



Numeracy for Life Committee

Corrected oral evidence

Thursday 26 March 2026

Noon

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Agnew of Oulton (The Chair); Lord Blackwell; Baroness Bull; Baroness Garden of Frognal; Lord Hampton; Baroness Hamwee; Lord Hannett of Everton; Lord Massey of Hampstead; Baroness Spielman; Viscount Stansgate; Lord Stevenson of Balmacara.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 59 - 71

Witness

[I](#): Colonel Alexander Burt.



Examination of witness

Colonel Alexander Burt.

Q59 **The Chair:** Good morning, Colonel Burt; thank you so much for joining us today. We are focusing on employers in this session, and obviously you are a very important part of that because you have a long-standing programme of, particularly, numeracy training for your recruits. We have got quite a few questions to ask you, so if you could be relatively brief in the answers I hope we will cover the range that we have around the table today. I will open the batting. I wonder what your thoughts are from the people you are recruiting on the prevalence of numeracy or low numeracy skills. How big a problem is it in the ecosystem that you are recruiting from, and what impact does that have on you as an employer in terms of the upskilling needed? That is probably enough to get going, but I am assuming that numeracy is a pretty key skill in the toolkit that even the most junior soldiers need.

Colonel Alexander Burt: Indeed, my Lord. First of all, I would like to set a bit of context and let you know a little about my role and how numeracy fits into the Army people plan. I am Colonel Alex Burt. I am the assistant head of personnel policy in Army Headquarters and the lead for learning and development in the Army. I have served for just over 26 years, mainly in the Educational and Training Services Branch of the Adjutant General's Corps, and this is a subject that I am passionate about. I have got quite a bit of history. When I was a major, I accompanied Brigadier Gary Morris to a similar committee on the back of the 2012 literacy and numeracy longitudinal study that we conducted. Alex Stevenson from the Learning and Work Institute, I believe, gave you evidence on the 19th that referenced that report; it really underpinned a lot of the way that we have taken numeracy forward in the Army.

It is a challenge that I have encountered throughout my 26 years. I speak to my colleagues in the Royal Army Educational Corps, which was formed up in 1920 after the First World War, and it has been an enduring issue with them. I am sure it was probably an issue for our forebearers in the Corps of Army Schoolmasters, who were formed up in 1845. It is definitely something that endures throughout.

What we have tried to do in the Army is come up with a people plan, and we have a number of areas that we focus in. First of all, we want people to join well. We are looking at the focus on the attract, and particularly reaching out to gatekeepers, making sure that we have got a credible offer, particularly in education and training. We want to make sure that people integrate well—so, when they join basic training and join this institution, they are assimilated within that. We want them to work well with their small teams and within their hierarchies; to live well; to develop well, which is definitely something where we focus on education and training; to progress well through the various different promotions;



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and then to transition and leave well and join the strategic reserve, but also the wider UK workforce. We do this in order to fight well. That is our unifying purpose. All of those areas together enable us to fight and win wars from land, which is what we are charged to do.

You asked about our assessments about numeracy skills in the Army and why they matter. We have the saying that people are not in the Army—they are the Army. That is very much how we look at our people-centric organisation. We believe that the greatest asymmetric advantage over potential adversaries is our people, and not necessarily the platforms or technology that we have. We are very much focused on that. The people that we recruit from are very diverse. We do have exceptional people joining the Army, and we do have some very highly qualified people in our basic training for our soldier entry, some of whom do have degrees.

However, a significant proportion of Army recruits enter service with a low level of literacy but also numeracy. Up to 50% of recruits arrive with literacy or numeracy below level 1, and around 38% do not have English and/or maths that is expected of a primary school leaver—entry level 3. We have got some very explicit policy in the Army that underpins training effectiveness, operational safety and employability, and numeracy is therefore treated as a foundation-capability requirement rather than an academic add-on.

We work very closely with our colleagues in the other services and the Ministry of Defence, and we have now got a formal defence policy showing that we need to have numeracy competence, and we are explicit about that. When we have our recruiting standards, we make sure that they are easily accessible to the majority of people. Some areas have slightly different levels of numeracy that they need to join—for example, if you are joining the REME, you would have a different entry standard to some of the other areas of the Army. The absolutely lowest level is entry level 2. Then we progress on to entry level 3, which is the basic training output standard.

I mentioned why we believe that is really important to us, adding to our military capability, but also looking at how we progress through. We talked about the basic training output standard being entry level 3. Then, as individuals go through their career at different promotion points, you need to be at certain levels. To promote to corporal, you need to be at level 1. Then to promote to senior NCOs or sergeants, you need to be at level 2. This helps us progress our workforce through service and then for joining the strategic reserve and, as I say, going into the wider employment sector.

We have got some really powerful evidence from the studies that we have done with the Learning and Work Institute, and I will just share some of the percentages and some of the statistics for you. We recruit from some quite highly deprived areas, and we are looking at recruits twice as more likely coming from the lowest-wage-earning 25% of local authorities than the top 25% highest-wage-earning authorities. Currently



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at our Army Foundation College Harrogate, which is where we train a certain proportion of our recruits, 61% of those are coming from the most deprived or lower-wage-earning authorities.

I would therefore argue that the Army is a huge accelerator of social mobility. We deliberately recruit talent from all aspects of the United Kingdom and further afield, and we look at every part of society and then use education, training and progression to unlock that potential that may have otherwise been lost.

A significant proportion of our individuals have a special education need. Around about a third of those going to Harrogate at the moment have a SEN. On completion, 99% leave with a GCSE equivalent in English at level 1 and 91% at level 2. For numeracy and maths, that is slightly lower; 91% leave with level 1 and 61% at level 2, but it is still really good progression. It is not just in the numeracy areas; when we have interviewed the recruits 81% believed that they have got better job prospects for going through into further employment, 82% gained a clearer purpose, 93% expanded their social networks, and 81% improved physical and mental health.

We have also commissioned some reports into the Defence School of Transport, and this is where we have our phase 2; our initial trade training is at the Defence School of Transport at Leconfield, and in 2025 we did a deep dive into that particular area. In functional skills, we were achieving a 77% pass rate for numeracy level 2. We also did a bit of analysis about how the investment into that particular school of transport improves the UK economy and social well-being. For every £1 that we invested into the Defence School of Transport, we could demonstrate that over £4.79 was actually generated in return in long-term improvements to the education, training and work prospects, but also health and resilience. So we are definitely into developing talent. I have a couple of bespoke vignettes on individuals that I can share with you, either now or later on, my Lord.

The Chair: We will come back to those, but we must get all the questions in. Thank you very much. Lord Hannett?

Q60 **Lord Hannett of Everton:** How does the Army assess and monitor numeracy skills? I am thinking particularly not only of when people are a part of the Army. How well prepared are they for when they leave the Army?

Colonel Alexander Burt: We have a multitude of different ways that we integrate functional skills numeracy, whether that be at basic training, or whether that be through our Army education services, which are co-located with the brigade combat teams that we have throughout the UK. We also embed it within our Army apprenticeship programme, and I believe we will go on to talk about that in a short time.



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We have a whole force approach. We have people like myself in uniform who are specifically qualified as postgraduate teachers, and then we have civil servants and basic skills development managers. Then we also have our partners in some of the colleges and some of the other contracted provision that we have on numeracy. We also educate forward. I remember delivering numeracy lessons in my education centre in Bosnia and also in Kosovo, a theme replicated when we were campaigning in Iraq and then Afghanistan. We had education centres there and now we have got an education centre on Op Cabrit in Estonia. Wherever our people are, then we definitely deliver. This is by people who have recognised qualifications to deliver, and they also attain those qualifications with the right awarding bodies, making sure that all the assurance requirements are as per the functional skills policy. It makes sure that we have got these portable, credible and transferable qualifications that people can then take through their Army career, through all of the “wells” that I described, and ultimately transition and leave well.

Q61 Lord Blackwell: Colonel, you mentioned that you take on people with a wide range of skills. The Army website says that you do not need any qualifications to join the Army, so you are recruiting a number of people with very low numeracy skills. I assume many of them are quite young. Can you talk about specifically what you do to bring those people up to entry level and level 1, and to go onwards, and maybe how you think what works differs from what they had in school, which obviously did not work?

Colonel Alexander Burt: We have a basic training pipeline that starts at Harrogate or Pirbright. Before that basic training starts, if an individual is entry level 2 and needs to get up to that entry level 3, then we have a phase zero course. This is a four-week course that covers both literacy and numeracy. This course focuses on maximising the adjustment for that individual to spend time assimilating numeracy and literacy skills, to make sure that they have the best chance of assimilating that training, whether that be basic training or initial trade training. The reason why we believe that course has good success rates is all about contextualisation. You are fully immersed in the Army environment, and it focuses on—if we just take the numeracy aspects—things such as map reading, so grids, bearings, and making sure that people understand how to pace. These are all standard numeracy skills. We look at equipment handling and administration. Speed/distance/time is another area that we focus on in improving people’s numeracy skills and making sure that it is context-based. We have got that phase zero course, which seems to sort of work really well.

We are also reaching out into a bit of blended learning up at the Infantry Training Centre at Catterick. We have currently got something called the functional skills cave, which is: you walk into a room and on all four walls you are transported into a scenario that replicates some of the tasks in basic training or deploying further on in your career. You have this



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immersive experience, and individuals are then taken through a number of scenarios, whether that be counting rounds into a magazine or plotting a route on a particular navigation exercise. Just immersing them into that environment seems to have a really positive effect. The individuals really seem to enjoy it and they can see the purpose. They have a meaningful horizon to their learning.

We are also experimenting with something called Century Tech, which is an AI-enabled learning platform that incorporates numeracy development by analysing individuals and particular skills, and adapts the content to where they have a particular need. So rather than just taking them through a whole programme, this enables a targeted and personalised progression rather than the “one size fits all” delivery which may happen in other areas.

I have watched previous witnesses address you, and I do agree with some of the culture, ethos and stigma that is attached, and we definitely try to have encouraging learning environments, making sure we focus on things that people can do rather than what they cannot do, and reassuring them that there is support there and about why we are doing it. Also, one of the areas that we look at is trying to make it applicable to their wider lifestyle as well. Financial literacy is something that we have invested in, so we obviously use the numeracy skills behind that financial literacy and improving that literacy, focusing on housing options, mortgages and looking at the house purchase process; we have got a very successful Forces Help to Buy scheme. We highlight some of the issues that individuals may encounter if they start gambling and look at loan-shark issues. We also discuss death-in-service benefits, which obviously contain a lot of numeracy facts and figures, and help people go through that. There is an advanced brief that focuses on investing as well. This is all reinforcing individuals, if they fully engage in that process, to transition and leave well, which is a key tenet.

Lord Blackwell: It comes down to context and motivation. Your experience is that most people at that entry level are capable of accommodating that? As they progress to the requirements of corporal and sergeant, et cetera, is it also true that most people are capable of doing that?

Colonel Alexander Burt: I believe they are capable. People just learn in different ways. We have an approach that is a lot more individualised. We do also have our specialist basic skills development managers. If people have a specific learning difference—an SpLD—we have the time and the resources to help that individual go through a tailored learning programme, to make sure that they achieve that, particularly when we are trying to get into that level 2, which is quite a challenge for some people. We take that time through the basic skill development manager to take them on that learning pathway and make sure that we make provisions for anything in terms of dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, et cetera, and help individuals go through that if they are in that area.



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Q62 **Baroness Bull:** Thank you for going there. This is where I should declare that I am patron of the Dyscalculia Network, so I was really interested to hear you say that. Actually, in Googling in advance of this session, I was really surprised at the number of user forums in which service personnel are incredibly positive about how their dyscalculia is both identified and supported. Am I right that one can seek a formal diagnosis through the chain of command? Is that accurate, that you could come in and seek that formal diagnosis?

Colonel Alexander Burt: Yes, that is the pathway that we support. Obviously everybody is constrained by resources, which is definitely an issue for us, as it is with many other employers. We do support people on that journey and try to come up with a pathway that is most appropriate with them. As I say, unfortunately, in terms of resources, the people who undertake that sort of pathway are as not as ubiquitous as we would like.

Baroness Bull: I know you will not want to comment on government policy, but of course it puts you in a better position in the Army than you would be in the education system, where there is no route to seek a formal diagnosis. So I guess my question is: how much would it help you if people were prediagnosed rather than coming to you age 18 with an undiagnosed permanent lifelong condition such as this? Do you have an assessment of the numbers that come in with maths learning difficulties as opposed to general SEN?

Colonel Alexander Burt: I would not have that specific detail on the maths area. It is something that we could look into and get back to you. But in terms of whether it would be helpful if there were more resources for that provision, to the left of joining the Army, then that would be definitely helpful. We would definitely welcome anything that can be evidenced and ameliorated before service. Again, our message is that people should not feel that there is necessarily a barrier to serving and, as long as you can meet the entry requirements, we will do our utmost to support all of our learners going through that particular pathway.

Baroness Bull: That is helpful, thank you.

Q63 **Baroness Spielman:** I am interested in the pathways that people work through in their time in the Army. By the way, I should say that in a previous life I visited both the Army Foundation College and Sandhurst and was really impressed by the consideration that goes into the educational models.

In the modern world, there is a great deal of emphasis on developing technology and processes that engineer out the risks of failure in all sorts of functions. I am quite sure that applies in the Army. The downside of that is that it takes away a lot of the opportunities to practise numeracy routinely, so it can potentially threaten developing precisely the kind of quantitative sense and situational judgment that are very important. How do you think about that tension and factor it into what you do with your staff?



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Colonel Alexander Burt: You pose an interesting question. Obviously, we utilise a multitude of technology as an aid, including GPS, but we do not ignore the basics and fundamentals. In that basic training provision, we still do the basics of map-reading progression, including pacing, because you can never completely rely on the technology. We make sure that our soldiers are soldiers first and are then utilised as exploiters of technology second, to make sure that they can do the job if anything is denied in a particular area. Quite often, where we deploy, we have something called "PED red", which means that you are not allowed to use personal electronic devices due to security aspects. We need to make sure that our soldiers can operate in those denied areas, so we have that throughout training to make sure that people are not overly reliant on that equipment.

Q64 **Baroness Garden of Frognal:** I used to work for City & Guilds and we did a mass of qualifications in basic literacy and numeracy for the Army. The other two services both need a level of skill for just about any role in them but, as you have described, the Army can take people with nothing, really. How quickly do you see soldiers improving their numeracy skills when they come to you? You have described how some of them come with none at all. Is it a fairly speedy process for them to be encouraged to improve?

Colonel Alexander Burt: It is such an individual skill that it is difficult to generalise, but when I have been in a classroom setting I have definitely seen that lightbulb moment. Perhaps that is because of the context that we operate in, or maybe it is the motivation that we encourage individuals to work through. Quite often, particularly in numeracy, when it clicks, it all makes sense. It is about trying to find a way that makes sense for the individuals that we have.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: It is often when it is linked to a practical experience, is it not? If they can see a practical use for them, people suddenly become much more interested in numbers than they were before.

Colonel Alexander Burt: Indeed. Regarding the timeframes and the phase zero course before basic training, we went for two weeks of each because of the government-guided learning hours protocols, which we see as a good yardstick. With things such as the Century Tech that I mentioned, people learn at their own pace, and we do not want to hold them back. If people get it, they are able to move on at an individualised pace, as opposed to waiting for the whole squad to follow on. We try to individualise the approach as much as possible.

Q65 **Lord Massey of Hampstead:** It sounds as though you have had a lot of success in bringing people up. I assume that a lot of the training that you give is compulsory, rather than people volunteering, but I would be interested to hear what proportion is obligatory versus people coming forward and asking for help. Of the various approaches that have been successful for you, which ones would you identify as being the most



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successful, that have really worked? Do you think any of them could be transferable to other employers outside the Army?

Colonel Alexander Burt: In terms of scale, the concentrations work really well. I know that we are again going to talk about apprenticeships in a short while, but we have something called boot camp concentrations for areas that people are finding particularly challenging. That concentration of time is useful. Not all employers are able to have that time ring-fenced for that particular activity. So, my recommendations are for them to use that blended learning approach. Again, the Century Tech is available on individuals' personal electronic devices. That creates an individualised approach. From my experience, if you are doing something little and often, you definitely get towards that progression. It is being disciplined with your time as an employer, affording people that opportunity and enabling them with the right equipment.

The Chair: Let us move on to apprenticeships

Q66 **Lord Stevenson of Balmacara:** What is your view about removing the requirement for adult apprenticeships to complete the level 2 maths qualification? Is that a good thing or would you, in your experience, suggest that that should be retained?

Colonel Alexander Burt: We are really proud of our apprenticeship programme. We are a significant employer on apprenticeships. We have been awarded the number one ranking in the *Sunday Times* for the past five years. A lot of that is to do with our scale and attainment levels; also, there is the diversity we have. We have around about 12,000 of our soldiers on an apprenticeship at the moment, going through one of up to 40 of the standards across all areas, whether that be healthcare, transport, logistics, et cetera. In terms of looking at the opportunities that apprenticeships afford our individuals, at the moment, we have the whole range from level 2 all the way up to level 7. We believe that that ladder of opportunity is important for our soldiers to progress. Again, it goes back to that Army people plan coming in and developing and progressing well.

In terms of the Government's view on removing that element, individuals learn at different stages. What we do not want is to hold people back from gaining their apprenticeships because they may not be able to complete that level 2 maths at that time. From our employer point of view, we have set down in policy when they need to attain that level 2, and that is when they are promoted to sergeant. Those individuals will get their level 2 but it may be at a later stage than the apprenticeships themselves. These individuals would complete their apprenticeship and then, after a bit more time in the Field Army, maybe with a little more life experience and a bit more motivation for themselves and their family, really apply themselves into that challenging area for them and make sure that they get that level 2 through an Army education centre programme.



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It does not affect us in terms of career progression. I can understand why that decision was made and why it raises concern with certain individuals and employers. But for us, it does not materially change when we have our levels according to our ranks.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: So you have found a workaround?

Colonel Alexander Burt: It was in place already and we just made sure that that route was still viable, and it is.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: The reverse of that—sorry, this is a very narrow point—is that you are recognising that the level of qualification is important in the Army, but at the sergeant level rather than at the level that it might be more appropriate at in terms of the conventional progression.

Colonel Alexander Burt: Indeed, yes.

Q67 **Lord Hampton:** I declare an interest that as part of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme I visited Shrivenham, Sandhurst, Harrogate and a lot of other places. I put on record the extraordinary quality of the education that it provides. Remembering that we are in a public forum and that we all always need more money, in a way, you said that one of the things is that if we pre-evidence SEND, it would make life easier, but what are the other key challenges you are still facing to deliver numeracy skills education?

Colonel Alexander Burt: Time is the resource that we are often challenged with, whether that is in our personal or professional lives. We make sure that we have the right level of importance attached to learning and development activities, and literacy and numeracy is definitely part of that. It is the competing priorities that we find a challenge. As I say, we go through a prioritisation of those tasks, and we make sure that we address each area in a particular sequence to make sure that individuals are able to absorb the military capability they get from their training and development activities.

Q68 **Baroness Hamwee:** Is it the case, as I have heard, that you have a fair number of Army recruits who join because they want the learning environment that goes along with the Army experience? If that is so, is there anything that can be transferred to the wider sphere, either employment or direct education, that we should learn from this?

Colonel Alexander Burt: Indeed. I read one of the research articles on LinkedIn comparing the different generations and what they value the most. The choices of the baby boomers, generation X and the following ones are quite stark. It appears now that the current generation that are entering the workplace are really fixed on and excited about those learning and development opportunities that maybe my generation were not when we were looking at our career choices. You could argue that it is slightly more transactional now—people are entering the workplace and asking “What is this workplace is going to afford me and my family?”



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We have a really positive message in the Army and the other services, in that we can bring people in, develop them and give them recognised skills and qualifications, and that is quite an attractive area for people joining the services.

Q69 **The Chair:** You mentioned that you have about 12,000 doing apprenticeships. I did not catch the numbers doing levels 1 and 2—you gave quite a lot of percentages at the beginning. Lord Blackwell made the point that you have pretty open access, so can you give me a sense of the scale that is doing these lower levels?

Colonel Alexander Burt: With our entries to basic training, it fluctuates depending on our supply and demand. We have anywhere between 5,000 and 8,000 individuals joining the organisation a year and, again, it depends on where those individuals are coming from, but it is round about half who may need an intervention to get them up to level 1. In terms of the apprenticeship programmes, we have initial apprenticeships at levels 2, 3 and 4, depending on which cap badge and area of the Army that you go into. There are also the progression apprenticeships, particularly the level 6 chartered management degree apprenticeship, and the senior leadership MBA executive apprenticeship. We have a full remit, depending on who comes through the door.

Q70 **Lord Massey of Hampstead:** When the 5,000 or 8,000 come in for their training, how do you assess what level of help they need, and whether they should be going to, for example, level 2 straight away? Obviously, you have said they have to do that if they are to become a sergeant, but how do you assess the level of need?

Colonel Alexander Burt: When you go through the recruiting process, you have a GTI—a general trainability index—score that then indicates which area of the Army you may be most successful in, so that is one of the scores that helps individuals understand the opportunities that are available to them. I mentioned the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, the REME, which requires a higher maths level, so it depends on which area of the Army those individuals want to go through. In terms of the apprenticeships, we have mapped the standards of the apprenticeships against the initial training and the duties that that individual is likely to undertake in the Field Army, and that is then the most appropriate level for that area. There are also various diagnostic tests that individuals undergo that can move them forward, depending on what sort of need has been identified.

Q71 **Baroness Bull:** You talked about the Learning and Work Institute study and said that you recruit from some highly deprived areas. Do you see any correlation between the general trainability index score that emerges and socio-economic background? Do you need to provide education for those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds? Are their trainability options being constrained, or do you not have that evidence?

Colonel Alexander Burt: I do not have that evidence. It is quite challenging to establish that causative relationship. People probably do



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that subconsciously, but we are keen to promote that we have open access for an individual wherever they come from, and we have training and education pathways that are suitable for those individuals.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Colonel Burt. It has been very interesting, and you are doing important work. You must be one of the few employers in the country that has an open-access policy, so thank you for all you do, and we shall be taking some of your thoughts into our report.