

Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Bill 2026, HC 1712

Wednesday 4 March 2026

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Clive Efford (Chair); Luke Akehurst; Sarah Bool; Juliet Campbell; Al Carns; Pam Cox; Mr Paul Foster; Mr Mark Francois; Gerald Jones; Jayne Kirkham; Mike Martin; David Reed; Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst; Rachel Taylor.

Questions 151 - 222

Witnesses

[I](#): Natalie Elphicke Ross OBE, Chair, Defence Housing Strategy Review Team; and David Brewer, Chief Operating Officer, Defence Infrastructure Organisation, Ministry of Defence.

[II](#): Cat Calder, Housing Specialist, Army Families Federation; Mark Hayhurst, Accommodation Policy Adviser, RAF Families Federation; and Helen Fish, Senior Families Advocate and Accommodation Lead, Naval Families Federation.

[III](#): Sarah Atherton, former Defence Minister and subject matter expert.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- The Naval, Army and RAF Families Federations ([AFB0032](#))

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Natalie Elphicke Ross and David Brewer.

Q151 **Chair:** This is the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill. We have three evidence sessions this morning. David and Natalie, you are welcome. Do you have any opening remarks? Do you want to introduce yourselves and your positions?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: I am Natalie Elphicke Ross. I chair the defence housing strategy review team that developed the strategy with the Ministry of Defence. That led to the matters we are discussing today, to improve defence housing.

David Brewer: Good morning. I am David Brewer. I am the MOD's lead official for housing delivery.

Chair: We have quite a lot of questions for this session. If you agree with one another, just say, "I agree", and we can move on.

Q152 **Mike Martin:** Thank you for your time today. Let us dive straight in. We are setting up this new Defence Housing Service. What is the relationship between the MOD and the Defence Housing Service? How will it be managed? How does accountability work?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: A governance structure is set out in the Bill for setting up the Defence Housing Service, starting with a new governing board, as set out in schedule 1. It will be an independent board with a number of non-executive directors and an independent chair, which will be managed as public appointments of the Secretary of State. The appointments will include a representative specifically to represent service families, so that the voice of the families is on the board of the Defence Housing Service.

As set out in the Bill, the relationship between the MOD and the Defence Housing Service is managed by a framework agreement, which is the overarching document that will set out the requirements of what the Defence Housing Service has to achieve. Importantly, those requirements will include the specification of standards for homes, which the Secretary of State will set out and which the Defence Housing Service must meet under the terms of the Bill.

That all comes together—in terms of accountability and information about performance—in an annual report, as set out in schedule 1 to the Bill. That report will be laid before Parliament to give parliamentarians an opportunity to scrutinise and assess the performance of the Defence Housing Service.

The role of the Defence Housing Service is to fix defence housing. It is a 10-year renewal plan. It has a £9 billion costed plan behind it, which is unprecedented investment in defence housing. The Defence Housing Service is the mechanism to ensure that this generational renewal is

carried through and that forces families get the homes and service they need and deserve.

Mike Martin: David, I assume you agree.

David Brewer: Yes.

Q153 **Mike Martin:** In the annual report that is to be laid before Parliament, what will we actually be judging? What are the metrics?

David Brewer: There will be a range of metrics. We already publish performance. We will work with some of our governance structures and the family federations' representation on the customer committee that we are establishing to help us shape the metrics that we report on. We will report on all the sorts of metrics that you would expect of a traditional major social housing provider—

Q154 **Mike Martin:** Quality of housing? Speed of repairs?

David Brewer: Yes. Repair speed, customer satisfaction, numbers of homes improved—all that kind of work.

Q155 **Mike Martin:** Okay. If I may, Natalie, you described it almost as subsidiary. You have an independent board, but it receives direction from the Ministry of Defence. We are in a rapidly changing era and geopolitical context, and operational requirements will shift—we might suddenly need to house 1,000 people over here or 10,000 over there—so how much flexibility is built into the system? If we needed to house 10,000 people over here, how will the money relationship change? Is that built in?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: It is built into the overall strategy. The forecasting of supply and demand and the costing are managed through a forecasting model for supply and demand, which was a key recommendation for the structure between the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Housing Service. That mechanism will ensure that the conversations that take place with the military to plan and deliver homes in the right places to meet operational military requirements can be met. In that context, it is important to note that the current situation of the defence housing estate is that it is not matched to meet military requirements. There are not enough homes in the right places to house service families where they are needed. Those homes are clearly not of the right standard, but also there is an oversupply, with too many homes in the wrong places. To date, there has not been good planning and management, nor good stewardship of that relationship overall. The Defence Housing Service and the new structure are being put in place to ensure that operational requirements can be met and families housed where they need to be housed, and to the right standard.

David Brewer: I will build on that a little. The £9.2 billion that was announced as part of the funding was built off a costed programme of work. We developed that by looking at all the planned unit moves, planned unit locations, across the next 10 years, and at what we needed to do to match supply and demand, and we built the costed programme. The Defence Housing Service will, with the Department, dock into the

integrated force strategic cycle—the defence planning mechanism for what its force structures and lay-down look like—and a change control mechanism will operate to make sure those things are kept in balance.

Q156 Mike Martin: You can imagine a world, though, where the geopolitical context changes so quickly that you do not have time to build or buy more houses. How do you take up that slack, or does it go into the rental sector?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: A range of accommodation measures will make sure that operational requirements are met. On the ability to move at pace, the other area that the strategy highlighted was the need for planning flexibilities to be built in for military housing. If there is a requirement for military housing on military land, for military operational requirements, clearly we cannot rely on the timeframe of the general planning system to help us meet military requirements and timeframes. That is something that we think is very important, that those planning flexibilities are given.

To assure the Committee, that is separate from the issue of the general market housing brought forward on Defence land. There may be questions on that later, but to reassure the Committee: if there is land being brought forward for general market purposes, that would be expected to go through the planning system in the usual way, if there is not a requirement for military purposes on that land. If there is a requirement for military purposes, I am sure the Committee will understand that flexibility is an absolute requirement to get those homes built and delivered.

Q157 Mike Martin: Briefly, there is going to be a representative of the families and service personnel on the board, which is excellent. What sort of things do you see them raising? How do you see the housing service responding to that?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: First, let me talk about the role they have had in developing the strategy. I know they are on the next panel, and I am sure they will speak to that as well. In setting up the review team, the Secretary of State wanted to ensure that the voice of families was directly on it.

I was absolutely delighted that we had the benefit of Cat Calder from the Army Families Federation, who has been absolutely amazing at working with the team as a whole, supported by all three families federations, which have been embedded throughout the review team's work. A core part of the work led by Cat and the team was a questionnaire for service families, which had over 6,300 responses about what they saw as the future of defence family housing. We have seen the benefit of having that direct voice. That is why we said in the strategy that we wanted it to be embedded.

It is a requirement that there is service family representation and consultation on accommodation changes with Defence. I think the organisation will really benefit from having the voice of families firmly

embedded from the boardroom right through to the delivery and experience of service families.

Mike Martin: David, did you want to add anything?

David Brewer: No, I have nothing to add.

Q158 **Rachel Taylor:** Thank you for coming along today. How much independent financial control will the Defence Housing Service have over the housing budget?

David Brewer: The controls and authorities of the organisation will be set out in the framework agreement that Natalie referenced earlier. The expectation is that the organisation will receive funding in the form of subsidy from the MOD through a grant in aid payment. The organisation will then have, accountable to its board, full financial control over how that funding is utilised, rolled out and deployed, and then it will be working back within the normal planning cycles with MOD.

Q159 **Rachel Taylor:** Will the Secretary of State have the power to divert resources from housing to fund other potential defence priorities?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: There is a really important issue that we looked at as to why, when there has been good will and good slugs of money put into defence housing, it has not delivered the outcomes that people wanted to see from that money. Looking at how the finance structure worked, it was clear that what we call the “annuality”—the annual planning within the Department—sits at odds with the long-term asset management investment strategy. It also leads to poor-value outcomes for taxpayers, because that work cannot be planned and delivered in a timely fashion.

Having funding flexibility within the new organisation is going to be important, together with the amount of funding—but the amount of funding alone is not sufficient; it is not in itself the answer, but it needs to be there at the right level. That is why a costed plan was developed with the unprecedented £9 billion investment in defence housing. That has been committed alongside the strategy, which is really important. There was the review, the strategy, the costed plan and the money committed by Government.

The Defence Secretary and the Defence Minister, who is here today, have been absolutely clear about the need to fix this and to put the funds behind it to do so. It will obviously be a matter for Parliament and future parliamentarians to continue to scrutinise and, I hope, support the Defence Housing Service in ensuring that it has the resources over time that it needs.

Q160 **Rachel Taylor:** Are you saying that the Secretary of State will not have the power to divert resources, or that they will?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: I am saying that the money has been committed and will be there to support the new organisation in the renewal

programme. That independent financial structure is part of ensuring that there is the money certainty that has not been available in past years.

The organisation will also seek to drive flexibilities and value for money for taxpayers in its work. Part of the funding structure is to ensure that there is the realisation, creation and recycling of value from defence development land. The organisation is being set up on the best possible basis to be able to have control of how it manages its funding and to continue to create value for defence homes over time.

Q161 Rachel Taylor: David, will the Secretary of State have the power to divert resources from housing to fund other defence priorities?

David Brewer: Ultimately, the organisation is answerable to the Secretary of State, as well as to Parliament and to families, and the Defence Secretary ultimately controls the prioritisation of budgets and funding. But as Natalie described, this Defence Secretary has absolutely committed the £9 billion, and there are lots of mechanisms in there to try to ensure that housing gets the prioritisation it needs.

Q162 Mr Francois: Mr Brewer, as Natalie said, this is a 10-year programme, so it must perforce be part of the Defence Investment Plan. We were promised faithfully that we would have that in the autumn, and then absolutely by Christmas, but now we are in March, so it is a bit like waiting for Godot. When we had our initial briefing, you explained to us that part of the DIP—a DIP assumption; I think you used the words “baked in”—would be a 25% reduction in the spend on housing management and maintenance, meaning that, in pub English, you have cut it by a quarter. How can we materially improve the quality of accommodation for service personnel if you have started by taking away a quarter of the budget? How does that work?

David Brewer: You drink in a different pub than I do, sir. This money is the most game-changing commitment to the generational renewal of forces family housing. We have worked a bottom-up, costed plan of what is necessary to deliver everything set out in the housing strategy. That, in terms of my input to the DIP process, is the funding we applied for, and everything we asked for was committed through the DIP process. We have the money that we need to deliver.

As Natalie mentioned, this is a game-changing new organisation and arrangement that allows us to deliver much better value for money for taxpayers. Some key areas that drive poor value for money, such as stop-start funding, are addressed through this piece of work. That includes the ability to put the right quality of professional resource on the ground to oversee the specification and quality of work delivered through our supply chain. As we renew the houses and improve their quality, the cost of reactive repairs will fall away over time as well. We are really confident that we have an absolutely great financial settlement.

Q163 Mr Francois: You would be very welcome to drink in a pub in Rayleigh, Mr Brewer, but for the sake of brevity, the DIP has not been published. You keep telling us that this money has been allocated, but £1 billion of it



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could be taken away the night before the DIP is published—you do not know that. Has the Treasury ringfenced and formally signed off that money, so that whatever happens to equipment or anything else in the DIP, you know for definite that you have that cash? We have to ask, because it is not published yet.

Natalie Elphicke Ross: I think we have set out very clearly that, when the strategy was published, the Defence Secretary made that commitment to £9 billion.

Q164 **Mr Francois:** With respect, the Defence Secretary is not the Chancellor. Has the Treasury approved the money?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: That is the amount committed to defence housing. Yes, there were conversations with the Treasury so that Defence could commit that money. It was important to me that, in the work done and commitment shown by everyone, including Defence Ministers, this generational renewal could be carried through. That is why there was a costed plan and commitment at that time.

Nothing in the work around the Defence Investment Plan in any way stops, holds up or delays the work we are undertaking, with that commitment and this new programme, to start delivering for service families now, and that is what is happening.

Mr Francois: If they ever publish it, we will know.

Natalie Elphicke Ross: To address your comment about the 25% cut, £9 billion is an unprecedented amount of money for defence housing. I hope all Members welcome that.

Let me explain why these efficiencies matter. In previous times, when money was committed to sort out kitchens and bathrooms, for example, because these basics were not fit and the work was not done to understand what stopped money going out the door on an efficient, value-for-money basis, instead of getting three kitchens, the Department ended up getting only one. That is two families who did not get their kitchens upgraded because of the structure that is currently in place. That is why we need the Defence Housing Service and this level of funding commitment, and it is why this structure will see it through for the benefit of forces families.

Mr Francois: For the record, there is no further—

Chair: Hang on a second. I think we are getting bogged down in detail that will come up in later questions.

Mr Francois: But this is fundamental to the whole thing.

Chair: We are drifting very far and wide from the original question. Just ask one more brief question.

Mr Francois: Natalie, you will find no sterner critic of the DIO in Parliament than me. I can drown you in Hansards to that effect. For the

record, the comment on a 25% cut was not mine; it was Mr Brewer's. He revealed it at the initial briefing, not me. Thank you, Chair.

Q165 AI Carns: Thank you very much for your evidence and the great work you have done on the defence housing strategy. Just to be clear, nothing in the Defence Investment Plan process is stopping us getting the work under way, is there?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: No.

Mr Francois: Publish the bloomin' thing then.

AI Carns: Sorry, Natalie. Could you say that again? I could not hear you.

Natalie Elphicke Ross: No, there is nothing that stops us getting the work under way. Indeed, the work is under way.

AI Carns: Thank you for the collaborative and polite way in which you are dealing with these questions.

Q166 Dr Shastri-Hurst: Can you set out the rationale behind the decision to set up a new public body, as opposed to the alternatives of either keeping service family housing within the MOD or transferring the defence estate to another housing association with expertise in that area?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: The questions of what the shape of the body should be, whether it should be moved or stay, how efficiency can be driven, where the inefficiency is, and why things had not been turned around were at the heart of the work we did on the review. The pride we have in our military must extend to the pride we have in our military homes. Ensuring that the commitment that has been made can be carried through was a question of what the right structure, body, capability, funding and accountability should be, and what that needs to look like.

The review team considered very carefully whether the body should stay within the Ministry of Defence. As I suggested in my previous answer, some structural, long-term issues suggest that it would not be well placed to deliver suitable long-term asset management and high service quality if it stayed long-term in the Ministry of Defence. We also looked at a range of other options, including a housing association model.

There were a few matters that the review team considered pivotal to that decision. The first was operational military capability. The experience of going to a private finance model with Annington left the defence estate in a position where it does not have the right homes in the right places to meet operational capability. That was not a happy experience. This structure needs to be able to work with the military to ensure that operational capability is appropriate. That suggests that moving it too far outside the Ministry of Defence would not be wise.

Secondly, we looked at the funding. A number of review team members, including me, have significant housing association and housing association finance experience, so you would expect us to consider whether there is a private finance route to set up a housing association that might ease



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pressures on the Treasury. We took expert advice on this during the review, including from the Treasury, Cabinet Office and others.

There are two factors that mean it would not work. One is that these are military homes for military purposes. They are used exclusively for that. They are not general market homes, and they are not being provided on that basis. The second is that the dominant amount of money is being provided directly by the Ministry of Defence through something we call the defence contribution, which is the gap between the subsidised rents and the cost to run and invest in the estate. Those two factors, together with others, mean that if this were in another kind of body, it would still end up being on balance sheet. It would not achieve the requisite separation required for public finance purposes. We took expert advice, including from the Treasury, as I mentioned.

The third thing is really important: the welfare of our armed forces and their families. During the review, we heard some good and very important evidence about the way in which housing was used to support the welfare of our armed forces and their families—for example, following a bereavement. That welfare function, looking after the whole family, is a pivotal part of the armed forces community. For that to be delivered in the way that is so important to the armed forces, it cannot be delivered well through a separate body—a third sector or private body, or someone who is not going to support that important welfare function. I think that would be to the detriment of the welfare culture there is at the moment, so that was not an appropriate route.

Finally, and very briefly, nine in 10 homes will be upgraded or modernised through the renewal programme. Three in 10 are in such a condition that they need to be replaced entirely, or new homes provided. The scale of the change in the 10-year programme has to happen alongside keeping the military operational requirement going, so there needs to be really close working on a quite complex estate renewal and build programme over the 10 years. Again, that means there should be close working with the military.

This new organisation, as a public body, will have the requisite operational and financial independence, but it will have the close working as part of the Ministry of Defence family. It will have that military relationship and organisation embedded to ensure operational efficiency as well as to ensure that high standards for families are met.

Q167 Mr Foster: You have a really challenging job here. Thirty years ago, I was living in married quarters at the Royal School of Military Engineering in Chatham, and it was crap. It was at the time when Annington was taking over. I am sorry about the language, but people need to understand how poor this accommodation was—really poor. Thirty years later, it appears to me that it is in an even worse condition. We have fewer houses, and somebody somewhere has been having the public purse away, because billions of pounds are being expended on an estate that is crumbling. I am not pointing fingers at anybody in this room, but it has not worked. You have a real challenge, and I wish you all the luck with it, genuinely,

because our service personnel really do deserve better.

One of the concerns I have is the really poor contractual performance on maintenance, repairs and move-in services, yet I read in the Bill that the Future Defence Infrastructure Services contracts are continuing until 2029. I have a real concern about that: why have they not been terminated? Am I right in suggesting that you will potentially be using some of the same contractors that have let down the services, the MOD and their families?

David Brewer: First, I share your view on the appalling state of military accommodation and your anger at some of the things that have happened in the past. The reversal of the Annington deal was the first step in unlocking our ability to get to grips with and fix service family homes properly. The reversal delivered in January 2025 was pivotal to our ability to get on, set out the strategy and deliver the work that we are proposing now.

There has been a very significant improvement in the performance of the contractors you are talking about since the contracts were mobilised. I will not bombard you with statistics, but we are tracking them and working really closely with them to drive better delivery and performance.

As we have described today, the long-term secure funding commitment allows us to work really differently with the market. It has also been difficult for our suppliers to deliver their best on the ground, because we have thrown extra work at them in short-term slugs and asked them to turn it around in months, and then we have cut back the funding. That does not set them up for success. I can tell you that they are all passionate and committed about doing the best for service families, as we are. I met the chief execs of all those supplier organisations yesterday, and we are continuing to look at how we can drive improved performance through the organisation.

As I mentioned earlier, we will be strengthening our own delivery teams. We will put high-quality, experienced, professional contracting engineers on the ground to specify and oversee the work of contractors. There is a great deal still to do to make sure we are getting good-quality work from those organisations and good value for money.

As well as moving the FDIS contracts across and starting work on what comes next, we will bring a number of other suppliers into our supply chain to deliver the scale of the renewal work. It is not that we are going to push all that work through the FDIS contracts; there will be new contractors onboard.

Q168 Mr Foster: Are you satisfied that, within the terms of the contracts you have in place, if the performance does not improve immediately, you can terminate?

David Brewer: The contracts provide for that. It is always the case, when you are looking at really big decisions like that, that there are downsides to terminating contracts and remobilising new suppliers, so we have to



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take a carefully balanced judgment on what is going to be the best thing to do to deliver the best outcome for families.

Natalie Elphicke Ross: As well as the review work, David and I went and had a look at some of the new, higher move-in standards that the contractors said were being met. They said that the new standard was set and paid for, and that we should go in the home to have a look. We went in, and what we saw was not good enough. We had ended up with a bath replaced, but degraded bath handles were still there, so when you walked in it just looked dirty, or there would still be a degraded soap dish. One house that we went into, which had been signed off for a move-in, basically had a metal spike sticking out of the wall at a child's eye height. David and the team are taking immediate action to make sure there is better inspection and responsibility for the quality of the standard, because it is being paid for, and we want to make sure that the homes that people are moving into are there.

Q169 **Chair:** What happened to the contractor in that situation?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: David can speak to that.

David Brewer: That house was not ready for a family to move into, and a family did not move into it until it was made safe.

Chair: That is not what I asked. I asked what happened to the contractor.

Natalie Elphicke Ross: They had a talking to. The standards of the checking—

Q170 **Chair:** I am sorry, but what you have described is a contractor not delivering on what they were paid for. What happened to the contractor?

David Brewer: The contractor resolved the work at their own cost, and they had not yet cleared the house for move-in. They would have brought that house up to a suitable standard before a family moved in.

Q171 **Chair:** Presumably, you went and checked all their other houses. Were they all of a similar standard?

David Brewer: We have a level of oversight on contractor performance. It is not where we want to be, because we do not have the professional teams on the ground at the scale we would like to be able to properly monitor performance and resources. We deduct money where contractors do not meet their performance targets, and we withhold payment where they do not deliver work at the right standard.

Q172 **Chair:** At the start of his question, Paul alleged that there were contractors making a lot of money but not delivering what they were being paid for. Do you agree with that?

David Brewer: Broadly, the contractors are now meeting the contractual service level targets that are set out in the contracts. They were not in the first year or two of operation, but they have turned around that performance. As I said, by working smartly, there is opportunity for us all to deliver much better service and much better value for money.



Q173 Mr Foster: We have the Minister here. Within the British Army and all the services, we have highly trained, highly respected people. We have military clerks of works, for example—I was one. Why do we not use them? Why do we not send them in? They wouldn't accept this poor standard. They are trained military staff, and they are part of the process. It is their families and their colleagues' families who are living in those properties. They would inspect them to a very high standard, because they are trained to do so—they deliver contracts for all the forces all around the world. Could we consider using them to supplement and oversee it? Somebody has signed off a property as being fit that could have killed a child. Let's not beat about the bush here—from what you said, Natalie, there was a spike in a wall.

Natalie Elphicke Ross: It is a situation where there has been contracting in parts and there has not been a whole picture. Historically, there has not been someone taking responsibility for the whole of housing delivery. One of the key things that is already under way in the changes over the last year is making sure that there are responsible housing officers, improved move-in standards and assurance over those. These are the things that need to be fixed in the new housing service. It is about making sure that contracting looks at the whole house, that the standards are actually there, and that there is assurance and checking.

We want to make sure that service families are much more involved and able to comment on the quality of the repairs and work, and whether the work has been done to the right standard, and therefore whether someone gets paid or their pay deducted. Work is under way, but the Committee will know that this is an important area and there is a lot more to do. I want to assure the Committee that the new Defence Housing Service will have the service ethos. It is being set up to make sure that the whole service family is delivered the right service to the right standard. We know there is much more to do, and this will be an important step forward.

David Brewer: May I follow up on a specific point?

Chair: Very quickly.

David Brewer: We employed military clerks of works to do a lot of the survey work that led to the development of the strategy. We are also starting to employ former clerks of works through the defence housing organisation to oversee quality, and some of our supply chain also employs former military clerks of works within their management structures. We are absolutely taking advantage of those skills, and we will do a lot more of that.

Q174 Al Carns: I, too, have lived in married quarters and seen repairs being poorly dealt with. They were either overly expensive or fixed the wrong thing altogether. Could you talk me through the consumer charter and how on-site housing officers will help to facilitate better management of contractual change and housing repairs?

David Brewer: We have set out a number of commitments in a published document called the consumer charter, which include improving repairs,

improving the quality of move-in preparation and a range of other measures. There is also a commitment to provide a named housing officer for all patches.

Q175 Al Carns: Could you provide a copy of the consumer charter for evidence, please?

David Brewer: We will.

Chair: Neil and Jayne want to come in, but I want to move on quickly, so can you keep it brief?

Q176 Dr Shastri-Hurst: Natalie, the example you gave of a particular house is a clear breach of contract. Why was the contract not terminated for that breach? How many others have not been fulfilling their contractual obligations over the last five years? You may not have those details in front of you, but you could write to the Committee. How many of those contracts were terminated as a result?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: The house I visited speaks to the question of how this has been set up and managed in the past. The FDIS contract was signed off by the Defence Ministers at the time, and it creates a separation between individual jobs that are delivered instead of looking at the whole house and having that signed off.

The resources, the capacity and the assurance to look after the whole family house are not provided in the current structure in the DIO defence housing team. That under-resourcing and structural failure has led to a position where the contractor can do their bit and get signed off—for example, they have put in a bath—but they are not contractually required to look at the house as a whole. That is not a result of what is happening today; that is a result of how the contracts were set up, and the lack of assurance and investment in the properties back at the time they were set up.

Working within the current contractual framework, filling the gaps, investing in the housing officers on the ground, investing in insurance¹, and making sure that the whole family house is looked at is the change that is needed. We need to address the structural failings of the past and make sure that service families are properly looked after, and that when they move into a home it is safe, comfortable and suitable for their needs. Everyone needs to be able to move forward on the Defence Housing Service knowing that it can be delivered. That is what we want to achieve.

Q177 Jayne Kirkham: As I understand it, it is almost like social housing. You have your main contractor and then subcontractors underneath. The subcontractors do one little job, and the main contractor does not really check or do much about it—they have a contract until 2029—so on the ground we are trying to get the housing officers to manage what is being done. If you are stuck with these contracts, having someone there on the ground to check sounds like quite a sensible way of doing it.

¹ Clarification from witness 12/03/26: I intended to say “assurance”

Natalie Elphicke Ross: That is a really good description.

David Brewer: Very well put. It is also worth noting that there has been a lot of change in those second-tier subcontractors. A number of the second-tier organisations have been terminated as a result of poor performance during those contracts. There have also been some areas where the main contractors have brought work in-house and employed their own direct resources, which we absolutely encourage. It is not that those have been static—they have probably been more actively managed and more dynamic than at any point in history—but we will be able to do more of that in time.

We are also really keen to get much greater accountability from the individual engineers and individual tradespeople who are doing that work, and as we build our systems and build our resourcing, we will be able to monitor the performance of individuals and make sure that we take action.

Chair: I have to move this on because we are running out of time.

Q178 **David Reed:** David and Nathalie, thank you for being with us this morning. From our perspective, we all want to see the situation improve, but I also want to manage expectations. Going back to the claim of reducing the delivery cost of housing projects and maintenance work by 25%. If we were in the private sector and I was trying to invest in this business, and you said you were going to cut the fat by 25%, I would really want to understand how you would achieve this wizardry. We talked about some of the contractors in the system that are not delivering. What is the view—are you trying to cut all of them and become super-lean so that you are left with the muscle and you can just deliver that at 25% reduced costs? How does that work in practice?

David Brewer: It is really difficult for me to frame a £9 billion commitment as a cut in any way, shape or form. We have absolutely got the financial settlement that we need to be able to deliver the most ambitious programme of improvement and work that has been set out for a very long time, and we are putting in place the organisational arrangements that allow us to deliver great value for money by just managing the work in a proper, organised, planned way, with the right level of professional oversight.

There are some key measures that work through the programme that will really help us to drive that value for money. It is not for this Bill, but we have been working with MHCLG to create a new designation of military housing within the planning system, which will help us to drive better value for money in some of the acquisitions and some of the other work. As we renew the estate, we will also be able to cut down the number of faults—the number of repair tasks necessary—by introducing proper, planned life cycle programmes of work. This is not just getting people to run faster and to cut fat; this is about a proper, organised, planned programme of work, and that is where the value comes from. As I said before, we have an unprecedented financial commitment, and it is the money we need to deliver the programme.

Q179 David Reed: To go into the terminologies of public debt finance: committed, commitment—without the DIP, have you been given a multi-year financial settlement, and do you have a hypothecated, ringfenced budget, linked to inflation, that you now know you can spend over the next few years and that you know you have that in the bank? That you know is on a spreadsheet somewhere, and you know is going to be invested.

David Brewer: The Defence Secretary has been consistent and completely unequivocal in his commitment to providing this funding. As was mentioned before, when that commitment was made at the publication of the strategy, there was consultation with Treasury at the time. That is the framework we are operating on.

Q180 David Reed: Just for my understanding, are we saying it is a commitment from the Defence Secretary that this is going to happen? It is not committed funds.

David Brewer: We have not placed that work on contract, no.

David Reed: Thank you.

Chair: You are lucky that you are not facing the level of cuts that local authorities have had to cope with over a very long period of time.

Q181 Luke Akehurst: How will the defence development fund be set up and managed to aid the development of surplus defence land?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: The amount of land that Defence holds is vast. It owns and manages more than 1%—about 1.3%—of all land in the country. It is an awful lot of land. Ensuring that land, where it is not needed any longer for defence operational purposes, is put to work for other purposes is a key part of the strategy.

Defence development land has been identified as part of the work to date, and that can bring forward potentially up to 100,000 new homes. Those will be homes for the main market. As that comes forward and is delivered, the land available will be replenished into the defence development fund, so the money will be recycled to spend on defence homes and development. The land will be replenished by the Ministry of Defence as it reviews its land holdings and finds other land it no longer needs.

Q182 Luke Akehurst: Are you saying that 100% of the receipts from the land disposal go to the DHS?

David Brewer: So 100% of the benefit that is generated through the development activity is ringfenced to be ploughed back into the Defence Housing Service, yes.

Q183 Jayne Kirkham: Just briefly, this money is going to change the entire housing service. It is fantastic. I can see why you are looking at this with housing. Does that put the housing service in a position where it will essentially be a developer as well as a landlord? How will the service

balance those different roles?

David Brewer: The overwhelming focus of this organisation is fixing military homes for military families. That is absolutely what we are here to do, and it is the primary focus.

Jayne Kirkham: So it is more disposal than development?

David Brewer: We know there are significant opportunities to generate better value and outcomes by developing surplus MOD land. The arrangement that we are working through in detail is creating a dedicated function that will sit within the Defence Housing Service and focus on development. We are exploring the detail of how that will operate through the next phase of work we are doing with colleagues and the Treasury.

We will bring in specialists to lead some of those activities. We anticipate that the vast majority of the work will be delivered in partnership with other professional organisations. We already have a number of those development partnerships operating in some areas. We will also be working with colleagues across Government, like Homes England and Places for London, to drive that value.

Jayne Kirkham: So your strategy will set what will be for sale as private homes and what will be for military use.

Q184 **Juliet Campbell:** Thank you both for being here today. You touched on this a little earlier, but will the Defence Housing Service be subject to the same local planning authority processes as other developers, and will this differ in the devolved Administrations?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: In relation to defence land that is coming forward to the main market, working with third parties, it will be brought forward in the usual way. There is no military requirement on that land at all; it will be brought forward as David just described.

That will involve working with planning and putting land in the planning system, in the usual way that you would expect, and working with local authorities around that. The same will apply with devolved Administrations and devolved Governments. However, where there is military land and a military requirement for military homes, as set out in the strategy, there will be a need for a fast-track planning system that allows those military homes to be brought forward and met. That includes the ability to replace some of the really substandard houses at pace in the right places. That is the distinction I would draw in relation to that. I hope it would be understandable why, for military homes, we need to make sure that they are provided in the way I have described.

Q185 **Juliet Campbell:** If you will not be using the same processes that an ordinary developer would use for building homes, how will we know that the standards are the same? Local authorities are notoriously slow, but they do ensure that homes are built to a certain standard, including affordability, energy efficiency and all the other things that they take into account. If you are not going to use that process, how will we know that



the process you do use is going to deliver to the necessary standard?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: In relation to the standards, the strategy sets out that those matters—such as making sure they are energy efficient and modern, and are the types of homes that you would want to see in the future—are what we want to see for our new military housing. We want to go further with those standards to make sure they are suitable for military life, such as having more storage for kit and good provision of broadband, so that families can work from home and have good-quality family life. Those design standards for new defence homes, in consultation with the families, are all part of where the strategy will go with that.

This will sit within the planning system, but I have described a fast-track planning system. At the moment, there are permitted defence requirement exceptions for some military accommodation, and there is a new provision in the draft NPPF to describe bringing forward specific military homes, which has not been provided for adequately in the planning system or previous NPPFs. For the first time, there is a recognition that military families are part of communities. They are a really big and important part of many communities, and we want to make sure that is reflected when local authorities are planning for the growth of their communities, including the military. That happens really well in some locations, and less well in others.

Being able to embed the importance of military housing within the planning system will be a really good step forward. We continue to work with MHCLG. We are keen to see a fast-track approach, and let me give you a really concrete example. If there is a location where land is held in the middle of a military family housing area, or adjacent to it, and there is a need for 50 new homes to go in, that is the sort of example where we are saying, “Can we just get after that, and get on and build those homes? It’s all part of extending the existing military estate. We have the land and the plan. Can we just get on with it and fast track?” There are some good examples like the build-to-rent sector, where there are slightly different regimes for slightly different markets. There is something there that we could work with, which would give local authorities visibility but allow Defence and the Defence Housing Service to get on and get behind it.

Q186 **Chair:** David, did you want to add to that?

David Brewer: In terms of the physical properties, all the same safeguards that apply in the normal system will apply to the construction of these homes, but the ability to get input from family representation and from the family federations through our governance structures will help us to make sure that we build the best homes for service families. We will be building pilot homes so that people can come and have a look at the sample of what we are trying to build and give us feedback on what works and what does not. We will be working with families in occupations so that we can constantly review and improve those standards. Ultimately, it is in our interest to build homes that are really high-performing, resilient and robust, and that do not need loads of maintenance work. We will be making sure those things are built in.



Q187 Mr Francois: The Future of Defence Housing questionnaire in June 2025 got, I think, more than 6,000 responses. What were the main findings from that questionnaire? What were the main points that came back from the service families who took the trouble to fill it in?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: There is a great deal in that. As I mentioned earlier, the work of Cat and the team was absolutely tremendous. There were some specific questions that we wanted to check in on with families, and the responses have been seen through the strategy and the result.

Let me give you an example. One of the challenges for many families is that military life requires mobility, and it is a huge sacrifice for the whole family to make. Sometimes, that mobility can affect schooling and healthcare, affecting service children as well as their parents. Anything that can be done to reduce mobility while allowing the operational requirement to be met is clearly important, so one of the pieces of work undertaken last year looked at whether what we call a zonal approach could be applied, whereby people could be within a zone—an area—rather than attached to a particular location.

People were being moved a few miles away to a different location, but that came with a new school, a new doctor and sometimes a new local authority. The zonal approach looks at whether we can manage the estate a bit differently, and whether that would help to reduce the number of moves and increase the choice for families around that. It is one of the questions in the questionnaire, and families were very supportive of that sort of approach, so that is in the strategy. There will now be further consultation with both the military and service personnel to make sure the zones are right and achieve their purpose. That was a good example.

We mentioned the new build standards. Again, we have asked families about the things that are important to them. There is huge richness; it informs not just the strategy but how the organisation moves forward in the next stage. A really good group of people have come forward and said they are happy to do further focus sessions and continue to do the work. I think it has been a great piece of work, and it really enriches and informs the direction of travel.

Q188 Mr Francois: Thank you; that is very helpful. The new Defence Housing Service is still going to have at its heart the FDIS contract that my colleague Paul focused on, because that still has quite a few years to run. For the record, when I published the “Stick or Twist?” report in 2020, which touched on the issue, I pleaded with my own Ministers not to go down the FDIS route, but they did.

If it is still dependent on a contract that has been highly criticised, including by service personnel and their families, a cynic might say that the Defence Housing Service is just an attempt to rebrand the old, failed DIO, because at its heart it still uses a failed contract called FDIS. What is the difference between the DIO way of doing it and the Defence Housing Service way of doing it? When it comes to basic things that take months, like fixing boilers, what is going to be different under the Defence Housing

Service using FDIS, compared with the DIO using FDIS?

David Brewer: We are talking about an absolute sea change in the way the organisation works and delivers. For example, we will be moving to a planned programme, a proactive life cycle, to replace things like boilers, to reduce the number of faults. I can tell you that, right now, across the estate, fewer than 10 military homes have been without heating for more than five days. In a number of those cases, where they have been without heating for more than five days, it is because the families are not available for us to go in and do the work. There has been an absolute improvement in the quality of reactive repair work, which was one of our charter commitments. I think that demonstrates that it is possible to drive performance improvement and better outcomes through those contracts by operating them well, working with the teams and putting our own specialist resources on the ground, which we are doing.

In addition to that, as I mentioned, delivering the renewal programme and the new homes will mean that we bring a huge number of additional suppliers on board, working with house building partners to deliver the whole programme of work.

Q189 Mr Francois: Again, so often it all comes down to money. We are in the first week of March, and you will appreciate that if we get beyond the third week of March, we will be into purdah, because of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh National Assembly elections. If the DIP is not published by then, we will not get it until after May. That is just a fact. If you are planning to really get cracking in April, how confident are you that you will get the DIP published and you will have the money you need?

David Brewer: I am confident that we are able to get the work on contract that we need to deliver the plan, and we are doing that already.

Q190 Al Carns: The Defence Housing Service is being created in recognition of the DIO's capacity and capability to deal with huge under-investment in the defence estate over the last tens of years. How will it increase DIO's capacity to focus on other issues, such as strategic basing, single living accommodation and the plethora of other issues that DIO faces?

David Brewer: As you point out, DIO has a really broad range of activities. We have 400 people overseas as we speak, supporting combat and intelligence operations around the world in really difficult times. The ability to create a dedicated, focused housing organisation, which can absolutely concentrate just on getting housing done brilliantly, takes that activity away from the DIO organisation, which as part of the national armaments directorate can now focus on delivering all those major programmes of work—upgrades at Clyde, and other major improvements and maintenance services at all our bases across the country. This will allow DIO to focus its resource and effort much more tightly on some of those other activities.

Q191 Chair: A lot of the potential development land owned by the Ministry of Defence will be highly sensitive land: green belt, SSSIs—all sorts of land. In your fast-track planning process, you will not be able to bypass any of



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those restrictions, because the Government have made it clear that they want to develop mainly in the green belt where there is, say, grey belt land, which is partially developed or not strictly green belt. Does the same policy apply to the development of defence land?

Natalie Elphicke Ross: For the defence development land, which is being brought forward for the main market in the usual way, all the usual positions will apply—architectural, environmental and everything else. It is the usual planning system, the usual rules and the usual requirements as for non-defence, non-military housing land. The slight distinction we are drawing is with infill extension, which at many of the sites I have looked at, where there is an acute, immediate operational need, is very often land that is already used for other operational purposes that could be used for housing or is infill in other ways. I hope that gives some reassurance on that point.

David Brewer: There is a real mixture of different types of properties coming. There are some very large sites that require long-term place making and work with partners such as Homes England to bring them into activity. There are other areas where we have existing service family accommodation estates where there is space to develop much more intensively on the footprint and they are already well served by roads and the like. There is a real mixture of different types of development opportunity.

Chair: If we have no other questions, thank you very much for your time this morning. We are really grateful to you for the way you answered the questions.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Cat Calder, Mark Hayhurst and Helen Fish.

Q192 **Chair:** Good morning. I call the Committee to order for our second panel, who are very welcome. Thank you very much for coming to give evidence to us. I will ask you to introduce yourselves, and then we will get on with the questions.

Helen Fish: Good morning, everybody. My name is Helen Fish. I am the senior families advocate and accommodation lead at the Naval Families Federation.

Cat Calder: Good morning. I am Cat Calder, and I am the housing specialist for the Army Families Federation.

Mark Hayhurst: Good morning. I am Mark Hayhurst from the RAF Families Federation. I am the policy adviser for accommodation.

Chair: We will be using first names if that is okay.

Q193 **Mr Francois:** Good morning, thank you very much for your time. The MOD carried out a Future of Defence Housing questionnaire, which I think reported in June 2025. It had over 6,000 responses, which is quite healthy. In your experience, what were the main findings from that



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questionnaire? What lessons did we learn from the exercise?

Cat Calder: The questionnaire, as you said, had a very good response rate, which was very heartening to see. That shows the depth of feeling that service families and service personnel have towards defence housing. We looked at three areas: one was how we could improve the current estate; one was about moving towards new builds, and what families would like to see; and the other was how we can help to encourage families to purchase and own their own properties.

There was a plethora of responses. They were all very similar. For example, in the part about how we want to improve housing, kitchens and bathrooms were obviously very much up there. On improvements, we also had a very good feel from families about what they want to do to their own homes, because these are homes that families are living in—they are not just SFA; they are homes. People told us what they want to do—they are adults—such as paint their property, put up shelves or be able to put a flowerbed in the garden. All those things came out as well. If you have any particular questions—it was a very long survey.

Q194 **Mr Francois:** What we wanted were the main things that came back, and you have helped us with that. Do either of your colleagues have anything to add?

Mark Hayhurst: What we found from the survey was the lived experience, how that is balanced out across the SFA estate and how people perceived their family home. That is key to ensuring operational effectiveness. To deliver that, it is key to ensure that there is a family home—a family hub—that is safe and fit for purpose. Those were some of the key comments that came out from the survey.

Helen Fish: The world has changed significantly since a lot of the SFA estate was built. A lot of our families are still living with chicken wire fences that separate their homes from their neighbours'. We do not communicate in the same way, and we want a bit more privacy as well. We will still speak to our neighbours and the community that we live in, but what people want and what they are saying is, "We want a bit more privacy than a 4-foot chicken wire fence." That came out in some of the answers to the questions that were raised in the survey and the questionnaire. What was built then was fine, but it is not fine for what is needed now. It just has not caught up, I don't think, and that is what a lot of our families brought up in answer to that question.

Cat Calder: The underlying feeling with all of this is that military housing is essential for our service families, and it has to be right for them now and in the future. That is what the responses brought out in the survey.

Q195 **Mr Francois:** On that point of principle, I suspect you would have unanimity around the Committee.

In terms of how it will actually be delivered, if we say for brevity's sake that the current model is the Defence Infrastructure Organisation model, with much of the actual day-to-day service provided via the FDIS contract,



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we are now going to move to a Defence Housing Service, again with much of the day-to-day service provided via the same FDIS contract. At the receiving end, it will look much the same. How do your organisations perceive the Defence Housing Service? What do you think will be different? What might be better? What might be the same? What might be worse? How does it look to you?

Helen Fish: Since the consumer charter was introduced, we are all seeing green shoots of positivity. We have seen that already with the introduction of named housing officers who are really changing the feel for families on the ground in the places that they live. Having that, permanent enhancements, an easier process to allow pets and simplified complaints, it is not where it needs to be, but it is better than it was. Those green shoots are brilliant to see, but money makes the world go round, and funding is a huge part of delivering anything. If the money is there to back up the system that is in place, there is positivity.

Q196 **Mr Francois:** You mentioned named housing officers. If you go back years, you used to have what were known colloquially as “patch managers”—usually a retired senior NCO or a senior rate who had been there for years and had always known that No. 12 had a wonky boiler and so on. Families liked that, because it was someone approachable who they could go to and get things fixed with minimum bureaucracy. Unfortunately, that was taken away. Do you think having named housing officers is moving back in that direction?

Helen Fish: I think the shift is there. At a recent meeting that the three of us attended, the subject of housing officers and what that can bring was touched on again. Some of our families see their housing officer when they move in, and they might not touch base with them at all during their time in SFA. Because of their busy lifestyles, a housing officer might change, but there need to be touch points along the way. I think we are again moving in the direction of having a person who knows not just the families but the estate, who is around, who belongs and who doesn’t—all those little things.

Mr Francois: When I looked at it, that is what the families want. Rather than ringing a remote call centre 300 miles away, they wanted a human being they can go and talk to.

Cat Calder: I am reassured by the depth of analysis that was done during this entire process. It really brought out some areas where a lot of improvement was needed, and other areas that, as we have said, are low-hanging fruit—the areas that are constantly being looked at, reviewed and finessed as we go through the very early stages of the process.

What is so important in all of this is honest and transparent communication with families. We need a culture change that is truly families-first. Having been on the review team, that very much came through, driven by the three fam feds, and it came out in spades within the questionnaire as well that it is what families need.



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We are really encouraged by the fact there is a desire to embed the voice of families either via families directly or the fam feds. We are evidence-based, so we can bring the larger body of evidence to meetings, but it is really important to have the families' voice in there.

Q197 **Mr Francois:** So you think having the families feds involved in the overall running of the organisation is a good thing?

Cat Calder: Well, we are not running the organisation, but certainly as part of the governance and as part of the accountability, absolutely.

Q198 **Chair:** Are you confident that you will be listened to?

Cat Calder: Absolutely, and that shows already.

Mr Francois: That was one of the key recommendations in "Stick or Twist?"

Mark Hayhurst: We are working within the boundaries of the FDIS contracts that you referred to within the DHS as it is, and we still have several years to go. I came into the role three years ago, when the FDIS contract was at its lowest point. Casework was through the roof within the fam fed, and we were firefighting on a daily basis.

However, since that point—Helen has referred to it—there have been green shoots. We have worked tirelessly in the margins to advocate for service personnel, to ensure their voice has been heard by the NAMS and RAMS contractors, to ensure that they understand exactly where the frustrations are, right at the ground level, whether it is contractors, middle management or what is actually sat within the RAMS level.

There has been a lot of work in the margins to ensure that voices are heard. The survey is one example, and we have now been invited in as collaborative personnel within the DHS, which has been welcomed by the three of us. So yes, we have what we have with the FDIS contract. However, what we are trying to do is ensure that we advocate for those service families, ensure their voice is heard and articulate it appropriately at the right time and in the right place to ensure that they understand exactly where those issues are.

Q199 **Sarah Bool:** Thank you very much for being with us. I just wanted to go back to the level of consultation and the involvement you had when they were creating this concept of the Defence Housing Service. I am delighted that you are having these ongoing discussions, but in the early stages, what was your involvement?

Cat Calder: The three fam feds were invited to be one of the five members of the panel, and I was that representative. I can categorically say, having done an awful lot of travel in and out of London and having been at every meeting, that we were very much engaged with, listened to and questioned, and our views were taken into consideration.

Helen Fish: Yes, I agree. Unfortunately—I think I speak for Mark on this one—we just could not commit to that. We have other responsibilities, and I was away quite a bit last year, so it had to be somebody who could be



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present all the time to bring that representation for all three families federations and the families that we support and advocate for at those meetings. Now we are certainly seeing an increase in meetings, get-togethers, committees and all sorts of things that would never have been in our diaries this time last year.

Mark Hayhurst: To expand on that, it was welcomed that we were invited to the Defence Housing Service customer service committee. We had our inaugural meeting a few weeks ago, which set out the TOS, how we are going to move forward, what the governance will look like and how we are going to act over the coming months and years as a collaborative team. That is certainly making inroads. IOC has not met yet with DHS; however, we are certainly making steps in the right direction.

Further to that, last year a recommendation from the strategy was that we would be consulted on policy issues, and we had evidence of that just prior to last year on a particular policy around surplus applications and surplus SFA. The three of us were consulted prior to it going through the frontline commands and up through the chain into the policy advisers within Main Building. We have been consulted and are continuing to be. We have been invited to relevant committees, and that has been welcomed by the three families federations.

Q200 **Sarah Bool:** Just a quick question on the pivot, because obviously single living accommodation is going to remain with the frontline commands. Do you have any fears about that, or has there been any discussion about those in single living accommodation? Obviously, you are looking from the families' perspective, but I do not want them to be left behind.

Cat Calder: Remembering that single living accommodation is not just used by single service personnel but by service personnel who are not necessarily with their families. The RAF did a recent survey on this, so I will let Mark talk on this one.

Mark Hayhurst: Last year, we did an RAF single personnel survey—or review—with just over 600 responses, with a couple from the Navy and the Army among them. Clearly, that comes across the board from those who are single and live in single living accommodation and those who are married, unaccompanied and live in single living accommodation.

The results were interesting. The interim report is on our website and is easily available in the public domain—it is easy to get hold of—and we are waiting for the full report to be completed. There is fascinating information coming out of it. From the anecdotal evidence, it is seen as “our home”, yet it is considered to be part of the built estate, therefore not “our home” and they feel like second-class citizens. Those are some of the anecdotal bits coming out of the single living survey, and it is wider than that. It has been briefed through the RAF senior leadership team as well. They are fully aware of the survey and the upcoming full report. Watch this space. We are driving into the SLA space in the Air Force, and I know the other three services are interested as well.



Helen Fish: Mark has alluded to a cohort of people who live in single living accommodation. There are those who do not live with their parents any more. They might be young sailors or young marines, and their parents have downsized because their youngest or oldest child has left home. When they deploy and go on board a ship, they have to give up their cabin. They will move everything they have into a storage unit or stash it somewhere. They take a bag on board, and that is where they live until they come back, and then they will get another cabin. They do not have anywhere to call home. Some of the single single people are our trickiest customers in that sense, because there is not enough cabin space for everybody to have something all the time, so when they are expected to deploy, their cabin on base is expected to be given up. That can be really challenging.

Cat Calder: The single living accommodation will be reviewed as the service family accommodation was. Hopefully, in time, overseas accommodation will be reviewed as well, because we have a lot of families who live overseas. Hopefully, over time—the team cannot do everything at once as it is a lot of work—these reviews will take place so that everyone will benefit.

Q201 **Jayne Kirkham:** I just have a few questions about that. I know this has been considered before, but of course families are not the same as they used to be—I have some personal experience of that. We have single parents who are not living with their children all the time, and people in long-term relationships who are not living with the other parent of their children. There is a much more mix-and-match approach. It obviously causes problems for service personnel when they are put in single living accommodation and they cannot have their children with them at the times when they have them, and they cannot get homes with spare bedrooms. It is a bit like social housing. Was that considered in the review? Do you think things will change on that level? We have a lot of parents who are struggling to spend overnight time with their children.

Helen Fish: It is a subject that we are all very passionate about.

Cat Calder: This was included slightly later in the process. Those in long-term relationships and those who had their children when they were not married were meant to be included in the modernised accommodation offer, which was paused two years ago. That cohort has been living on a promise for the last two years. The recommendations focus on the built estate. We need to make sure that we have the right amount of service family accommodation to include all the cohorts, so that all families have access to subsidised accommodation in the right place at the right time, of the right size and the right standard. I think we would all agree that that is what we are looking for. The results of the questionnaire also showed that the majority of service families want to live in SFA for the convenience and camaraderie—the patch life, as it is called.

In years to come, I think we will have enough SFA. I am very heartened, though, to know that there is a recommendation for an interim scheme to be put in place, so that these cohorts who are not currently benefiting will



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benefit going forward. I think the recommendation was that an announcement would be out in April. We are hoping that we will hear something by then, so that the families in these cohorts, who have not had any communication for the last two years about what is happening, will now be able to benefit from subsidised accommodation.

Q202 Jayne Kirkham: There is a recommendation, isn't there, that families of all shapes and sizes need to be accommodated?

Helen Fish: Absolutely, there are societal shifts. Society is not the same as it was years ago. If we had more time, we could probably get on our soapbox about it, but we do not unfortunately.

Mark Hayhurst: On the LTR, the 80 days and non-resident parents, and where it sits in the policy at the moment, I think we all agree that the current policy is not fit for purpose because modern families are not shaped in accordance with the JSP. In it, if you are married or in a civil partnership, you are therefore entitled to have SFA. The other cohorts are eligible, and so on and so forth. We know that SFA stock levels are poor, so surplus applications are capped at units around the UK.

Work needs to be done to modernise those policies and to reflect on what our service personnel and their families want. Getting married is not one of those things. Modern living is, "Actually, we just want to stay as partners." That is fine, whatever it may be. We notice. The ONS has recently said that marriages are on the way down and long-term relationships are pretty standard. The military is a reflection of society, so we need to modernise and move forward with it. Currently we are not, and that policy needs to be reviewed in time, appropriately—it certainly needs to be addressed.

Q203 Mr Foster: Families first—I cannot thank you enough for the work you do, for all the families you represent, to have your voices heard and to make sure that families are represented properly. We mentioned the modernised accommodation offer. It was paused because of the backlash. I do not think the backlash came from the families, because it was around the rank-based allocation and the needs-based allocation. I would suggest—I ask for your views on this—that if there had been a needs-based allocation in all the services, putting families first not rank, the estate might not be in the state that it is now. To be slightly controversial, if you had not had young officers with no family living in some of the accommodation that your families now have to live in, things might have been addressed quicker—possibly. Do you believe that it should be a needs-based, not a rank-based, allocation?

Helen Fish: This goes back to what Mark said: the policies are just not where they need to be for modern living. I do not think it is necessarily all about rank versus need. There have been some senior naval officers who wanted less than the policy and their rank gives them. They had to jump through burning hoops to get that because the policy just does not work in that way. What they actually needed for their family, irrespective of rank, could not be given to them because the policy was in the way. It is not

just one step; it all leads into the other. There is not a one-size-fits-all answer.

Q204 Mr Foster: So where did the backlash on the modernised accommodation offer, which meant that it got paused, come from?

Cat Calder: To be perfectly honest, we do not know all the detail of why it was paused. I think there was probably a financial element to it. It has been pinned on officers and their spouses, upset that the reduction from rank to need would be a perceived change to their terms and conditions. That is not within the terms and conditions, but it is something that has always been that way.

But I do not think that is the real reason that MAO was paused. I cannot guarantee that, but I think there were other reasons. We have to remember that, although officers are allocated on rank, other ranks are already allocated on need. We need to make sure that the property anyone is allocated is of an adequate size and standard. We have soldiers who are being allocated a three-bed house when they have three children who are all under 10, but the house is so small that if you get a bed in the second bedroom you cannot open the door or the wardrobe. That is what we need to be addressing. We need to ensure that what we are delivering is adequate for the needs of modern military families.

Q205 Mr Foster: You may not be able to say this, but I will. I absolutely agree—I think officers and their families were pinned. It was a financial issue that was holding back the delivery of the modernised accommodation offer, and I think the criticism I heard of officers was unfair. I want to make it clear that I do not agree with that criticism.

Mark Hayhurst: Today, given that the pause was just about two years ago, it needs to move forward. We have had a void of communication that has been filled with social media speculation. As you can imagine, it is wildfire out there. Yes, it was paused, and there is speculation from different quarters about why it was paused, but it needs to move forward now. Someone now needs to grip it. It needs to be a son of MAO or whatever it may become, but it now needs to move forward. Announcements need to be made, because a lot of families are in limbo, trying to understand what their next steps are. LTR and surplus aside, that is where we are.

Q206 Pam Cox: Thank you for sharing some pretty damning evidence, along with the previous panel, about the state of military housing in the UK. That evidence has been reinforced by members of the Committee who have lived in that housing. Given the scale of the challenge and the ambition of the Bill, is there anything that you would want to see that is not in it? I feel that this is a once-in-a-generation chance to improve things for military families.

Cat Calder: I am not sure we can really comment on that. It has been such a huge survey, given the depth of investigation that has gone on into what has gone wrong in the past, why it has gone wrong and what needs to be done to fix this. Families have seen a change process before. We

have been through change programmes and they have not shown any substantial benefit to families, but I do not think they ever went back and addressed the root cause of the issues.

I am very hopeful that this will start to show benefits for families, caveating that with the fact that not all families are going to see big benefits straightaway. It is going to take time to build. The refurb projects are going to be in various locations. I was in a family that moved three times, and every time I moved, I had to live through new windows being put in. We have other families who have moved, and works have been done, and they have not seen anything.

An element of care will need to be taken, and we need to ensure that families are communicated with, kept abreast of changes and treated like adults. Let us give families the information they need so that they can make decisions. Additionally, the operatives and all the programme works need to take into consideration the needs of the families. Going forward, there needs to be more communication with families and more empathy.

Mark Hayhurst: There are no specific amendments that I would make to the DHS today, because we are at such an embryonic stage. As lessons have been learned and identified over the last couple of decades, as has been well documented in the last hour or two, we now have a seismic, generational opportunity to move forward with the DHS. We can make those systemic improvements to move forward, having understood where the past failures were. As a families federation, our plea across the board is to have robust timelines and good-quality communication with the people on the ground. Those are some of the key points to ensure that people widely understand what is going on, when it is going on. At this moment in time, communication has been limited. As I said a minute ago, that has been filled with unnecessary noise, which is sometimes true but may not always be. We are looking for more robust decision making and for us to move forward in collaboration with the DHS.

Chair: That concludes our questions this morning. Thank you very much for coming along. We certainly look forward to families having a greater say in the Defence Housing Service in the future, which I am sure will improve it no end.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sarah Atherton.

Q207 **Chair:** Members and witnesses will be aware that two senior officers have been charged with offences relating to events leading up to the death of Gunner Jaysley Beck in 2021. Although the resolution of the House on matters sub judice does not apply to legislative proceedings, Members and witnesses will want to take care to avoid saying anything that might prejudice this or any other active court material. Please bear that in mind when asking questions.



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I welcome our witness. Thank you for coming, Sarah. Would you like to introduce yourself and give your rank and serial number, and then we will get on to our questions?

Sarah Atherton: It has been a long time, but WO 803191. I thank the Committee for inviting me to give oral evidence; my apologies that I cannot be in the room. My name is Sarah Atherton. I am a former MP, a former Defence Committee member and a former Minister for Defence People. I also chaired the Defence Committee's inquiry on women in the armed forces, "Protecting those who protect us". Latterly, I have become an advocate and campaigner for defence people, equal opportunities and justice.

Q208 **David Reed:** Thank you very much for being with us this morning, Sarah. Given your connection to the armed forces community, can you tell us the community's view on the service justice system's progress on improving the treatment of serious offences?

Sarah Atherton: There has been a rather muted response to what has happened since 2021 and the inquiry. There is very much a feeling of initiative fatigue: a raft of initiatives have been brought in, but there has been no real impact on the ground—not one that they feel, anyway, although the MOD would argue that there has been. Understandably, confidence in everything that the MOD now wants to commission and introduce is quite low. Trust and confidence will take a long time to build. In general, the community is pretty sceptical about the motivations of the MOD.

Q209 **David Reed:** With serious offences, is there less or more trust in convictions, or at least in progressing cases for certain offences?

Sarah Atherton: There is less trust. That is not helped by the high-profile cases we have seen—the Red Arrows, Harrogate, Larkhill, the Submarine Service, Sandhurst.

We are now seeing the ramifications of long-standing policies emerging. As you may know, Op Pianora is about inappropriate medical examinations. That started with the Army, and 500 cases came forward. More have now come forward, and it is being extended to the other services. The pre-1990s pregnancy ban is starting to raise its head, as are the pre-1967 LGBT exclusions. We have all this brewing under the surface, along with the new cases coming forward of women who really feel that they are not getting justice or support in the current system.

Q210 **David Reed:** My next question is closely linked to that point. Is whether there is less or more trust based on the themes of serious offences—whether they are violent or sexual, say? Is there a view that a case involving violence might be progressed and might lead to a conviction? Would it be the same for sexual offences?

Sarah Atherton: I think it would always depend on which channel they went through. If someone went to the Defence Serious Crime Unit with a serious sexual offence, they would get a better service than if they were



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channelled to the service police. The system at the moment is very fragmented. When we get on to the Bill, we will see how improvements can be made, but it really depends on where the service personnel are. If they are on deployment or overseas, the services are quite scant and disparate; if they are at Catterick or Aldershot, they might get a better service. But by and large, the trust and confidence in the system have not been rebuilt.

Q211 David Reed: From your perspective, how is the Bill in its entirety being viewed by the armed forces community?

Sarah Atherton: As I say, there has been a pretty muted response. There is a lot of initiative fatigue, with no real progress at the coalface, where it is needed. Trust is really low in the MOD, and that will take time to build. I am pleased to see that there are some really positive points in this Bill, which hopefully I can discuss later. But it is about trust and confidence, and this Bill will not achieve that until it has been put into operation.

Chair: We are coming to the Bill now.

Q212 Al Carns: Let me follow up on that question before I go on to some of the set pieces. First, thank you very much for your work over the last several years: it has been truly fantastic, and we have seen many of your recommendations implemented.

You have talked about confidence and trust. When I speak to various parts of the system within the MOD, they say that one reason for the increase in awareness and understanding of the issue is that people feel more confident that their cases will be dealt with correctly. Do you disagree?

Sarah Atherton: No. In the Women in the Armed Forces inquiry, six out of 10 women said that they would not report an incident because they feared career fouling. I understand that those numbers have slightly increased, but they have not increased significantly enough. They have increased and confidence is starting to build—some of that may be due to awareness and to advocates like me coming out and saying, “Please do complain”—but it is not good enough. I am hoping that the Bill may start increasing confidence, but six out of 10 is not enough. We can see the increasing pressure of the demand on the Defence Serious Crime Unit as a response to that. It is good, but it is not where we should be.

Q213 Al Carns: When was that study done, with the six out of 10?

Sarah Atherton: In 2021-22.

Q214 Al Carns: Right, so four years ago. Do you think that the measures in the Bill do enough to protect and support victims?

Sarah Atherton: Yes. I quite like the measures on violence against women and girls, and the protection and preventative orders. That is a really positive move that will contribute, to a degree, to reducing violence against women and girls.



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I particularly like the domestic abuse protection order. I was a service spouse in the 1990s, an infantry wife, and I witnessed domestic abuse within the married quarters then. It continues now, hidden behind closed doors, in service accommodation. I am really pleased that measure is in there.

As for stalking, in seven years I have never come across a case, but I am not saying that it does not happen. These measures are quite a progressive step forward, in a number of ways.

Q215 AI Carns: Do you think that these new powers, specifically around sexual offences and domestic abuse, are adequate to protect victims of sexual harm and domestic abuse from further harm and issues?

Sarah Atherton: I think they will, to a certain degree. These measures are back-ended, if you like: they are all about prevention and victim support, not about stopping the episodes of inappropriate or poor behaviour or criminal activity in the first place. They will give protection and build confidence that women will come forward and get the support they need. Of course, they are preventative: once the crime has happened, there is a monitoring mechanism that will protect and support victims, but the Bill does not address the offence happening in the first place. But the monitoring and reinforcement is good.

Q216 AI Carns: The whole Committee will be going down to see the Defence Serious Crime Command, and we will get to see the victim support unit.

Clause 10 will introduce a new victims code of practice that is designed to support victims of service offences through the service justice process. Have you any thoughts on what the code should look like and how it should be implemented to ensure its effectiveness?

Sarah Atherton: Yes. At the moment, the system depends on good people doing good things. Processes, policies and services are extremely varied and hidden within systems. They are different in different locations and units. Quite frankly, service personnel do not know where to go for what, so the system is quite fragmented.

The code of practice will provide some sort of road map, and it will let service personnel know what to do and when, and their rights. My suggestion would be to incorporate a victim support pathway in the code of practice, so that they not only know what to do and when, but know who is doing what and where to go for help.

The code of practice will require uniformity of service provision across defence. That will probably require further investment. For example, if a servicewoman is raped on deployment or operations, sometimes they do not have forensic medical examination kits or forensic medical examiners, and they are being flown back to the UK to have that done. That will obviously have an impact on the quality of evidence that is then put to court martial, if the case gets to court martial in the first place.

The other issue that has been mentioned to me in the service community is that the MOD is now commissioning third sector organisations. That is



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good. Aurora New Dawn is being commissioned heavily by the MOD, and I am hearing that it is going to be commissioned even more. I reached out to people in my network—I gave an all-stations call—to see what they knew about this organisation, and very few had heard about it. So the other issue is how you filter the code of practice down to make sure that everybody knows about it. I suspect that you will have to introduce it in training and promotional cadres and get the training requirements authority involved. That is going to be an issue.

Q217 Pam Cox: I am a member of the Justice Committee, so this is of interest to me. The cross-cutting nature of the Bill is intended to encourage the MOD to work with other Departments, for example with the MOJ and the Home Office on crime and justice. The victims code has existed for some time nationally. I would be interested to know your thoughts on how the national victims code could assist with the development of the victims code that we are talking about, and vice versa: are there amendments to the national victims code that could be proposed as a result of the specific situations that you describe?

My follow-up question is about violence against women and girls, on which the Government also have a cross-cutting strategy. How might this work connect with the VAWG strategy? Are you already involved in that? It sounds as though you would be a great person to be involved.

Sarah Atherton: No, I am not involved in that. I fully support the violence against women and girls strategy, but I have a sense that it is being tagged on to a piece of military legislation; it is not embedded within that legislation. My suggestion would be that the violence against women and girls taskforce sits down with the MOD to devise a 10-year plan that is incorporated within the code of practice.

I was a social worker, and I have sat in many MAPPA meetings. They are vital for cross-pollination of ideas, learning, protection and sharing information. This is very new to the military. It is a good move that the military are now making—it has been much needed—to be more open and transparent and align their standards with civilian standards. That helps that cross-working.

This is a really good measure; it is progress in the Bill that we have not seen so far. It is really good that we are now aligning standards with civilian systems, because servicewomen were saying, "It's all very well them being sanctioned in the military, but they're now being discharged. Their slate has been wiped clean. I don't feel I've got justice, and what's worse is that that person is going out on to civvy street to perpetrate more crimes." This is a really good step forward in the Bill.

Q218 Al Carns: Thank you very much, Sarah—that was really useful. When I was in your old job, I sat down with the VAWG Minister and taskforce several times. We have now created a pilot project that is being tested and trialled in two bases in the UK. Do you have any thoughts on how that is progressing? Have you been tracking that?

Sarah Atherton: No, I haven't. Disappointingly, they have not reached out either.

Al Carns: Aurora New Dawn is leading some of that as well, and it is working closely—

Sarah Atherton: No, I haven't. As I say, I put out an all-stations call to see whether people knew about this, and nothing came back. There is a disconnect between what is happening at MOD and what is actually happening on the ground. I am not saying that it is not happening at MOD; it is just not getting down to where it matters and is needed.

Q219 Al Carns: It is the ever-present issue of communication and education, which we need to get better at. I completely agree.

Clause 17 will require commanding officers to report a serious offence to the service police, regardless of whether the individual is in the immediate chain of command, which is one of the issues you highlighted earlier. Do you think that addresses concerns about the independence of the service justice and complaints system?

Sarah Atherton: I like this measure very much. In the Women in the Armed Forces inquiry, we received substantial evidence that COs were involved with collusion and cover-up, protecting their unit's reputation and, to a large degree, protecting their own career paths. We have seen what happens when commanding officers mark their own homework, so this absolutely sends a clear message that commanding officers need to show moral leadership.

I also welcome the whole-force approach, because it was far too easy to say, "It's not happening in my unit. I'm turning a blind eye." I think it is an attempt to change the culture of leadership within the forces, and over time it will build confidence that commanding officers are listening, acting appropriately and upholding complaints. I am really pleased about that.

There are a couple of ramifications that I have thought about. What would happen if the commanding officer did not report? Would that commanding officer be subject to non-criminal service offences? How are you going to enforce this to make sure it happens? On the communication, how will the commanding officer know what to do and how to identify an offence that requires mandatory reporting? There are a few little hiccups there and, as always, the devil is in the detail, but I like this very much.

Q220 Al Carns: The Lyons review recommended that serious offences such as murder, manslaughter and serious sexual assault should be tried solely in the civilian jurisdiction unless consent is given by the Attorney General for the offence to be tried in the service justice system. Given that the Bill does not take forward that recommendation, what do you think about the measures on concurrent jurisdiction? Do you think that victims should have a preference?

Sarah Atherton: I do think that victims should have a preference. You might expect me to say this, but this is a missed opportunity. I have seen nothing since 2021 that would support keeping serious sexual assault and



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rape in the military jurisdiction. Service personnel want civilian jurisdiction by default.

I would like to see a statutory presumption that serious sexual offences committed in the UK will be investigated and prosecuted in the civilian system. I have always wondered why the MOD is reluctant to do that, because it would send a clear signal to service personnel that the MOD is listening, that it has responded and that it values people above reputation. I think the Bill is an incremental step towards that. I think the military justice system is trying to improve its standards, be more transparent and get its act together, but I do not think it is quite ready for external scrutiny just yet. I think this Bill will go further than any other cycle has gone to get them ready for that.

Q221 Al Carns: That is a really interesting point of view. I know from speaking to a variety of people—witnesses, women and groups within the Defence Serious Crime Command—that the preference piece is critical. The civilian justice system obviously decides which way it goes anyway, but it is primarily on the preference of the victim. I think that preference is absolutely essential, because in some cases victims would like it to go through the civilian justice system, while in others they would prefer it to go through the service justice system, given some of the support they now get since one of your recommendations was put in place after your review. I think that is one for further debate by the Committee as we move forward.

Sarah Atherton: A protocol was put in place after the Women in the Armed Forces inquiry. Very few people have experienced this happening in practice, so I have asked, via the freedom of information process, for some statistics on the existing protocol, how often it was used and how often the victim got their preference. I have not yet had a response from the MOD, but if the Committee would like me to, I will forward it when I get it.

Al Carns: Please do. We would like to look into that.

Q222 Gerald Jones: Thank you for being with us this morning, Sarah. What are your views on what should be included in the service policing protocol to improve working relationships between the various service police bodies, the Secretary of State and the Defence Council?

Sarah Atherton: I particularly like—this is needed—a unified policing strategy across the various police units: the Defence Serious Crime Unit, the global response team, the public protection unit, the major crime team. I would like to see it extend and envelop the tri-service complaints unit, the victim and witness care unit and the Military Court Service, because they are going to be essential. All these disparate agencies now need to start working as a team.

But the protocol is only as strong as its associated compliance mechanisms, training, the sense of independence that service people feel within that, the culture it operates in and, more importantly, the resources invested in it. A protocol will not change culture or behaviour. The Defence



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Serious Crime Command will be pivotal: it will be the foundation of all these changes.

If I were the Committee, I suppose my question would be whether the Defence Serious Crime Command is fit for purpose. Is it properly resourced? What are the workforce skills? Are there any deficits? What is the demand on it? I know that demand—this fits in with what the Minister was saying about increased reporting—has gone up by 16% since its inception. Is it getting the resources that it needs? If His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary were to go in, what would it find? If the Defence Serious Crime Command is not solid, everything else will fall apart. That is the question I would be asking.

Chair: That is the end of our questions, Sarah. Thank you very much for a well-informed set of answers on the service justice system, which have really set up this section of our inquiry. We are very grateful for your time.