows in, and sandbags need to be filled and put out to shore up the banks of a river—troops can make that happen overnight. When covid required swabbing stations to be established, PPE to be distributed, test centres to be established, or Nightingale hospitals—all of that. So, there is a perception that the MoD can make things happen really quickly; there is a perception that the MoD is the one part of Government that has its own standing resource with which to make the magic happen.

So, all the way through the '19 to '24 Government, there were constant asks on us around all sorts of things. But the immigration stuff was particularly challenging, because we were being asked to hand over camps to accommodate irregular migrants, and we were being asked for service family accommodation, to provide accommodation for those people as well. We were being asked to provide troops to assist on the Western Jet Foil down in Dover. The Royal Navy was even out in the channel, assisting in the pushback of migrant boats on the halfway line. There were all sorts of asks and our reluctance to do that stuff, for all sorts of reasons, caused a tension. So, there was always that.

Beyond that, this breach was the fault of someone within the MoD and it had the consequence of billions of pounds worth of taxpayers' money, spread across a whole host of Departments—the MoD, the Home Office, MHCLG, the Department for Education, DHSC—all of whom, all of a sudden, were going to have to respond, because the Treasury, in its wonderful way, sits in these cross-Government meetings and say, "Costs lie where they fall", which immediately causes an allergic reaction from Secretaries of State in all those Departments, when they realise—

Q268 **Mike Martin:** So they are viewed in quite a negative way, then, because you are shunting costs on to other Departments?

James Heappey: That is not necessarily the MoD's fault; that is the Treasury saying, "Costs lie where they fall."

So, the tension around the MoD not wanting to help with the wider issue of irregular migration—standfast that actually the MoD did a lot, but there were a bunch of things. Given the geopolitics, handing over a huge chunk of the training estate or the transit camps—you both, and Lincoln too, will



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be very familiar with them—so that they could accommodate irregular arrivals in Dover, when you are trying to reform the warfighting capability of the Army, and you need those training camps to have the Army, the marines and the Navy out training, ready for war, there's a tension. So, that was long-running.

The cost of reacting to Rubific—the data breach—was profound, and of course, therefore, there was anger around Government about that. People were just robustly defending their corner. As I said in that tweet, there was nothing wrong with that; that is the reality as a Government. The only thing that would have made it better is if the Treasury had said, "Don't worry. We'll underwrite all of the costs, centrally." But the Treasury can't do that—they didn't have the money.

As for the first quote that you gave, on the Triples there is lots in what we will discuss this morning of which, to say that you are proud of it is not the right thing in the context of what we are discussing, but the Department dealt with an incredibly challenging circumstance—standfast that it ever happened in the first place—quite well, I think, in terms of the way it operationalised the response.

The bit that the Department got tragically wrong was the Triples, which was what you were referring to in your first quote. It is a source of huge personal regret to me that, when I go through all my notes from the time, I challenged again and again and again: "Why are Dan Jarvis, Tom Tugendhat, Johnny Mercer, the Select Committee and various journalists telling me that employment records exist? Why are they all so certain that this is different from how you describe?", but the Department again and again kept coming back and saying there was no formal employment relationship—and so, in good faith, as a Minister, you stand at the Dispatch Box and you reflect that departmental position.

It is a source of huge regret that, frankly, I was told the wrong thing and other colleagues, with whom I had a profound disagreement over this, were fundamentally right. I am sorry, both to them and to those who were affected, that I—

Q269 Mike Martin: Which colleagues would you say sorry to?

James Heappey: Specifically, Dan Jarvis, Johnny Mercer and Tom Tugendhat. They, I think, were the three key champions of this in the previous Parliament and they came to me and other Ministers again and again and again, saying that the Triples did have an employment relationship. The Department again and again rejected it.

On the eve of a meeting with Dan Jarvis, I had pulled in a selection of two, three and four-star military and civil servants, and they had had warning to go away and look at this again: "Dan Jarvis says that there are employment records that tomorrow he is going to show me."—I think the meeting room that Dan and I met was W4, off Westminster Hall— "How can he say that he has those and you be so sure that we don't?".



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They sat in my office and said, "We think that he's got a record pulled together by a campaign group, rather than contemporaneous records. We don't think such records exist. This is what the employment relationship with the Triples was. It does not meet the criteria for ARAP." They looked me in the eye and stood fast with the line. It is hugely frustrating that months later, after I had left office, for whatever reason the position changed. We could have made the decision earlier if that had happened sooner.

Q270 Mike Martin: Very briefly, for the record, can you describe your role in directing the MoD's response to the immediate data breach? You were on the gold command, right?

James Heappey: No, I was not on the gold command. I think hell would freeze over before Ministers were allowed to intrude into organisations like that.

Q271 Mike Martin: But you were setting the objectives for the gold command.

James Heappey: I am not sure I would even go that far. We were being given daily sitrep—situation reports—by the gold command.

Q272 Mike Martin: Who set the objectives?

James Heappey: I think it would be fair to say that there was ministerial agency in being able to say what we thought the priorities should be, what we thought were the urgencies. There are out-notes from meetings in which the Secretary of State and I both make a number of demands of the gold command in terms of their workflows. But we were not part of those gold meetings; they were an officials-level meeting.

Q273 Mike Martin: So who was in charge?

James Heappey: The chief operating officer, Nina Cope.

Q274 Chair: Just to clarify, you were not involved in the gold group strategic command group?

James Heappey: No.

Q275 Chair: But I think we were advised that you were involved very actively in setting the objectives for the group. Would you say that is correct or not?

James Heappey: No. I think I have just covered that in the answer. I think we were receiving sitreps from the gold command. Gold was not a ministerially chaired meeting. There is clear evidence, in the notes that we have from the time, showing that we were telling the gold group what we believed to be the priorities and expecting them to resolve that. But the gold group was chaired by the chief operating officer and we were provided with sitreps.

Chair: You were receiving updates on that accordingly as well?

James Heappey: Yes.

Q276 Chair: I want to draw further on the anger across Government that you



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intimated. How were you made aware of this anger, and how did it affect the outcome for affected Afghans?

James Heappey: How was I made aware of it? I was sat, rather uncomfortably, in endless cross-Government meetings, on the receiving end of it.

It is important to recognise that there was not just one thing running. It was not just Rubific or the response to the data breach. There was a very recent court judgment around additional family members, which had brought with it the requirement to accommodate thousands more people in the UK. There was case law around various other ARAP refusals that we had made. There was case law around category 4, which kept on growing anyway. Again and again, the MoD basically had to go back to other parts of Government and say that, for a host of different reasons—some the consequence of the breach, many the consequence of court judgments and case law—the numbers constantly required more resource.

There was a situation in the summer before we were notified of the breach, in 2023, when the air bridge for ARAP, bringing people from Islamabad to the UK, was dependent on our ability to match people to accommodation. We could not bring them out of Islamabad. That was the policy of Cobra and various small ministerial groups. We could not bring out of Islamabad until we had matched them to accommodation. The MoD engaged an agency to find us private rented accommodation, so that we could match people to accommodation. The Home Office also had an agency trying to find private rented accommodation.

You had fratricide within Government, where we were bidding up on each other for private rented accommodation, driving up prices all over the country—which, by the way, meant that local governments that were trying to solve their social housing crises were also in pain, plus those who were trying to rent for themselves. You could argue that the fact that the Afghan air bridge was dependent on our ability to rent private accommodation was ridiculous, but it was really tense.

You had hundreds of arrivals daily through an irregular route across the channel. You had an entitlement to bring people from Afghanistan, who were legally entitled to come to the UK, whom we could not accommodate because we could not find accommodation for them—and by the way, as the current Government are finding out now, immigration was becoming a very political issue that was driving voter behaviour.

You ended up in a situation where a very toxic issue that is very resource-intensive was causing acute pain all across Government. We were trying to do the right thing for ARAP. The Home Office was trying to solve the issue of irregular arrivals. The Foreign Office was trying to bring people under ACRS, plus Syrians and Hongkongers and all the various other people entitled under the schemes they had sorted. The courts were helping with decisions on additional family members, category 4 entitlements and all sorts besides. It was nuts.



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Q277 Chair: I know you were trying to do your job. As you rightly noted, immigration was a very sensitive issue. There is also an indication that the Prime Minister at the time was more focused on the housing side and how the use of hotels could be concluded at the earliest possible opportunity, and that is why there was not as much focus on the problems the MoD was facing. How would you characterise that?

James Heappey: Yes, that is true, and it is hugely frustrating. If it is helpful, there are effectively three valves in the Afghan pipeline. There is the valve that is the border of principally Afghanistan and Pakistan, or Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. To get people through that valve takes a big dollop of cleverness on behalf of those who design and deliver that route, and some very friendly and helpful behaviour from our colleagues in the Government of Pakistan and the Pakistani military. You have that valve, which should be the most challenging, and yet actually flows quite well.

The second valve is the movement of people from Islamabad to the UK, which is a combination of the Government of Pakistan and the British Government. That was challenging on a number of occasions. Even in October 2023, when we were two months into the post-breach reaction, I was trying to deal with a very frustrating position of the Government of Pakistan, where they wanted the full flight manifest for every Voyager flight we were trying to bring out of Islamabad 30 days in advance. It was really hard to do that, so I ended up having to ask the Chief of the General Staff, Patrick Sanders, to meet the Chief of the Army Staff in Lahore at the Pakistan army polo match. Patrick and General Munir were able to chat that through, and we managed to get some movement on that requirement.

At the same time, however, the wider UK Government were avoiding restrictions, because it was completely toxic to take on more hotels—that will be familiar to those of you who now occupy the Government Benches. We had this really frustrating regulation at both ends: if Pakistan were unhelpful, we could try to use our brilliant High Commissioner Jane Marriott and other diplomatic challenges to ease that; and we had cross-governmental tension back here.

The third valve was getting people out of hotels or transit accommodation into permanent accommodation. That is about agreement between UK central and local government, which was incredibly challenging, too, because all that was under enormous pressure.

Q278 Derek Twigg: The tension on immigration we all know well. In your view, did that influence the length of the period that the injunction was kept for? Do you think that became a real concern of Government at any point?

James Heappey: No, I honestly do not—I can only speak for—

Derek Twigg: I am not saying you.

James Heappey: I understand you—I can only speak for the decision that Sir Ben just outlined in his initial decision, and I was in post at the time when Grant Shapps asked for its renewal. I can assure you that at no



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point did I see or hear anyone reflect on the politics of immigration in seeking the injunction or seeking to renew it. At all stages, I only ever heard people talk about the intelligence assessment and the risk to life.

Q279 Chair: Good. I want to get clarification on another issue. Robert Peston wrote in July that “on August 23 2023, at the first meeting of the government’s emergency Cobra meeting to discuss the security disaster, the then foreign office minister responsible for the Indo-Pacific, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, said to the MoD’s representative on the committee, General Sir Gwyn Jenkins, that obviously he would be resigning.” Were you actually present at that meeting?

James Heappey: No. The meeting, as far as I can tell from the pack of papers that I have read in preparation for coming to see you, was attended by the Minister for Defence People and Families. I suspect—it was the back end of August—I was elsewhere. I had been in the office the previous week, when notified, but I did not attend that meeting.

Q280 Chair: For the record, what is the name of the Minister at the time? You cannot corroborate beyond that.

James Heappey: I think by then it would have been Andrew Murrison.

Chair: Andrew Murrison was there. Okay, thank you—I just wanted to get that clarification.

Q281 Lincoln Jopp: Going down a level from the institutional frustration and the butting of heads between the Home Office and the MoD, would it be right to say that the Domestic and Economic Affairs Committee of the Cabinet had wanted, basically, to limit any extension to the numbers eligible for resettlement to the lowest possible number?

James Heappey: Yes. You have seen—I probably was guilty of being overly emotional in some of those meetings, as some people helpfully told people back in July, but any of us who served in Afghanistan and saw the risk that the terps faced alongside us would have been, I think, similarly emotional about the need to honour that debt. In my own battle group, I think we had two or three terps killed in one night in one particular instance, and yet the following day, the terps who survived went back out on patrol—it was pretty incredible really.

It really affronted me that people we had made a commitment to, who had a legal right to come to the UK, had their arrival held hostage by the fact that hotels were full of people who had arrived illegally or irregularly across the Dover straits. I understand why the realities of governing mean that that was a tension—the reality was that a huge number of hotel rooms were occupied by people who had arrived in the UK illegally or irregularly, and that was costing a huge amount of money and was increasingly politically sensitive. But the conflation of irregular arrivals, and thus the capacity to accommodate those who had a legal right to come, was a bit of an affront to those of us who thought ARAP was a good thing.



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By the way, ARAP was not just an MoD bit of emotional moral obligation; ARAP was a collectively agreed, cross-Government commitment, and it was challenging to see it not be fully supported in the way that we would hope.

Q282 **Lincoln Jopp:** And also, it sets the conditions, were we ever to do expeditionary operations in someone else's country in the future. It is not just a short-term thing.

James Heappey: Yes. Dan Jarvis comes up a lot in this, but I remember Dan asking me about exactly that a couple of times in Defence questions—when we were briefly in Sudan during the Khartoum airlift, and things like that. I think we have to be quite careful. This was the answer I gave him at the time, and I think it is worth restating: we do not want to get into a transactional thing whereby, whenever the British military arrive anywhere on some sort of expeditionary operation, people come to work for us in the expectation of a subsequent visa. I think that just creates a sort of behemoth.

You can make an argument that the circumstances in Afghanistan were exceptional, and the campaign that was run by the *Daily Mail* and others around the interpreters was very widely subscribed to, but I don't think that the British military should start making a commitment that everybody who works for us, everywhere we go, wins the right to come to the UK thereafter.

Lincoln Jopp: No. Ideally we would win, so they could stay.

James Heappey: That would be good too—enduring peace and security in their country would be a better outcome.

Q283 **Lincoln Jopp:** I have a quotation from something you have written, and I just want you to contextualise it, because it does not make a lot of sense to me: "The suggestion I was driving a new entitlement for those not eligible for ARAP or ACRS but affected by the breach is untrue". Did you say that?

James Heappey: Yes, if that is from the long Twitter thread that I put out in July. There were some anonymously sourced quotes saying something like "He's overly emotional about the whole Afghan thing," and that I was effectively trying to create a whole new eligibility. That is simply not true. What we were trying to do was deliver ARAP as quickly as we possibly could—not just in the wake of the breach but since the fall of Kabul; we were trying to get it done as quickly as we possibly could. Then there were people who were affected by Rubific, who potentially were not previously eligible—

Lincoln Jopp: Rubific?

James Heappey: The breach. Forgive me; Rubific was the codeword in Government for the breach until it became public knowledge. But no, there was no attempt to dramatically increase the number of Afghans. In fact, quite the reverse. I suspect that a number of my former military colleagues are still quite cross with me because, when they were trying to



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advocate for their kandak commander—an Afghan national army battalion is called a kandak—or people who had served in the kandak alongside them during their time in Helmand, I was very robust in saying, “No, ARAP was never set up to accommodate the Afghan national army; it was set up to accommodate the terps and other locally employed civilians who worked alongside the British military, in our direct employment.”

I was emotional, I suppose, about delivering on that obligation to those who worked alongside us, but pretty robust, actually, on how there was not the capacity for ARAP to bring the entire ANA—and that that would not have been any good for Afghanistan either.

Q284 **Lincoln Jopp:** But, in effect, you were driving for a new entitlement—not ARAP or ACRS, but for people who were put in jeopardy by the breach.

James Heappey: No—at that point, no, I was not. In all of the DEA and ministerial meetings I went to, all of the discussion was around how to accelerate the arrival of those who were eligible for ARAP and were also affected by the breach, on the basis that they were now even more in danger.

Q285 **Lincoln Jopp:** I see, so it was about getting them to the front of the queue.

James Heappey: Yes, but there was never, as far as I recall, any suggestion that we should be doing anything else. Plenty of other people might have been affected by ACRS, for example.

One of the challenges—Sir Ben mentioned the scale of the ARAP challenge—was that I think the hopper peaked at about 110,000 applicants. Bearing in mind how many people actually worked for the UK military during our time in Afghanistan—probably fewer than 5,000—it was clear that there were a lot of people applying out of desperation. My discussions with other NATO Ministers indicated that most people were applying to every country that had been part of ISAF. We were routinely shown Afghan social media content that showed facsimiles of commendations that you could print out and insert your name in to fake having been a locally employed civilian or having been involved somehow in ISAF or Operation Enduring Freedom.

Monthly in Defence questions, we were being challenged about the pace of decision making and the fact that the hopper was endlessly growing and the number of positive decisions was shrinking. It was an incredibly hard thing to be the Minister responsible for. Sometimes, all good logic failed. My logic was that, rather than working our way through 110,000 applications and thinking about whether each one was right or wrong, surely somewhere there was a list of everybody who worked for us, so we should get those names and run it against the list of 110,000. That would straight away enable us to identify the people our working records told us worked for us. Of course that doesn’t work, because even Afghans who are not trying to game the system will list their names in all sorts of ways. It was incredibly challenging.



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Concurrently, I was flying around the world trying to buy up every bit of 152 mm ammunition that I possibly could in order to smuggle it into Ukraine to support the Ukrainians. The MoD was trying to support the Ukrainians, reconstitute a UK warfighting capability and become an immigration department for tens of thousands of people concurrently. It was a pretty challenging time.

Q286 Ian Roome: I would like to talk about the timeline of the Government decision-making process for the relocation scheme. Obviously, the data breach was discovered in August 2023, but the first invitation letters under the new scheme were issued in April 2024. Can you give us an insight into why decision making within the Government, under the cover of the injunction, took as long as it did? We know that the MoD went back to extend the super-injunction many times. Could you give us a timeframe to explain why the decision making took so long?

James Heappey: Are you talking about the Triples or those affected by the breach?

Ian Roome: Those affected by the breach.

James Heappey: I am not absolutely sure. I had left office by April. I think we were starting to pull those who were affected by the breach out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan as quickly as we could. One of the challenges was that there were about 2,500 stuck in Islamabad. I made the point earlier about the need to match people to accommodation before we could put them on a plane in the summer of 2023. There was a backlog of about 2,500 people. Some will have been part of the breach, and others will have just been there, having already been facilitated out of Afghanistan. So we had to clear the decks in Islamabad and then accelerate as best we could the people we were getting out of Afghanistan, notwithstanding that that was blooming hard.

I do not know what you are referring to in April. The Afghan response route, as a formal mechanism, didn't exist when I was in office, but we were definitely trying to pull people through sooner—obviously, from day one.

Q287 Ian Roome: In your time in office, what was your input into the relocation scheme?

James Heappey: Very, very, very active indeed. At some point, all the detail of how we did it will be able to come out, but not now because it is still running.

Q288 Ian Roome: Do you think any of the decision-making process in the MoD regarding those relocations could have been done any differently or sped up? Was the political will there? What was affecting it?

James Heappey: No. The political will was 100% there within the Department. If I could have brought out five times as many people every week across lots of different routes into all sorts of neighbouring countries, if we had had better relationships with Iran, if the Uzbek route had been more viable—or via the Tajiks—then we would have done so. The



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Turkmens were always an absolute no. The Minister in the Lords, Tariq Ahmad, and I both tried. If we could have brought people out through more routes more easily, we would have done so.

There were all sorts of reasons why the flow was what it is—not least that the Taliban are not mugs. If you are bringing out minibus after minibus every single day, the risk of compromising the route is obvious. We would see that. We would see UK reporting of the route and then be told by those who were doing this that there was a visible additional presence on various Afghan-Pakistan border crossings in the week that followed. It was really hard. There was also the fact that people were then held in Pakistan thereafter—and I am so grateful to the Government of Pakistan and the Pakistani military for their forbearance.

We should also bear in mind that it was not just the UK. It was not just me flying to Islamabad trying to ask the Pakistan Government for all this stuff, the Americans, Danes and Germans were too—everybody who had been in ISAF and who had an Afghan resettlement scheme was asking the same of the Pakistanis. Pakistani politics was also pretty febrile at the time and Afghan immigration into Pakistan was a pretty hot issue too. We owe them a lot and it was hard. Under both the Secretaries of State that I served the political will in the Department was that we had a moral obligation and should do this as quickly as we could.

Q289 Ian Roome: Did the rest of the Government have that political will?

James Heappey: I think that the rest of the Government agreed with the sentiment and the obligation. I do not mean the following as criticism, because I think it is perfectly reasonable; however, if you are the Secretary of State for MHCLG you will have had council leaders and council chief executives all over the country telling you that there was a social housing crisis, and that the affordability of private rents is crippling and that that is being inflated by the MoD and Home Office competing for private rented accommodation for asylum seekers or ARAP arrivals. The Secretary of State for MHCLG, the housing Minister and the local government Minister are behaving quite honourably in reflecting the stresses that local Government leaders are reflecting to them. However, it causes a tension in cross-Governmental meetings between the interests of the MoD and those of MHCLG. The same is true for DHSC and DFE.

To take the example of Wiltshire, there is lots and lots of military accommodation there. We would try to bring hundreds of families into surplus service family accommodation. That would all be after school budgets had been set, so we are bringing people with acute needs and English as a second language into a place mid-school-year and with no money. Not surprisingly, the schools Minister is then saying, "Whoa, how is that to be funded?" It would be wrong to characterise this as anybody around Government acting in a malign way and trying to thwart ARAP; it is just the realities of what it is to be a Minister and to govern.

Q290 Lincoln Jopp: A very short question, to which there will hopefully be a very short answer. Were we paying Pakistan to accommodate people there



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while that bit of the valve worked itself out?

James Heappey: No, I do not think so. We relied very much on their grace and the relationship that they have with the UK. As I said, I know that other countries that were similarly trying to run their programmes did not get quite the same level of support. We should be very grateful to Pakistan.

Lincoln Jopp: The benefits of a polo match.

Q291 **Fred Thomas:** You mentioned your frustration about the departmental line on the Triples changing frustratingly shortly after you left office. You will have picked up reporting over the past 12 months in the news media on the idea that some Triples have not been relocated to the UK, through some kind of process that has happened in various teams in the MoD. Has that reporting frustrated you as well?

James Heappey: As a Minister, you speak in good faith based on the departmental position, and indeed the Government position. We were all bound by collective responsibility to stand fast, and they have been vindicated—they were proven right. Tom Tugendhat and Johnny Mercer were both serving Ministers at the time who departed from the collectively accepted, agreed position.

Q292 **Fred Thomas:** Sorry, I am asking you very specifically about the recent reporting in the last 12 months—not about the move in position. Maybe you have not seen it, but I am asking about the idea that some Triples have not been brought to the UK.

James Heappey: Do you mean because they might be witnesses in the inquiry?

Fred Thomas: That is what some of the BBC reporting is suggesting.

James Heappey: I find that quite an extraordinary allegation, and my every instinct is that it is not true. Of course, I could find out subsequently that I was misled, but I really cannot believe that that would be the case.

Q293 **Fred Thomas:** Do you think there have been any problems, aside from whether that was the intent, to do with relocating Triples even once that move in departmental policy happened? I will be careful in what I say because some of our evidence sessions were behind closed doors, but we have heard of problems with the process for approving Triples' applications.

James Heappey: Approving those applications was hard. For the interpreters and for other locally employed civilians who had been working directly with the regular force, the employment records were better, so it was easier to validate their application. But for people who were applying under category 4 and the Triples, it was quite challenging. In fact, the circumstances of the breach definitely do not comply with any data policy that the Department set or whatever else, but you have to ask yourself how on earth they would validate those applications in any other way. The person responsible, in good faith, was circulating—he thought—small lists

of people to a trusted network of interlocutors in Afghanistan, and others who had been relocated to the UK.

Q294 Fred Thomas: When you talk about the individual, you are talking about the main data breach.

James Heappey: Yes. I understand your point, Fred, about it being now, but the situation still has not changed. In order to validate whether this person who claims to have been a Triple actually was, you have to circulate, probably, those names to a community of people who they worked alongside within the British military, but probably to some trusted Afghans as well. I cannot comment on how the decision-making process is working now, but I cannot imagine how it would be any different from what it was. In terms of the practicalities, I would expect that they have a more robust data management policy now, given what has happened. But you are stuck between the imperative to make a good decision and bring these people to the UK, versus the challenge to validate that they are who they say they are.

Q295 Fred Thomas: I do not think anyone is underestimating, as you have explained articulately, the incredible challenge of doing that and matching up information. I was asking about the idea that has been reported that some decisions to turn down applications have actually not taken any time at all—they were extremely quick and done in a blanket way. You might be able to comment on that.

James Heappey: I have been contacted by journalists about the same thing, and asked the Department. There was a time when a whole bunch of decisions were taken quite quickly, but I think the Department has always pushed back against the idea that there was ever a blanket rejection. I was certainly never told that there was going to be a moment of blanket rejection. I never asked for any such thing, and I would be amazed if that ever happened. The tension that existed was never that people within the chain of command were trying to not bring people to the UK. The challenge was that everybody was trying to do their best to bring everybody they possibly could—those who were entitled under the core ARAP scheme but under category 4, and various other people besides. I really do not believe that there was ever a blanket rejection out of expediency.

Q296 Emma Lewell: Do you think the right people have been held accountable for the data breach and its consequences?

James Heappey: You are hearing this morning from two Secretaries of State and the on-point Minister for all of this. All three of us will accept ministerial accountability, obviously, and have apologised. I apologised twice—both for the fact that the breach happened, and for the fact that the Triples decision was delayed to the degree that it was. I also spoke to John Healey, when he came in as the shadow Secretary of State and I was briefing him.

To the earlier questions about the injunction, it is worth reading the original judgment in response to Sir Ben's original application. The judge is



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very clear in the judgment that he decided to strengthen the injunction based on his knowledge of the legal system and his perception of the threat that had been articulated in the witness statements.

One of the things that the judge subsequently directed—I think at its renewal—was that key people in Parliament should be aware, including the Speaker and the Lords Speaker. I briefed the Speaker, and the Minister in the Lords briefed the Lords Speaker. I briefed John Healey—the offer was made to both John Healey and Sir Keir Starmer, but they made the decision that only John would come.

I said to John at the end of the first meeting that, if this injunction is lifted before the general election, I will need to resign over this. I felt that it needed ministerial accountability in that way. The challenge, Emma, is that while that gives some sort of political satisfaction, the rest of the Department carries on as normal.

Q297 Emma Lewell: That is what I was driving at. Ministers will rightly apologise for things and be held to account, but who else was accountable for this? Have they been held to account for what happened here?

James Heappey: I was reflecting on that after speaking to the Clerk last week in preparing for this, and I am somewhat torn. I think that the then permanent secretary and second permanent secretary responded very well to the challenge, and it was good to have the Department being led by people who knew their way around at that point. Once you get down into two-star and one-star levels of accountability, or below, it becomes quite challenging for Ministers and ex-Ministers to opine.

It does feel rum to me that you have two former Secretaries of State and a Minister very openly taking responsibility for what happened and apologising. I suspect that if David Williams comes to speak, he will be similarly open and reflective—he already has been at the Public Accounts Committee. Should people further down, such as people with more direct supervisory responsibility for the person responsible, have been fired? Discuss.

Equally, there have been plenty of examples in recent years of the civil service reacting to ministerial insistence on things like that as ministerial intrusion, bullying and interference in civil service affairs. It is hard to answer.

Q298 Emma Lewell: Sorry to interrupt, but the Chair is conscious of time. In any organisation, if you make an error on this scale and are not held to account, you are likely to make it again.

James Heappey: Yes.

Q299 Emma Lewell: The point I am trying to make is that, if the right people have not been held to account, it does not negate things like this happening in the future. From what I am hearing from you, you do not think that everyone has been held to account. I do not want to paraphrase you, but it sounds like you are saying that not everyone has



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been held to account.

James Heappey: There is no doubt in my mind that, had something like this happened in business, there would have been ramifications significantly greater than the ones that have happened. An awful lot of people did an awful lot of great work to rectify this and to get the ARAP pipeline flowing, and they did an awful lot of great work with all the other very important and dangerous things that the MoD was dealing with at the time.

The fact that, as far as I know, the only people who have really publicly taken any responsibility are the two Secretaries of State, the Minister and the permanent secretary is probably constitutionally right, but it is probably not the right response within the organisation itself.

Emma Lewell: Thank you. Sorry for cutting you off; I know the Chair is very keen to conclude.

James Heappey: No, fair enough.

Q300 **Chair:** Mr Heappey, I am very grateful to your good self for your invaluable contributions to our inquiry. I want to place on the record my gratitude to you for your co-operation with our Committee Clerk. You wanted to say something very briefly?

James Heappey: If I may, Chair. You had an exchange with Sir Ben that Mr Martin spotted I was nodding along with intently. When your predecessor Committee was doing its report on readiness in the last Parliament, I was increasingly uncomfortable with the amount that we were saying we could not disclose to the Committee on the basis that it gave away classified information.

I asked for historical examples of similar reports. The Clerk maybe was involved at the time. It is clear that, during the cold war, your predecessor Committees 30 or 40 years ago were shown things like stockpiles and held fleets, and that the Committee then redacted that before publication. David Williams and I were both very concerned that the dial has moved too much in terms of what was not exposed to the Committee.

I would argue that there were two things: first, if the Armed Forces are not as ready as they should be, Parliament should know that because from that comes Parliament pressure on the Treasury to increase the defence budget; second, if the Armed Forces are as ready as they should be, there is a deterrent effect to Parliament publishing data and information to that effect, so our adversaries know.

The Committee should continue to push on that; there is plenty of precedent when we last faced a state threat for us using Parliament to drive decision making around Parliament and raise awareness of the threat, and to show Parliament and the public that we are ready to defend the nation.

Q301 **Derek Twigg:** Who took the decision not to do that?



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Mike Martin: You were the Minister and the senior civil servant in the Department. If you guys wanted it to happen, who was holding it back?

Derek Twigg: What stopped it?

James Heappey: You will recall from the conversations that we brought you in for a private briefing.

Derek Twigg: That was one of the best briefing we had, actually.

James Heappey: Thank you very much. It was a private briefing, but it was hard to get the private briefing in place, if you recall. We were trying.

Q302 **Derek Twigg:** Who was stopping it?

James Heappey: It would require sustained ministerial effort, frankly, to drive it.

Q303 **Derek Twigg:** Against whom?

James Heappey: Against the institution. There is a sense that we—

Q304 **Mike Martin:** Who controls the institution?

James Heappey: A whole bunch of the Ministers in the new Government are asking themselves the same question—it is hugely frustrating.

Q305 **Mike Martin:** For the record, Grant Shapps is now laughing and nodding.

James Heappey: The argument that was being advanced was that, nowadays, such is the availability of information online that you can aggregate stuff even when it has been redacted, and from it you can gain intelligence.

Q306 **Chair:** What you are saying is that the institution, the deep state, or somebody else is preventing transparency and accountability, and Parliament and parliamentarians do not even know.

James Heappey: It took me, as a Minister, to observe that far too many parliamentary questions and inquiries from this Committee were coming across my desk with refusals to provide the information on the basis that it was classified. It took me to say, "This is not good enough—we need to reply more helpfully," and to commission research into what Committees were given during the cold war when we last faced a state threat, and then to insist on a private, classified briefing to the Committee to assist in its report. It took an awful lot of effort to be able to do that. To build on the conversation you had earlier, you should want to know why—

Q307 **Chair:** I am glad that you placed those views on record. That is a constant struggle. It is a battle that we fight on a regular basis, myself and our team, to ensure that we have transparency for the Committee. Often, we don't have it and then we can't hold individuals to account. I am very glad that you did place that on record. As good as those secret and classified briefings are, as and when we get them, that transparency is not fully there.



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James Heappey: The answer is to trust you to redact, as your predecessor Committees did in the cold war, so you can hear the evidence and then redact in your report, so the Russians gain nothing, but you can satisfy yourselves on behalf of the nation. If it worked in the '70s and '80s, I am not sure why it wouldn't work now.

Chair: If it worked in the '70s and '80s, what is to stop it from working now? Thank you very much, Mr Heappey. I will temporarily suspend this session so we can get to the next segment of our inquiry.