

Defence Sub-Committee

Oral evidence: Women in the Armed Forces: From Recruitment to Civilian Life, HC 1047

Tuesday 27 April 2021

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Members present: Sarah Atherton (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mr Tobias Ellwood; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Derek Twigg.

Questions 124 - 191

Witnesses

[I:](#) Baroness Goldie, Minister of State, MoD; Lieutenant General James Swift, Chief of Defence People; Samantha des Forges, Director of Diversity and Inclusion; Air Vice-Marshal Maria Byford, Chief of Staff Personnel and Air Secretary.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Ministry of Defence](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Goldie, James Swift, Samantha des Forges, and Maria Byford.

Chair: Good afternoon. I am Sarah Atherton, Member of Parliament for Wrexham. Welcome to this third and final oral evidence session on this, the Defence Select Sub-Committee inquiry looking at the experiences faced by women in the military and female veterans. First, I would like to thank and pay tribute to the previous Veterans' Minister, Johnny Mercer, who was a great support to me and a good support to this Sub-Committee. We wish his replacement Minister, Leo Docherty, all the luck in the future.

To date 4,106 serving personnel and veterans have completed our survey and submitted evidence in that survey format. We have received 76 pieces of full written evidence. We have held focus groups with 12 serving personnel and after today we will have held three sessions taking oral evidence from 12 witnesses. The weight of evidence has been compelling, with a spectrum of concerns being raised.

In a week where veterans' issues have been featured heavily in the news, we are pleased to have with us today representatives from the Ministry of Defence. Our witnesses are Baroness Goldie, Minister of State at the MoD, Lieutenant General James Swift, Chief of Defence People for the MoD, Samantha des Forges, newly appointed director of diversity and inclusion and Air Vice-Marshal Maria Byford, Chief of Staff Personnel and Air Secretary and also one of the most senior ranking women in the military. Thank you, Baroness, for stepping in today. Welcome all.

Q124 **Stuart Anderson:** Hello, everyone. It is great to see you. If we can set the scene for the rest of this session, it would be great to know where most progress has been made on integrating women into the Armed Forces and what the most serious challenges are. James, can you start us off, please?

James Swift: I know that the Minister wants to come in on this too. The evidence is that over the last 20 or more years we have not had a good track record, but in more recent years this is an area that we have paid considerable attention to and, therefore, there are good signs of progress. Perhaps the most obvious is that a few years ago we opened all the roles in the Armed Forces to women. Why would we not want to make the most of the talent of over half the population and do that? That is a great start.

One of the challenges, though, that we face is that, as a predominantly base-fed organisation, it does take a while for that change to draw through the organisation. We will continue to work hard on that, but at the same time look at opportunities for lateral entry and re-joining, which allow people, in this case women, to join at a slightly higher level and



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therefore accelerate the progress in making sure that we have women represented at all phases of the Armed Forces.

Stuart Anderson: I will come to the Baroness on a supplementary in a minute, but it would be good to hear your point of view on this, Maria.

Maria Byford: I come with a bit of a unique perspective. I am in my 31st year of service, having joined during the first Gulf War in January 1991. When I joined the Armed Forces, women could not stay in and have a family. They could not go to sea. They had only just been opened in roles such as flying aircraft and they could not fight in ground close combat roles. If you look forward 30 years, we are now in a situation where all roles are open to all women. We have a number of senior female role models.

I can count a few female firsts in my career, such as being the first woman to command the UK medical group in Afghanistan. It does not sound that remarkable, other than the fact that it was 10 years into the operation before we had a woman in command of the UK medical group. I was the first woman who was head of the RAF medical services, but I am not the first female air vice-marshal and I am not the first female Chief of Staff Personnel. The first female two-star was AVM Elaine West in 2013 and Air Marshal Sue Gray was the first female three-star across defence when she was appointed director general of the Defence Safety Authority in 2018.

I reflect through my career on my experiences. I am half of a dual-serving couple, or I was until a couple of years ago when my husband retired from the Air Force. We have two children who are now in their early 20s, but we certainly went through experiences when life-friendly policies were not what they are now. I look at now the flexibility and the choice that allows women to enable full careers and to maintain a full service commitment. These are really critical in how we will retain the talent and skills we need for defence.

I agree with General Swift that we are not in a perfect situation yet, but what I have personally seen is real acceleration, particularly in the last couple of years. There have been a number of key developments that have really contributed to that acceleration, in particular the inappropriate behaviours report that was undertaken Air Chief Marshal Sir Mike Wigston, which I am sure we will come to talk about this afternoon.

Probably the shadow cast by Black Lives Matter also has allowed us to understand how to have challenging and difficult conversations around diversity and inclusion across the Armed Forces, and the Chiefs of Staff's commitment to inclusivity last July for me has really contributed to this sense of changing the narrative and really driving change with real momentum behind it. I am delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to the evidence this afternoon.

Q125 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you both, and thank you both for your



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extensive service. Annabel, I am not sure if you want to come in on any points there, but I have a supplementary to add on that. It is good to hear we are making progress, but why is the percentage of women in the UK Armed Forces quite a bit behind the United States and France?

Baroness Goldie: It is a pertinent question. Can I say to you, madam Chairman, that I am very much appreciative of the opportunity of appearing before the Committee, because this is a really important inquiry that the Committee is undertaking? We certainly support your important work and we will consider very carefully your findings. I would like to specifically say how grateful I personally am to current and former servicewomen, whose testimony to your Committee has made clear that on too many occasions defence has failed to provide adequate support.

Building partially on what James alluded to and certainly what Maria was just talking about, I asked my officials to produce a timeline for me. I have been the Minister since July 2019, but I wanted to get a sense of what the direction travel had been. It is interesting that both James and Maria have referred to milestones in that progress. Over, let us say, 13 years from the creation of the Service Complaints Commissioner in 2008, what I have seen is steady progress but, as Maria was saying, a real escalation into prominence over the last 18 months. It is nothing to do with me but is indicative of the momentum that was beginning to be generated within the Department, with some really important things coming out.

To go back to Mr Anderson's original question, the situation is that the MoD, in terms of women in our Armed Forces and the percentage of women present within the Armed Forces, is in a better position than where we were, but we are not yet where we need to be; we need to be quite frank about that. I am aware of initiatives to help with this. For example, we know we need to do more to recruit women and improve our conversion rate from those expressing an interest to actually seeing them in training.

Outreach is important, just as with other areas traditionally underrepresented by women, such as the STEM professions, and we need to start this at a younger age and in more communities. James Swift made a very important point about lateral entry, and Maria Byford made a very important point about how powerful it is to begin to see women emerging into the more senior roles, because there is nothing, in my opinion, like that to start encouraging younger women, who may not have a very clear idea what a life in the Armed Forces may mean, but if they can see role models they will be encouraged by that.

In answer to your question, we see signs of improvement and we have initiatives there. We are retaining women once they join, and I am sure our gender transformative policies are going to help to continue this trend. For example, we have embraced flexible service. We have embraced wraparound childcare. We have designed specialised support for those returning from starting families. I know that one of your areas



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of interest is how we are specially accommodating the very distinct needs of women within the Armed Forces, and they are distinct needs, whether that is in relation to uniform, equipment, health facilities or sanitary provision. We are making very positive progress on all of these fronts.

Chair: We are now going to look at recruitment targets. We may have covered a little of this, but we would like to go into it in more detail with Tobias.

Q126 **Mr Ellwood:** Thank you to the panel for your time this afternoon. It is good to see you all. Baroness Goldie, can we just continue this focus on the targets themselves? The target is 15%. Can you just bring us up to date with where you are in achieving that target and when you think you may, because obviously you are falling short of it?

Baroness Goldie: I wish I were either Mystic Meg or had a crystal ball, and then I might be able to answer that question more accurately. The pace of change that we saw perhaps three to five years ago was, in my opinion, glacial and was not going to be sufficient to produce the progress that you are talking about. I am satisfied now with the combination of initiatives, policies and specific programmes that are being deployed. Then we can look to positive progress.

The figures I have in the 12 months to 30 September 2020 are 1,630 female personnel joined the UK regular forces and that is 11.2% of the total intake, so that was an increase of 0.5% compared with the previous 12 months. Work is ongoing to push forward on this progress. Interestingly, On the intake of female officers is higher than for other ranks. That is standing at 16.1% and 10.6% respectively.

That gives an indication of the direction of travel, but let me make crystal clear that nowhere in MoD is there complacency about this, and I am absolutely delighted about the stand-up of the directorate of diversity and inclusion. We are extremely fortunate to have recruited someone like Sam des Forges to be the director, because that is going to provide a visible focal point within MoD to give leadership in driving forward the delivery of these essential policies.

Q127 **Mr Ellwood:** If I may, Baroness, you say it is moving forward quickly. A 0.5% change in a year, when you are at a current actual figure of 11% in the UK regular forces and your target is 15%, is not huge movement. It would suggest that whatever strategy you are approaching or utilising at the moment is not having the effect. You say you do not have a crystal ball, but with this approach it is going to take decades to even reach the very low target of just 15%. The question for the MoD is whether you need to be more radical in your approach to not just recruiting but retaining more women in our Armed Forces, particularly the Army?

Baroness Goldie: The figures I gave you cover a significant period of the pandemic and that has impacted on activity. It would be surprising if that was not the case. We have in MoD a very significant civilian



population as well as the Armed Forces, and what we have is leadership from the top. I am the Minister responsible for trying to drive this forward, but I have total support from the Permanent Secretary. I met with him this morning, in fact, and he is very keen to continue the leadership offered by his predecessor, Stephen Lovegrove, on diversity and inclusion. I could not have asked for greater support from Stephen and I see I am going to get marvellous support from David Williams.

Nick Carter, as CDS, has been totally supportive and I have found that we are working as a triumvirate, if I can be part of a triumvirate; anyway, we are working as a trio and we are absolutely joined together in wanting to give this leadership. That is in conjunction with what Sam des Forges is responsible for in the new directorate.

We can expect to see progress, but, as I say, we are not complacent. We are hoping that as we come out of Covid and it is possible to open up more activity and possible then to return to a more active recruitment programme, that can join with what I was talking about in terms of what we have identified as areas where there is a need to see where we can interest women and assist them to come forward.

Q128 Mr Ellwood: Nobody is questioning your commitment. Nobody is questioning the collective support there is to effect change. The question I am posing is the strategy that you are adopting. We are not seeing the uptake to meet your target. The target is there at 15% and it has been there for many years.

I will turn to Sam. There is a discrepancy between the length of time that women are staying in the Armed Forces and the length of time men do. Women choose to depart much earlier. Can you explain why that might be and what you are doing to correct it?

Samantha des Forges: There are a number of areas that we are looking at from that perspective. What we recognise is the real focus on initiatives has been coming through recently and it will take a little while for us to see those really landing. We are starting to see some of the green shoots, but the reality is it will take a little bit longer to see the folk coming through and single service recruitment does take a bit of time.

We have put in the defence plan, which enables us to hold to account—because holding to account is really key here—stronger levels of ambition for where we should be focusing our recruitment and for the numbers we should be aiming at. There is a big part of highlighting the different opportunities and the role models among our women in the Armed Forces, so highlighting things like the flexible service and highlighting things like wraparound care, which just improve the offer that we are making throughout the whole career of our Armed Forces women.

Stepping back for a moment, one of our key areas is our cross-defence action plan, which details something like 117 strategic actions that are focused right across the board, but include a very detailed focus on our



women in the Armed Forces, what we are doing to change that lived experience and what we are doing to highlight that through outreach and, therefore, just building a proposition. You are right: you are not going to be seeing those transformational changes in the latest figures, but you will start to see them in six months and 12 months' time.

Q129 **Mr Ellwood:** Finally to General Swift, the integrated review is going to put a new dimension of new character of conflict that we are going to be engaging with. Have you done any analysis as to how this might impact and affect recruitment and retention? I cite, for example, the length of duty that ships will be away, for example. Has that been factored into your targets that you are trying to achieve?

James Swift: Perhaps if I could just address the first part of your question and then come to that IR, we find that in applications we get between 20% and 25% women applying, but only, as you saw, 11.2% actually joining, so that is one of the areas that we are looking at: why do women fade away in that application phase slightly faster than their male colleagues?

We then also find that there is a higher rate of injury during basic training, particularly muscular-skeletal injury, that can cause slower pull through, so learning from that we are applying those lessons to reduce muscular-skeletal injury for the whole force. We are both changing specifically how we train, in order that we injure fewer people, men and women, but also we have recruited and trained specific physical training instructors who are better informed about the physiology of the women going through the training, in order that we reduce that.

In terms of specific initiatives in the last and next year, though, to get at your strategy point, the Royal Navy last year doubled the amount of accommodation for basic training for female other ranks. That was an artificial block on the number of women they could get in as other ranks, and by doubling that they are already seeing a big change.

This year the Royal Air Force has set itself a level of ambition, which, as Sam said, is much higher and they are making sure that, on various admissions to training this year, they flatline against that, in order to make sure that they do deliver that increased level of ambition at the end of the year. The Army is working with its recruiters. Because next year the Army is going to need to recruit fewer people than this year, it is absolutely focusing on increasing and improving the diversity of their input, including women. It has asked its recruiters to target that as an initiative.

In terms of your point about how long women stay, if you look at voluntary outflow rather than voluntary and involuntary outflow, so people choosing to leave, it turns out that women stay longer most of the time until a period in the middle of the career, which often coincides with starting families. Therefore, that is why we have had such an emphasis on family-friendly policies, whether that is flexible service or wrapround



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childcare and the like that the Minister has already mentioned. All of those contribute to your question about the strategic approach to getting at the numbers of women in the Armed Forces.

Your point about the integrated review is really well made. Specifically, on your point about ship deployments, what the Royal Navy is trying to do is move away from really long deployments, which are not necessarily attractive for any of their sailors, whether men or women, to a series of double-crewing, such that it is possible to go away for four months at a time and then come back and have guaranteed time at home before going away again. The combination of predictability, shorter tour length and more time in the firm base will hopefully make a big difference for both the men and the women in the Royal Navy.

You will recall from your time as a Minister, Mr Ellwood, we found that people join in many cases for exciting opportunities, including operations, so we expect that the persistent engagement that we will see in the integrated review will prove really positive in attracting the people who want to go away and experience that challenge and variety that operations can bring.

Q130 Mr Ellwood: I just want to probe this important piece about the opportunity to step away from the Armed Forces for a period of time and then step back in. This flexible career approach was introduced, indeed by myself, and with huge fanfare, I might add, to mitigate anybody wanting to go and study to do another degree or even to have a baby, a family or whatever. When we spoke to many of the personnel as part of this Committee's study, we found that in practical terms it was not very easy to do. Are you able to say how many people have taken up this opportunity to take a break from the Armed Forces for a year or more and then return without having their career impacted?

James Swift: I do not know the number of people who have stepped away for a career break. I can tell you that over the last two years 309 service personnel have taken up the opportunity for flexible service and there are a range of measures here. Flexible service allows an individual to restrict the amount of separation from their family base or their deployability for a period of time while still serving.

We also then have alternative working arrangements, which allow people to produce the same full-time output, but on varied timings, whether that is compressed timings, different start rates or anything. Perhaps one of the bits of evidence that is behind your question, Mr Ellwood, is that we see that there are 15% of women in the reserves, and the reserves is an example of a part of the force that is more flexible and therefore perhaps can offer some of those opportunities to join, re-join, dial up and dial down. That is something that we are seeking to bring increasingly into the regulars.

Q131 Mr Ellwood: I am sorry, Chair, to pursue this, but 300-odd people out of 150,000 in our Armed Forces is not a huge number if we are trying to



retain people in these jobs.

James Swift: Empirically, you are absolutely right, Mr Ellwood. It is not a huge number, but nor I am aware of evidence that people are being denied this and being frustrated by being denied it. The important thing is to make this available. I was going to come on to this later in answer to a subsequent question, but perhaps if I may now, Chair, the fundamental change that is happening in the Armed Forces at the moment in this space is a move to a pan-defence skills framework.

By defining jobs by the skills required and by defining individuals by the skills they have acquired, it means that we can take into account that people acquire those skills in totally different ways at totally different times. The reason why it is relevant to this is if people do leave the Armed Forces for a period, acquire a further set of skills outside the Armed Forces and then re-join, we will be able to take account of that in a way that our current linear career paths just do not allow us to do as easily. Absolutely behind that will be the intention that people leave and then re-join at a higher level, bringing back that experience to defence.

Q132 **Chair:** Can I just pick out something about retention? 31%, nearly a third, of people who completed our survey said they left the military because of poor work-life balance and family commitments. How are you going to measure your success, because you are implementing a lot of strategies and a lot of programmes? It all looks and sounds great, bow how are you measuring success? Have you got strategies in place to say that your initiative is changing what is happening on the ground?

Baroness Goldie: Going back to the point that Mr Ellwood was making, he is to be commended for the initiative he took when he was the Minister, because that was singularly important in opening up a whole new opportunity for women in relation to the Armed Forces.

On this question of recruitment, the only information we have statistically is that, over the last five years, female Armed Forces personnel have had lower voluntary outflow rates than male personnel and that, to an extent, is encouraging. I defer to James Swift on this, but we do collect data via the Armed Forces continuous attitude survey. That is pretty well our indicator as to the direction of travel and what is happening.

I would like to think that with the combination of activity now taking place, which has been described by all the witnesses in different ways, there is an aggregate effect, and that aggregate effect is positive and beneficially, but you are absolutely right that if we are looking for empirical evidence as to whether the policies implemented are delivering, we have to go back to the evidence and data provided by these surveys. That is the only way to get a firm handle on that, but I defer to James Swift, who may have something to add in respect of that.

James Swift: You are spot on, Minister. The Armed Forces continuous attitude survey and indeed the exit interviews that take place when



people leave are our best guides as to the reasons that people are leaving. The impact of service life on family life is top both for men and women. That is, therefore, a concern for us and that is why we are trying to drive these policies through. Your question was about how we will know if it is working. We will only know once that ceases to be the number one problem and other issues replace the leading indicator at the moment, which is the impact on people's family lives, because there will always be reasons that people choose to leave, whether it is taking up a career elsewhere or whatever it might be.

Q133 Richard Drax: Good afternoon to you all. Annabel, this is an issue about uniforms and particularly body armour and other bits and bobs that do not necessarily fit the female shape. Having listened to the evidence we have had so far, what springs to mind are male-style trousers, the armour plating when on operations and helmets. In one case someone giving evidence explained that, even with the small protection, it dropped down to below her waist, so when she walked it damaged the back of her calves. It is fair to say that most female soldiers probably have more hair than their male colleagues and tuck it up in buns and all kinds of ways, and they say when putting a hat on top, or a helmet on top, it is quite hard to see out with all the kit on.

I would have thought the solutions were really quite simple. What can be done to get this sorted, so that our women soldiers, pilots and everybody else can be comfortable in their uniform, whether serving in peace or in operations?

Baroness Goldie: That is a question of critical importance and, clearly, it is absolutely vital that that is recognised. As we hope to expand the female cohort within our Armed Forces, yes, you are absolutely correct, we have to ensure that we have appropriately designed uniforms for them to wear and that, indeed, when we come to battle equipment and to general equipment, the needs of women are recognised and taken into account.

The different forces have tended to approach this in a different way. What I can say is that in relation to the Navy, the women's clothing committee was established in 2017 by naval command. It consisted entirely of female Royal Navy personnel across all ranks and rates to consider possible changes to improving female uniform for the female Royal Naval cadre. They have made very good progress. I am informed that at their inaugural meeting they identified 12 areas of concern and 10 of these have now been addressed. You are quite right, Mr Drax, that some of it is of a fairly simple nature, which you would have thought and would have hoped would have been self-evident and yet seemed to remain slightly off the radar screen, but the Navy has been very proactive in that respect, making good progress.

In relation to the Army, having regard to the type of activity the Army engages in, which inevitably is slightly different to both the Navy and the Royal Air Force, interestingly, women were traditionally excluded from



ground close combat roles based on combat effectiveness, but in 2014 a review concluded that that rationale for retaining exclusion was no longer valid. What then had to be looked at was to address your point, Mr Drax, as to how to recognise that in ensuring that these women who wish to be engaged in that activity are appropriately supported in terms of uniform and equipment.

There is a group called the capability ground manoeuvre team. It is addressing female-specific combat requirements for future procurement of combat clothing and equipment. The Committee may be interested to know there are specific lines of work. There is combat body armour, ballistic hard armour plates, combat clothing and then, which I find personally very interesting, development of an anthropometric database to really delve into what the differences are on a scientific basis and how best we address these. I mentioned equipment a moment ago. As part of the procurement of the replacement SA80 A3, we will be considering the needs of women soldiers while also conducting an equality analysis in accordance with Army procedure.

Q134 Richard Drax: Annabel, could I be very rude and interrupt you? I do apologise. This is all very good, but, for example, for the body armour surely you could go to the people who produce it and redesign it in a matter of days, I would suggest, to meet, shall we say, the shape of the female form extremely easily. All these groups are meeting and talking about changing things. Why is it all taking so long? I do not see what the problem is.

Baroness Goldie: You anticipate my next comment. When it comes to combat body armour and design of a prototype female-fit scalable tactical vest, trials of that prototype will begin in April and May of this year, so there is actual work going on. I referred to ballistic hard armour plates. The interim solution of a smaller Osprey plate is going to be introduced by the end of 2022 and used in conjunction with the female-fit scalable tactical vest. Things are actually happening. I did not want to delve into too much detail for the Committee, but there is substantive progress being made.

Richard Drax: Annabel, that is very helpful.

Maria Byford: Baroness Goldie has probably covered my points, but I was just going to talk about the investment in robust evidence and research that has really been ongoing since 2015 when the Secretary of State endorsed £20 million of health and performance research. All of the things the Minister has talked about I recognise in terms of the scalable tactical vest and the smaller Osprey plates about to be trialled.

There is work we are doing around female air crew as well, because up until recently we have only used male shapes and sizes in order to design air crew equipment. Things like ejection seat design, in-flight urination systems, breathing system design and protection systems are now being



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redesigned, as you say, to accommodate the female anatomy, which is clearly quite different, so that is all work that is ongoing.

Q135 **Richard Drax:** You are happy, Maria, that things are being done and being done soon rather than just being talked about. You are happy things are actually happening.

Maria Byford: Yes, very much so. This is absolutely in response to the concerns that have been raised by serving servicewomen.

Q136 **Chair:** We have received quite a bit of evidence about this and concerns by serving women. All roles are open to women. Since 2019 combat roles have been open to women. We have had evidence from women that they are crouching in a firing position, they cannot operate effectively and their safety is compromised because of the equipment they are provided. While I acknowledge research and progress is being made, should we really be doing this? Should we be disadvantaging women in this way?

James Swift: No, absolutely not, and their safety is of primary concern. We have to catch up and that is why this work is in train and why we are trialling the new tactical vests either at the end of this month or the very beginning of next month in order to address that problem.

Q137 **Chair:** I would like to move on, please. We have heard shocking evidence from Paula Edwards from Forward Assist, which is the only tri-service female veterans' charity we have in the UK at the moment, about the lack of sanitary products for women in extreme environments. Afterwards Minister Heapey said that tampons and sanitary products would now be provided to female personnel deployed abroad, but only as part of the emergencies provision box. Why cannot sanitary products be issued for all deployments, like sunglasses, insect repellent and suntan lotion?

Baroness Goldie: Again, it is a critical area to seek clarification on. The MoD has recently implemented a women's health focus into the health and wellbeing portfolio and that is aiming to drive health and wellbeing improvements for the lived experience of women in the Armed Forces. This portfolio is going to look to develop a range of policies to better support women in the service looking at menopause, breastfeeding, access to sanitary provisions, assisted conception services and post-pregnancy rehabilitation through 2021. That is an important bit of progress and I defer to James again on this, but I am certain that we will be seeking feedback on how that is progressing, because to me it is quite simply an essential and inescapable degree of support necessary to our female personnel.

James Swift: When we looked at this last year, the first thing we did is we went out and spoke to our serving women to ask them what they wanted, and the vast majority of them wanted to provide their own sanitary provision, because it is quite a personal matter. What they felt, though, was that at times, through stress or any other reasons, menstruation happens at a time that they were not expecting or something else changes, and at that stage they needed access. You



might call it emergency provision, but they needed access at that stage to some support. That is why we have taken the approach that we have; we have listened to them.

I was at a basic training institution earlier this month, just after Easter, and I picked up on this, both with the female instructors there, but also with some of the cadets, and the provision is available on the back of every vehicle on the exercise, so every troop-carrying vehicle. All the instructors, male and female, know that it exists. All the cadets going through training know that it is there. They are all briefed at the beginning on the protocols, that it exists and that access is there; all they need to do is ask for it. Uptake and usage has been really low because most women have provided for their needs themselves, but when it is needed it is there, and they told me that it had made a real difference.

Q138 Chair: I am pleased to hear that, but there is a slight flaw in that. Having to ask for it might be a little bit inhibiting for women, so I will leave that one with you. Can I also look at women's health? We have had evidence from servicewomen that some military GPs have less understanding of women's health needs, so much so that they do not pursue particular postings due to lack of suitable GPs. What are you doing about this? Can I bring Sam in, please?

Samantha des Forges: Stepping back a moment, one of the really important elements that we are doing as the new D&I directorate is really amplifying the voices of our women, much in the way this inquiry is as well, and not just hearing our women, but really listening to them. As mentioned just now, the sanitary products point was a case in point, where actually what our women were asking for was different from what we might have otherwise assumed.

When we are looking at the provision of support from GPs and the medical services, I have a meeting coming up in the not too distant future with our surgeon general to explore some of these issues. We also have to recognise the primary care and occupational health piece that is part of the defence provision and the secondary care and specialist care where the NHS would be involved.

I did some work in my previous role as gender champion around the menopause specifically and it came up that the menopause was one particular area where some of our Armed Forces women did not feel that they necessarily had the level of support and understanding from the GP services within defence, and it is an area that we are working on in terms of how we raise understanding and ensure the training is in place and that they have confidence in the services that can be provided. I would say that is a point again that is very much front and centre for us and one that we are focusing on.

Q139 Chair: Sam, can I just then look at the review of the women's health policy that is running at the moment? Do you have any preliminary findings that you can mention to us?



Samantha des Forges: I am not sure if Lieutenant General Swift might have more on that particular point.

James Swift: The answer is I am not sure that we have any findings at this stage. What the group has done is broken it down into 10 or 12 workstreams, only one of which is specific to women's health matters, because all the other health matters also affect men and women in the same way. That work is then progressing this year, so I am expecting findings later in the year.

Chair: Annabel mentioned before leadership from the top. We have the CDS, who has acknowledged laddish behaviour, and we have had the Judge Advocate General choosing unwise words when he spoke at the Armed Forces Bill Committee. The next tranche of questions would like to look at cultural change in the military.

Q140 **Derek Twigg:** Baroness Goldie, bullying, harassment and discrimination persist, and that has clearly come across in our investigation. Our evidence suggests that this is a problem of culture. How can an organisation as large and complex as defence set about transforming its culture?

Baroness Goldie: It is a probing question and it is an important question, because the Committee will be aware that the extent of the MoD cohort was something like 150,000 or 160,000 Armed Forces personnel and then a civilian cohort of somewhere over 60,000. Going back to what the Chairman said, it has to come from leadership.

I mentioned earlier on that I was very encouraged to see the not just united but determined attitude of both Permanent Secretary and CDS to take forward this necessary change in how we approach diversity and inclusion broadly, but very particularly, on the part of CDS, how we deal with it in the services.

It does take leadership and that is something that, as James will confirm, is second nature to the Armed Forces. The Armed Forces work in a culture and ethos of leadership and they have respect for leaders, so it is very important that that leadership is demonstrably provided and not just talked about. I know CDS has been very instrumental in engaging with his single service chiefs, and I am sure Sam des Forges, because she sits on the relevant board, can add a bit more to that conversation.

I can say, for example, that on 24 July last year senior military leaders in defence signed a letter outlining their commitment to improving diversity and inclusion and committing to be held to account by six-month progress reports in order to move from apathy from action. It sets out the commitment of seniors to deliver this change and to deliver the policy, the process and the behavioural change required to make the necessary progress for D&I. That success requires dedicated leadership at all levels within the Armed Forces, but I am absolutely satisfied that the



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Chief of Defence Staff and his single service chiefs, supported by people like James Swift, are doing all they can to inform behaviour.

The important thing is, to be honest, when unacceptable behaviour takes place those who are affected by that have the confidence to call it out and in calling it out know they will be supported. That is absolutely critical.

Q141 Derek Twigg: First, we want to stop it. How can senior leadership ensure that junior leadership ranks are making the same changes to the culture? How can you ensure that at junior leadership that change in culture is taking place? What is being done by those in charge, the senior military and Ministers, to ensure that that is all the way down to the most junior rank in terms of leadership?

James Swift: Perhaps I can start on that and then we can go to Sam des Forges, given her leadership for this. You are absolutely right that it starts at the top and works its way down, but it also starts at the bottom and works its way up.

It is critical that all basic trainees are educated from the very start as to what appropriate and inappropriate behaviours will be and what the values and standards of the Armed Forces are. At the same time, we have introduced the same into the induction training for the civil service, noting that they come in at many levels. Throughout the Armed Forces leadership courses this issue is addressed again, so at each level they are repeatedly tackling the issues of inappropriate behaviours and what needs to be done.

At some levels, for example at the commanding officers-designate course, we then also inject the Service Complaints Ombudsman, who visits in order to explain in person what she does, the service complaints system and the commanding officers' role in it, in order that they get it at that level of leadership as well.

Perhaps I will give one other innovation and then hand to Sam. In parallel with that is the introduction this year of active bystander training, which has been rolled out, is absolutely leading and is now mandatory for everybody, so that people understand that we all have a role, both in not doing it in the first place but, if we see it, in stepping in and doing something about it, so that the weight is not all on the complainant or the victim having to report it themselves. If you are happy, Mr Twigg, Sam probably has something to add here.

Q142 Derek Twigg: Can I just pursue that a little more? Some of the shocking evidence we had was of women who had made complaints but were not taken seriously and, in fact, the senior officers that they had raised their complaints with were trying to make it go away without actually taking necessary action. One of the sayings I like is "Trust and verify". How are you verifying that the junior officers of more junior ranks are actually following what you have just said, taking complaints seriously and dealing



with them in a proper manner?

James Swift: The simplest way of us doing that is, first, trying to educate them correctly, but then addressing if and when it is reported that they are not doing it, and therefore making sure that potential complainants understand the various avenues that they have access to. It is fair to say some of our policy has been quite impenetrable and therefore not widely understood. Therefore, one of the things that we have been doing is producing much clearer, concise guides as to what people can do in circumstances when either they experience or see inappropriate behaviours, so that if it is not dealt with correctly by the chain of command, they have alternatives.

Two of those alternatives that spring to mind are using the Service Complaints Ombudsman herself or, alternatively, our new bullying, harassment and discrimination helpline, which runs 24/7, is totally independent and is staffed by experts who people can contact anonymously to talk through the issue and get the support that they may need. Those are the alternative mechanisms.

Samantha des Forges: Absolutely, you are right that it is about culture, and culture right the way through the organisation. We have been talking about apathy to action and empathy to effects and really bringing that focus in. A lot of this goes to the Wigston and the Gray reports, which bring a lot of really powerful recommendations in place.

One thing worth noting is the climate assessments we have in place, which enable us to look at specific areas or particular locations and, through an anonymous survey process, try to understand what is going on there. Depending on what comes out of that, there is the ability to then look at a range of potential interventions to deal with those issues. That is one where you can look at that low level. It is very much about measuring culture consistently and continually. It is consistent and persistent communication.

We mentioned active bystander training. At the last count we have had about 54,000 folk complete the active bystander training. There is not one single intervention that is going to address what you describe. It is about that whole suite of interventions, including things like climate assessments, which allow us to say, "Okay. Maybe the high-level message is this, but in this particular location is that what is happening or is there a specific challenge we need to address in a different way?"

Q143 **Derek Twigg:** What has the anti-bullying helpline shown and what has come out of that? How many complaints have been through it?

Maria Byford: I can come in at this point. Since the bullying, harassment and discrimination helpline was set up, there have been 287 calls until March. 77% of those have been around bullying, 10% around harassment, 2% around sexual harassment and 10% around discrimination. It is really key that we have an outlet and an avenue for



people to be able to raise their concerns, but also that we have a network of people who know how to deal with it at a unit level and a local level. We have a fantastic network of diversity and inclusion advisers and practitioners who have been trained through the defence leadership centre at the Defence Academy, which enables us to get local help for people in addition to building our policies, so getting the joint service publications right. There is a refresh and a re-publication of our relevant policies that is ongoing at the moment, and also a focus on informal complaints resolution to try to resolve a complaint through mediation or informal investigation at the lowest possible level, to try to resolve the situation before it becomes more serious.

This all links back to the findings of Air Chief Marshal Wigston and his recommendations, which are all about authentic leadership at all levels, relentless engagement across the chain of command and consistent communication, as Sam was just saying. Those are the things that collectively will lead to meaningful change for defence.

Q144 Derek Twigg: Maybe yourself and Baroness Goldie could take my final question before I hand back to the Chair. We have had countless women who have come forward to tell us about their experience of sexual harassment and assault while serving. How much of a problem do you think it is in the Armed Forces? Maybe Baroness Goldie could go first, and you could come back in then, Air Vice-Marshal.

Baroness Goldie: What you have heard has been deeply disturbing and to the MoD it is unacceptable. That is why we are endeavouring with a combination of measures, both education and training, as James Swift has been describing. We are trying to introduce a better understanding as to behaviour that is absolutely unacceptable.

The behaviour can range from, as you indicated, banter to much more serious behaviour. I have to say that if anyone behaves in a criminal way, they will be rooted out, they will be prosecuted and the ultimate threat is they may be convicted and chucked out the services. There is zero tolerance of this, but you are quite right to ask the question, "How pervasive is it?" It is very difficult to answer that; James Swift would agree. That is not because we want to be evasive. The position is improving because of the measures we are putting in place.

Q145 Derek Twigg: Do you accept there is a problem?

Baroness Goldie: I accept there certainly has been a problem. I accept it is possible there is a continuing problem, perhaps to a lesser extent. What I am being absolutely candid with the Committee about is that it is very difficult to measure that, but James Swift may have something to add.

James Swift: I only have one thing, and then Mr Twigg wanted to go to Maria as well. In order to determine whether we are making any difference, it is important to measure this. Therefore, we conduct



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periodically sexual harassment surveys. The most recent batch of those is completing now, and we are in the process of analysing those results to see if there has been any change since the last one and also what it is telling us.

When I was exposed to the first one of these back in 2015—it was the second one in the Army but the first one I was aware of—it brought to my attention something that happened in my command a few years previously. I thought I had done everything right to try to set the right climate and I know the commanding officer in the unit concerned was trying to do the same thing, but still there had been an incident where a relatively senior officer had preyed upon a very junior female officer. That is so shocking and awful and, therefore, that is what we are trying to completely root out. It was happening then. We will know shortly from the sexual harassment surveys whether things have got any better. We have to keep trying to reduce it to zero.

Q146 Chair: Again, I would like to ask how you are measuring the success of your initiatives, because I have received evidence from serving women that they do know there is a harassment and bullying helpline, which is good. They do not use it, because when they need it, they need to see someone face to face, not an anonymous person down a phonenumber. It is not being used.

Your bystander training is not relatable. They have all been on it. They are saying it has not changed anything on the ground because the training you are offering, which is online and I am told is for an hour, does not have people in uniform and does not relate to a military environment, so it is not relatable. You are introducing a plethora of initiatives, which sounds good, but nothing is improved on the ground. This is the evidence we are having. How are you assessing the success of your initiatives?

James Swift: Thank you for that feedback. The evidence from this Committee's investigation will be really helpful in taking forward some of these issues. As I mentioned, the sexual harassment survey is one measure that we are putting in place, but we also measure discrimination, bullying and harassment through the annual surveys. Discrimination at work since 2018 has reduced from 15% to 11% and over the same period bullying and harassment from 14% to 10%. It is still too high, but it is trending in the right direction and we will continue to drive those further down.

Chair: I am going to move on now to the next question, but before I do, in evidence submitted to the Armed Forces Bill Committee, the MoD stated that instead of an independent defence authority, as recommended by Wigston, you have appointed Sam here, the first director of diversity and inclusion, which is meant to adequately address the concerns of the lack of independence. Richard will pursue this further.

Q147 Richard Drax: Sam, this question is for you; anyone else can chip in too



if they wish. What are your responsibilities as the MoD's first ever director of diversity and inclusion, and what do you want to achieve in the role?

Samantha des Forges: Just by context, as you say, it is the first ever director of diversity and inclusion, but also we have touched on the chiefs' joint commitment back in the summer of last year. In addition, there was a significant investment in the central D&I team. That was a really clear public statement of intent for us to take action. I will talk about the D&I team briefly first of all and then the wider directorate.

Q148 **Richard Drax:** Sam, could you be very helpful? Acronyms are meaningless probably to people who are watching. D&I is who?

Samantha des Forges: Diversity and inclusion. My apologies; it is too long in defence. In terms of the diversity and inclusion team, which was significantly increased last summer, it is really pushing forward this strategy and reinvigorating it. Much of what we have been talking about in terms of culture centred on respect and integrity is that focus. If we talk about where our areas of focus are, it is creating that more engaged and motivated workforce, which will result in increased retention, wellbeing and performance.

There is a lot of focus on building stronger teams and improving decision-making. We talk about Chilcot challenge and enabling challenge and better operational effectiveness if we are enabling our people to fulfil their potential. There is the piece we have touched on about enabling defence to access and recruit more talented people from across the whole of the society that we serve. There is something very practical about increasing our level of cultural understanding, which will ultimately aid us in overseas operations, engagement across supporting trust with communities in British society and the overall reputation. There is a wider piece and I am sure I do not need to go into the business case any further.

In addition, from 1 April this year we have expanded the directorate, which is bringing in, in addition to the diversity and inclusion team, our unacceptable behaviours team, who are implementing the Wigston and the Gray reviews, the service complaints and service justice transformation teams, which were stood up in autumn 2019 and who do the day-to-day running, and the defence serious crime capability team. If we look at what we are asking the directors and myself to do overall, it is really about bringing those teams together, so that we have an evidence-based, co-ordinated and cross-cutting approach to tackling fairness, equality and justice.

Before I took on the role, I was fortunate enough to speak to the Secretary of State, the former Permanent Secretary and the Chief of Defence Staff and they were all absolutely clear that what they were looking for me to do and for the directorate to do was really grip this transformation to make sure we are moving from apathy to action, as has been described.



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A lot of that is about holding to account as well. One of the things we have developed is the cross-defence D&I action plan; XDIAP is an acronym for you. What that really includes, as I say, is a huge amount of strategic level actions, a number of which we have talked about, but it is no good having lists of actions unless you are really holding to account, so we are focused on bringing together the data, bringing together the analysis, identifying what is working and what is not working and then holding to account through our quarterly performance and risk review process.

Overall, it is a central function that seeks to cohere all the activity to ensure that we are sharing best practice and to look at the data, analysis and evidence that we have been talking about today, to see what we are missing, what we are not doing enough of and where we need to focus and then making sure we use the governance mechanisms to really hold to account.

The other point that I would just make as well, which is certainly key to the way that I am keen for the team to run, is about amplifying the voices and, as I say, really listening to the voices. When we talk about women in the Armed Forces, we must remember that they are not a homogenous group with the same ambitions, issues and challenges. We have women who are members of ethnic minorities, who are early in their career or in senior roles, who may be members of the LGBTQ+ community, who may be neurodiverse or who are people with disabilities. We have to really recognise the intersectionality and the different needs and interests. It is a broad area of work, but we have brought together the teams that are delivering and focusing most on this to cohere and also to really hold to account and bring real challenge to those who are delivering in the single services.

Q149 Richard Drax: Can I pick this up, being a former soldier and slightly in a devil's advocacy way? Is there a danger this could have the opposite effect? Why is all this so necessary, with all these different roles, when senior leaders and senior officers should be, I would have thought, taking up a lot of these roles and ensuring that all the things you are trying to achieve are done under their command? Is it the result of failure, of senior officers not doing their job, that you and your organisation is necessary at all?

Samantha des Forges: My ultimate ambition is that we do not need this role or this team. When we were having those conversations with senior leaders, the question we were asking was how we can really accelerate the change that is happening. There was certainly focus on diversity and inclusion, but how can we really hold to account? How can we make sure that the right incentives are in the system and hence the appetite for cohering?

As I say, there is a huge amount of really good work going on. We have touched briefly on the gender work balance working group. There is some fantastic work that our women across defence are doing to improve, but



it is not casting the biggest shadow and part of my role is making sure that we do cast the biggest shadow. It is driven more by an appetite for more and faster than necessarily a reflection of failure.

I may be misinterpreting your question, but just to pick up on one of your points about whether this could become a bit of a barrier, one of the conversations we are having, particularly with military colleagues, is around whether language of diversity and inclusion can become a barrier itself; we are very alive to that. As a directorate we are absolutely a whole-force directorate. We are a directorate of folk from all of these services, from people with backgrounds in private sector, different parts of Government and defence, just to bring that diversity of view. We are very open to listening to feedback.

I was talking to the defence faith forum, which is the collection of chairs from our Armed Forces faith networks, and we were having a very similar conversation about how we most effectively land the messages that this is all about operational effectiveness at the end of the day. I would say those are live topics, and it is only by listening to our colleagues that we are going to make sure that we are most effective and impactful. I do not have all the answers, but I am listening to the folk who have them.

Baroness Goldie: Can I just add to what Sam was saying? Mr Drax, it is important to remember, as you are aware, defence is a hybrid organisation. We have a significant Armed Forces population, but we also have a significant civilian cohort, and the desire was felt that we needed to achieve a diversity and inclusion policy and directorate that spread right across defence, because, interestingly, although some of the problems may occur in the different environments of either civilian cohort or Armed Forces personnel, a lot of the root causes of the problem are the same and, therefore, we wanted to be absolutely clear that we had leadership from the top.

As I said earlier, that has been one of the very important consequences of establishing a directorate of diversity and inclusion, because it is giving now tangible leadership. It is not a sense of it was set up for the Armed Forces because the Armed Forces were failing. It was a recognition that across the whole defence population we needed to do something more significant to start grouping these challenges.

Q150 **Mr Ellwood:** I just want to explore this a bit further and just talk about the consequences if a leader was seen to somehow fail to take steps to correct if they saw errant behaviour taking place. Maria, would you like to start off on this?

Maria Byford: I am struggling with your question. The organisation would take steps if a leader failed, but I would genuinely hope that our leaders would not fail. The conversation, the training and our collective lived experience means that we want the very best for all of our Armed Forces personnel. We want them to be able to bring their true selves to work and the culture of the organisation has to be inclusive in order that



people can thrive and we can make the most of their talent and skills. Personally, I would be very disappointed to see a leader fail to behave in an inclusive, fair and transparent way. Clearly, any organisation may have a rotten apple in the barrel, but hopefully the collective good of the organisation would ensure that those behaviours are driven out from the services.

Q151 **Mr Ellwood:** Let me perhaps give you an example, which is a real example that was given to this Sub-Committee, whereby junior female officers on board a ship experienced unfortunate behaviour from their male colleagues, so leching and inappropriate comments, which made them feel like objects and was certainly not respecting their rank and them as people. When they raised this to more senior female officers, they said, "I am afraid you are just going to have to get used to it, because the paperwork involved to challenge this would cause more problems. It would also perhaps cause labelling". A whole host of issues would present themselves and it just was not worth going down this route. I summarise, but that is essentially the impression we were given and, therefore, it was accepted and tolerated that this sort of behaviour could continue.

Maria Byford: I find that really disappointing. I can only reflect on recent experiences in my own service. We will all be aware of an unfortunate incident that happened within an area of the Royal Air Force regiment, which was dealt with immediately by the most direct action from our senior leadership, with the Chief of the Air Staff removing those who were in command at the time of the incident. They have not only directed a service inquiry but also a cultural inquiry, which is being led by a senior retired officer, looking at whether the culture of the organisation is right. It is that type of reactive and visible leadership that is really key to ensure that we certainly do not see layers of leadership where they think it is acceptable, because we absolutely have to act in line with the values and standards of the service.

Q152 **Mr Ellwood:** It is not acceptable at any time, but you do understand why, in today's day and age, especially when we are promoting such high standards, junior officers are approaching more senior female officers looking for a role model, asking for guidance and how to deal with this situation and they are told, "Just suck it up. You just have to deal with it. You just have to take it, because it is part of the territory".

Maria Byford: I find that very disappointing. It does not relate to my own personal lived experience in the Royal Air Force, I am afraid.

Q153 **Mr Ellwood:** Can I just go back to General Swift? You commented on the muscular-skeletal challenges that females faced during training, which led to more people falling out of the system. Does that ring a bell?

James Swift: Yes.

Q154 **Mr Ellwood:** Could you just expand on that a little bit as to, from a female perspective, what is happening there that has led to people for



whatever reasons being unable physically to continue on?

James Swift: In the process of moving from the decision to open all roles to women, including the women in ground close combat, we were concerned that carrying heavy weights for long periods might injure the women in those roles, just because the physiology of men and women is subtly different in terms of bone strength and those sorts of things. We commissioned some independent research into that and in the process not only did we find that was the case, but we found that we were harming our male military colleagues as well through the way that we were carrying our weight, but also the way we were training, and that we could be much more intelligent about it and save muscular-skeletal injuries for both men and women.

More recently, though, as women have been joining the ground close combat roles and, therefore, going through basic training, despite even that, we found that there has been a slightly higher rate of injury and, therefore, what we have been doing for, again both men and women, is making sure that we build very progressively in the early phases of the training, so that both genders can develop their resilience and robustness before being put through some of the more strenuous activities that are necessary for some roles in defence.

Going back to your previous question, though, Mr Ellwood, one of the most important things is that people need to have faith in our complaints system. If they do, that will increase the number of people who are prepared to use it. Part of engendering that faith is reporting back to them that, when something is reported and people are found at fault, action is taken. I admit that that feedback loop is something that I am struggling with at the moment.

In the military court system, it is a public system and, therefore, we can publish the results of a court-martial and be totally open and frank, but in the complaints system, because it is a grievance system and it is therefore covered by staff and confidential data protection-type considerations, I cannot just publish that information in the same way. We are trying to work out how we can blob it up or anonymise it in such a way that we are not breaking the responsibility for data protection to the person who has been found out fault, but at the same time we can communicate that we do take this seriously, we do take action and people, therefore, can grow faith and use the system more.

Baroness Goldie: Mr Ellwood, I was utterly appalled listening to what you described. It is deeply troubling. You are unable to provide specific information, but I would want to pursue that further, if you felt able, because that is a really manifest demonstration of a breach of command responsibilities and a failure to look after the welfare of junior personnel. I am appalled. If, Mr Ellwood, you can co-operate in any way with giving us more information, I would want to see that pursued.

Q155 **Chair:** Annabel, we have had an extensive amount of information, all



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with similar concerns and complaints, and this evidence, where we can, will be made public.

Baroness Goldie: We would want to pursue that.

Q156 **Chair:** We are encouraging you to look at this, because it is extensive and it is shocking. I am going to move on to the faith in the system that James just mentioned. So far this Committee has heard compelling evidence about the ineffectiveness of the chain of command within the complaints system, and in the Armed Forces Bill Committee it was mentioned that a central admissibility function and a standing decision board will be created. However, this is not an independent body, as Wigston recommended. Will these changes sufficiently address the lack of confidence, faith and independence within the system? Why did you choose to do something different?

James Swift: There were 36 recommendations in the Wigston report and we are progressing all of them, including the one on the defence authority point, which is behind your question. As described earlier, Sam laid out what has been embraced into her directorate, with the whole gamut of complaints and unacceptable behaviour through to justice, in order to be that independent body that can hold to account and scrutinise the performance of the system that is being delivered still within the services. We also have the Service Complaints Ombudsman as a further check.

Your point that people still lack faith because the chain of command is involved is well made, as your evidence suggests, but the steps that we are taking in the report going through the Armed Forces Bill at the moment are designed to take the chain of command out of the system at the appropriate points, both to apply specialists but also to increase pace, because one of the areas that causes a reduced faith in the system is that we are not processing complaints in a timely enough manner. Therefore, we have been heavily focusing on how we can continue to have the rigour necessary to proceed with a complaint, but at an appropriate pace and improve that. The admissibility function, the standing boards and the like are aimed to get at that pace issue.

Q157 **Chair:** What we have heard repeatedly through this whole process is marking your own homework and the desire for servicepeople, women as well as men, to have some independence within this process. Why did you not choose to follow Wigston's recommendation? Why have you chosen something different?

James Swift: We have followed his recommendation in terms of creating the authority. Indeed, I checked with him back in February whether what we were planning to do at that stage and now have done with Sam's directorate was addressing this recommendation, and he concurred that it was in all but one respect.

Q158 **Chair:** It is that one respect that would instil faith with service personnel in the complaints system, but you have chosen not to do it. I cannot



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understand why you have not chosen the independent part of it.

James Swift: I am slow to catch up; I am sorry. That is already in place. It is in place through the Service Complaints Ombudsman. There is a completely independent channel that people can use if they wish and, indeed, at any stage they can appeal against the bit of the service complaints process that is administered by the services, and then the Service Complaints Ombudsman will deal with those appeals. They can either go direct or they can appeal, so it already exists.

Q159 **Chair:** Nicola Williams, the previous Service Complaints Ombudsman, said the process is only as independent as the person holding that position.

James Swift: Do you mean the ombudsman?

Chair: Nicola Williams said that.

James Swift: But you mean the person holding which position?

Chair: The ombudsman's position. Again, it is marking your own homework.

James Swift: I do not want to put words into Nicola's mouth, but I do not imagine she was saying that she felt she was not independent.

Q160 **Chair:** I do not know what she said. That is the quote verbatim that she said about her previous position.

James Swift: I will take that away and pick that up with the current ombudsman to understand whether Mariette Hughes feels that she is independent or not. If she does not, that is a real problem, because she must be independent for this system to work.

Q161 **Chair:** What role will you play, Sam, within the handling of complaints, as director of D&I?

Samantha des Forges: My role is less about the handling of individual complaints. As the Lieutenant General has just mentioned, that is where the Service Complaints Ombudsman acts and brings the independence. My role is more about cohering, pushing through the transformation and change, the holding to account of, for example, the single services and what they are doing and following through the actions. It is those elements of the central authority. The independence in terms of actual complaints is through the Service Complaints Ombudsman.

Q162 **Chair:** James, why are the Service Complaints Ombudsman's recommendations not binding?

James Swift: Her next report, which is due out early next month, is delivered to Parliament and then the Secretary of State responds to that report.

Q163 **Chair:** It is not binding.



James Swift: No, it is not.

Q164 **Stuart Anderson:** James, I want to pick up on what you have said and follow on also. I was in the Committee with Tobias. As a Committee we have spoken to many people about incidents they have faced when they have raised them up the chain of command and have been told to leave it there, but also when asked about the Service Complaints Ombudsman there is no faith in that system. This is not me saying this. This is multiple different ranks across all the services that would not even consider using it because they have no faith in that. I respect what has been put in place, but how do we provide faith for the system, because nobody is going to use it, or a large proportion of people will not use it?

The comment I was given was, "If I was a male soldier, I probably would not do it. Being a woman, no chance. Being someone from a black or Asian community and specifically a woman, forget it. I would never consider it". These are the views of people this has been set up for. How are we going to create transparency and justice and instil confidence that this system can work? I would like you to pick that up please, James.

James Swift: It is a real challenge and it goes back to the comment I made a little earlier. The best way to instil faith in the system is for people to see it working and, therefore, that feedback loop is absolutely essential, which is why it is something I am looking at now to see how we can address it, because to move the perception from one, as you report, that people do not have faith in to one that they do, they need to be able to see that it is working and that is why I am focusing on that.

Q165 **Stuart Anderson:** I would also like to hear your comments on that, Maria. I know you have said it has not been your experience, which is great to hear, but when we have heard from multiple other people it is their experience, I would like to hear your views on that, please.

Maria Byford: There are a few things here around the service complaints system that really do need to be addressed. One of the areas that we are looking at from an Air Force perspective are the experiences of all those who have been involved in the service complaints process, so not just the complainant but also the respondents, and their feedback on how the process has worked for them. It is really key to understand the impact it has on everybody in the service complaints process, because not all service complaints are entered into with the best of intentions. It is really important to understand the impact on respondents as well as complainants.

Timeliness is really important. At the moment the system takes a long time to progress through, so what we have tried to do is split the approach to service complaints. Those that are related to inappropriate or unacceptable behaviours are, by nature, often very complex and take longer to resolve. We have also sought to fast-track those that are related to much more simple processes like grievances around terms and conditions of service, which are quite often policy interpretations and



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which can quite quickly be resolved. That way, we can then focus time, energy and resource on the more complicated and complex behaviour-related complaints. They are two quite different types of complaints within the system.

To enable that within the Royal Air Force, we have a cadre of retired one and two-star officers with experience in this. We bring them in to help resolve, acting as deciding officers, and making admissibility decisions as well. That helps relieve some of the burden from the chain of command, but also gives a sense of impartiality, which helps get after those that feel they have been wronged.

Q166 **Stuart Anderson:** Have any internal surveys been conducted in confidence across the forces on what different ranks think of the Service Complaints Ombudsman system?

Maria Byford: Certainly, from a Royal Air Force perspective, we have been undergoing an internal confidential review of complainants and respondents, which is instigated at the point of the decision. They are then given the opportunity and invited to take part in a survey, but that has not yet completed, so I do not have the results to share with you yet.

Q167 **Stuart Anderson:** What about across the Army, James?

James Swift: I am responsible for defence, not just the Army. I am not aware of such a survey. It is something that I will take away to understand because it may well help us understand how we can increase people's confidence in the system.

Q168 **Stuart Anderson:** That is a valuable point because, if there are different views at the levels you are at and what we are hearing in our private sessions, we need to match them up somehow. It would be good, if they do get conducted, to see those results.

Can I move on to Annabel now? I am keen to find out when the results of the MoD's bullying and harassment complaints procedure will be made available.

Baroness Goldie: We conduct surveys, as we were saying, and we do that on a regular basis. Can I wind back for a moment to what I think is a very illuminating point? The service complaints system is critical to addressing many of the problems that the Committee has identified. That goes back to confidence. We offer support to people who make complaints but I am wondering, James, if we are explicit enough in indicating, to persons who have been affected by behaviour and want to make a complaint, what kind of support is available for them. That support may be critical to getting them over the line of feeling confident in making the complaint. I am grateful to you for raising that. That is something we can take away and look at.

Q169 **Stuart Anderson:** When will the MoD's bullying and harassment complaints procedure—JSP 763—be made available?



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Samantha des Forges: I just want to touch on a couple of your other bits. The AFCAS and ResCAS surveys do include questions about the Service Complaints Ombudsman process. I believe the Service Complaints Ombudsman also has its own satisfaction survey as well. There are some other surveys in place and, of course, we have also shared the lived experience report with the Committee, which has provided a great deal of insight.

The updated policies are going through the final stages of approval. We are looking for that to be released in the summer. I am conscious of time, but would it be helpful for me to touch on some of the elements that will be coming through that process that may help with a better understanding of the support available and the focus on efficiency, among other things?

Q170 **Chair:** We are short on time. Could you drop a note to the Committee, and then we can share around afterwards?

Samantha des Forges: Yes, absolutely. I am very happy to do so.

Q171 **Stuart Anderson:** I am just trying to find the update of the MoD's bullying and harassment complaints procedure—JSP 763—which the Danuta Gray review in December 2020 said would be available this month. We are very short on days this month. Who can give us an update of when we will see that?

Samantha des Forges: That is the policy that is going through the final stages of approval. I am saying summer being slightly conservative. We are hoping to see it fairly soon.

Q172 **Stuart Anderson:** It will not be April then, as was said in December.

Samantha des Forges: I do not believe so. It will more likely be May or June.

Q173 **Chair:** Annabel, you mentioned support for individuals who make service complaints around bullying, harassment and intimidation. Could you expand on what support is available at the moment?

Baroness Goldie: It comes in various forms. There can be an assisting officer, and that is apparently the most recognised form of support for a complainant in a service complaint. That person is there to help, support and guide. There is also a diversity and inclusion adviser. That is personnel across the whole force who receive specific training to enable them to provide impartial advice to all parties on unacceptable behaviours, the informal complaints process and the service complaints process regarding complaints about unacceptable behaviour.

There is a chain of command, and a comment was made earlier about that. That is appropriate, but I would point out that it is the responsibility of the chain of command. That is why I listened with great concern to what Tobias Ellwood was describing earlier. It is the responsibility of the chain of command to ensure that those in their command are supported.



Therefore, if they have concern about an individual's welfare, they are responsible for ensuring that that individual knows where they can seek support and, if they require welfare services, where they can get these.

There is also the role of the padre for those who would derive pastoral sustenance and support from that. The padre can give welfare support. There is also the important role of charities. Charities enjoy both expertise and independence. Often that can be very reassuring to the individual who may feel concerned or sensitive about the impact of behaviour on them. There is a range of support there. As I said earlier, we have a job to do about making more explicit what that support is.

Q174 **Chair:** I see you intend to make assisting officers more available for people going through the complaints system. We have had mixed reports about assisting officers. Some have been very good. Some, we have heard, have been colluding to cover up evidence. With expanding the role of assisting officers, how are you going to choose, train, supervise and appraise them? How are you going to assess their success?

Baroness Goldie: As they come from within the service, James, you might want to comment on that.

James Swift: Ultimately, their success is if the complainant feels properly supported throughout the process. Their role is to assist, to help the complainant understand the process and to help them through it. As you say, done properly, it is a really good support mechanism. I am sad to hear that there are also experiences that have been reported to you where it has not worked so well. I would be interested to learn from those in order that we can have a more consistent standard.

Q175 **Chair:** What process is in place now to appraise and supervise assisting officers? They are in a very privileged position in dealing with people that are very vulnerable. How are you making sure that they are doing their job effectively and efficiently?

James Swift: It would be the responsibility of the chain of command to make sure that they have put the right people in place.

Q176 **Chair:** Sam, what progress has been made in improving support for victims of crime, in particular rape and sexual assault?

Samantha des Forges: Lieutenant General Swift may be better placed to answer this particular one.

James Swift: Victim support across the piece, including rape, is something that we take really seriously. The victim support officers within the military police system are there in order to provide that initial support, and then to help individuals find the appropriate support beyond the victim support liaison officers. Getting the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales on to our Service Justice Executive Group and Service Justice Board is a really important step in trying to make sure that we



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keep the victims at the centre of this, and that we provide suitable support for them.

Q177 **Chair:** If an alleged rape happens in a civilian setting, they are taken to a victim support unit where they use a rape trauma kit to collect evidence to support a conviction or not. What happens in the military? Does that happen in the military?

James Swift: Yes, and we use the civilian system where appropriate. There is a standing arrangement between the military and civilian police in order that we can make use of the very best facilities to support victims.

Q178 **Chair:** When we asked our focus groups about the MoD's Victims' Code, which tells people that they can go independently to the ombudsman, many had never heard of it. We have received evidence from the Ministry of Defence to say that that is widely known, and women can choose to do that. Again, it is not happening on the ground. How do you assess that this information is going to filter down so that everyone that may need it knows about it?

James Swift: It goes back to the point I made earlier about making our policies clearer, and communicating them properly. That has been one of the changes that has been rolled out this spring, so that we can communicate in a more accessible way what the system is and what the support is, so that we are not suffering the problem that you relay there.

Q179 **Chair:** I would like to pick up on military sexual trauma and rape. The new service police work strands are welcomed, in the way that the service police can work in a consistent and cohesive manner. That is very progressive and good to hear. Ultimately, convictions for military rape remain shockingly low in comparison to civilian rape. Neither rates are good, and this is not a race to the bottom. Do you not see this as an opportunity for the MoD to be progressive and bring back confidence in the military justice system by implementing the recommendation of the Lyons review?

James Swift: Which recommendation?

Chair: That murder, manslaughter and rape be heard in a civilian court.

James Swift: I might let the Minister answer that one in a second. As far as the statistics are concerned, the statistic that I think you are referring to is the conviction rate when one gets to trial, so guilty verdicts in a trial. They are less in the service justice system than the criminal justice system for rape. When you look at the progress of a case being reported, referred for prosecution, referred to trial and then the trial itself, while the numbers are so small that the service justice review said everyone has to take real care with these statistics, the overall conviction rate from case to guilty verdict is slightly better in the service justice system than the criminal justice system. I reaffirm what His Honour Judge Lyons said:



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that one has to be really careful with these statistics because the numbers are so small.

Q180 **Chair:** Would this not be a good opportunity now for the MoD to demonstrate faith, confidence and transparency, and agree that MMRs should be tried in a civilian court, which is what is being asked of the MoD at the moment?

James Swift: Would you like me to handle that, Minister?

Baroness Goldie: I am happy to chip in. Shaun Lyon's review was looked at very carefully. I want to make clear that the Armed Forces Bill supports jurisdictional concurrency. That is important because it creates a legal duty on the prosecutors in the service and civilian justice systems to agree a protocol on the handling of such cases. That will provide greater clarity and certainty about how such cases will be handled, which will promote fair and efficient justice. While either the service or the civilian justice systems will be able to deal with such cases, if the prosecutors are unable to resolve a disagreement over the handling of the case, the civilian prosecutors will have the final say.

It is important to recognise that, in relation to crimes committed within a service context, there may be particular circumstances that have to be taken into account. I would suggest that there are four particular factors that are relevant. One of the things, clearly, is the wishes of the victim in a sexual assault as to where the case is handled. Other factors are whether there are linked service offences, and whether there are cross or multiple jurisdictions involved in the offending, which means having the totality of the offending dealt with in one jurisdiction rather than another. There are also the particular needs of a service victim. In some cases, if there has been a traumatic fatality and service witnesses, the service justice system may be best placed to work with that.

What is important is having a system that is flexible enough to cope with witnesses in various locations at various times. That is part and parcel of what can be the character of an operational environment, including the flexibility to achieve a trial date, for example, that accommodates operational effectiveness. The service justice system is familiar with these logistical challenges of listing a trial before, for example, a warship with perhaps a victim and a number of witnesses during a global deployment. It is part of its remit to support operational effectiveness. The service justice system will readily consider moving existing court commitments when these situations arise. It is important to take into account that there is a particular character that that obtains within service activity.

Q181 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Baroness, do you agree that female veterans face additional or unique challenges when transitioning to civilian life? There are signs that female veterans are not benefiting fully from the MoD transition services.



Baroness Goldie: I am disturbed to hear that. I thought there was a fairly stable structure in place. General Swift may be better placed to comment on the detail of this.

James Swift: I was really interested in the We Also Served report into the health and wellbeing of ex-servicewomen. While it reaffirms some of the things we already know about the experience in service, the experience after service is patchy, in that in some cases it is better and in other cases it is less good than it is for male ex-servicemen.

On your point about the career transition process, the evidence we had before we saw that report does not suggest that the system is either failing our servicewomen leaving or that, after service, there is a negative difference. The career transition approach is absolutely designed with employability in mind. It is aimed at all service-leavers, but it is also aimed at the employment opportunities that exist beyond service. Where courses, for example, do not exist within the contract, it is possible to find those courses through the higher or further education route as part of the transition.

The evidence that we have collected beyond transition is that the unemployment rate six months after leaving the Armed Forces is not significantly different between male and female service leavers—7% and 8% respectively. The difference that we are seeing in employment rates seems to be more about economic inactivity rather than unemployment. I do not mean to split hairs here, but, clearly, economic inactivity is driven by a number of personal choices rather than a failure to be able to secure employment.

When we look at what employment ex-servicewomen get, we find that they are proportionally represented at manager, director and senior official level, and over-represented in professional occupations and associate professional and technical qualifications compared to their male service colleagues.

I am really grateful for the report because I now have an alternative set of evidence. We can go away and have a look at that, given that the evidence that we had hitherto was not suggesting that this was an issue.

Q182 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I will take that a wee bit further. I am surprised that it is still taking evidence after so many years. The Ministry is gathering evidence, does not know some of the answers to these questions and is clearly finding them slightly challenging. General, how do you support women to transition if they leave service after taking, for example, maternity leave, given that the written evidence from the Ministry suggests that they might lose out on resettlement entitlements?

James Swift: If that is happening, we need to correct that because that is not our policy. There are special provisions for people leaving under maternity in order that they can either take their resettlement provision early or delay it.



Q183 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** You would say that that does not happen.

James Swift: I am saying that the policy is in place to meet the needs of servicewomen in those circumstances. If they are not getting access to that, then we need to make sure that they are.

Q184 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Can I go back to the Baroness in terms of some specifics? Does the Ministry, for example, accept the term “military sexual trauma”? I wonder what the Ministry is doing to recognise that as a description.

Baroness Goldie: As the previous evidence has indicated, the Ministry of Defence takes very seriously any inappropriate or criminal behaviour that is extended to personnel. We would wish to root that out. We would wish to ensure that the miscreants were appropriately identified and dealt with. I am not sure that we have adduced the particular definition to which you refer but General Swift may be clearer. I would need to check that out. I do not know.

Q185 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** You are saying that you do not know if that is an accepted term within the Ministry.

Baroness Goldie: I am afraid it is not within my field of knowledge, but others who may have more detailed information may know. I do not know if Sam des Forges has information about that.

Samantha des Forges: I recognise that that was something that was highlighted in some of the other evidence presented to the Committee. We are focused on the wide variety of unacceptable, inappropriate and criminal sexual behaviours. We are looking very closely at the other evidence that has been presented to the Committee, and learning from that as well, in terms of how we best capture and respond to it.

Q186 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Is the Ministry therefore considering accepting this as a term?

Samantha des Forges: It is certainly something that I am open to look into. We would have to take that away. I guess there is a question about whether it is something we already recognise but perhaps use different language for.

Q187 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Maybe I will take it slightly further in terms of the support for those female service personnel who have suffered from in-service bullying, harassment, discrimination or—I will use the term again—military sexual trauma from other members of the Armed Forces. Could you tell us a bit more about the types of mental health support that those women either receive at the moment and/or continue to receive if they have left service?

Samantha des Forges: We have a variety of mental health support offerings available. I may ask Maria to touch on this. We have mentioned the rollout of the bullying and harassment helpline. We talk about various apps that are available, such as HeadFIT. Mental health and wellbeing is



something that has a great deal of focus in defence at the moment. We are talking about things like the service complaints system generally. That is an area where we are particularly focusing on how we can bring more understanding of mental health and wellbeing right the way through that system for both those that are respondents as well as those that are making the complaint.

Maria may have a more detailed overview of some of the support that we provide to military colleagues in this space.

Maria Byford: In a previous life, I was responsible for the delivery of the defence mental health services. The defence people mental health and wellbeing strategy breaks down into four areas: promote; prevent; detect; and treat. This goes right across the chain of command and at all levels.

In terms of the defence mental health services that are available, the first point of contact is the GP or the primary care service, so defence primary healthcare. If deemed necessary, there can either be an intervention at that level or referral into the community mental health system. There are a number of departments of community mental health that are set up regionally around the UK. There is also an ability to refer into NHS specialist services, as well as there being a defence inpatient mental health contract. There are quite specific performance indicators around how reactive that service needs to be. For example, an urgent referral should be dealt with within 24 hours.

There is also, as Sam mentioned, a fantastic range of helplines available, including the combat stress helpline that was set up when Mr Ellwood was Minister for Defence People and Veterans. There are a number of charities that also operate in this space and help support our people. There is a wide range of mental health services that are available.

Q188 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Many women watching this evidence session and the previous evidence sessions will be in no doubt that, for them, that does not seem to work. When we have taken evidence in Committee, we are even hearing that the vast majority of the members of the Armed Forces giving evidence have never heard of processes like the JSP 763; they have never been shown it. If they are not going to complain in the first instance, why would they go on and take up mental health services when the forces themselves do not seem to be helping them at the very complaint element? They do not have that trust element.

Maria Byford: This goes back to the themes we talked about earlier around commitment across the chain of command at all levels of leadership around authenticity and reducing stigma. This applies not only to mental health, mental wellbeing and resilience, but also to those who have experienced unacceptable or inappropriate behaviours. We need to remove any stigma associated with them. It needs to be a conversation that we can all have, so that we can root out the behaviours that are not



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conducive to having that inclusive lived experience for all in the Armed Forces. It feels like a similar theme to me in that we need to destigmatise conversations around this, so that people feel able to raise concerns and that those concerns are properly addressed going forward.

Q189 Mrs Lewell-Buck: We know that a lot of veteran support comes from the charitable sector. Baroness Goldie, could you share with us whether or not you feel that the military charity sector recognises and meets the needs of female veterans?

Baroness Goldie: The MoD has a close and very good relationship with the charitable sector. That has been assisted by the creation of the Office for Veterans' Affairs, which has brought this into the heart of Government. If you tie that into the Armed Forces covenant and look at the forthcoming Armed Forces Bill, you see a shape as to the desire to try to support and improve the post-service provision of support and care that our veterans would expect.

It is very clear, and the Committee will be aware, that individual charities do outstanding work with veterans. Our view is that the MoD does not want to interfere with what the charities do. If possible, we want to try to support and complement that work. One of the reasons the Office for Veterans' Affairs has been constructed is to support that better understanding and integration of what we do. Again, General Swift may have some further thoughts on that.

James Swift: We work very closely with the Office for Veterans' Affairs. All veterans start in service, in the military, and so we have known them while they have been serving, and support them as they transition. Much of the work that preceded the establishment of the Office for Veterans' Affairs, including the veterans strategy, was written in the Ministry of Defence. Some of the mental health support, for example, through the NHS was established before that, and we continue to have very close relationships with the third sector.

Your point is a further manifestation of this. The Office for Veterans' Affairs and my area co-chair the Covenant Reference Group in order to make sure that all stakeholders in this space are joined up and doing their very best to deliver. There is then a ministerial group above that, which is again co-chaired between the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Defence. My own personal relationships with charities in this sector, while predominantly focusing on serving people and families, often stray into overlaps with support for veterans as well because the two are so closely linked.

Q190 Mrs Lewell-Buck: From my own experience with constituents and various charities that I have spoken to working in this sector, there seem to be an awful lot of charities all dipping in and out and doing different things. It makes it quite difficult for people to navigate. I am sure witnesses will disagree with the comments made by the recently resigned Minister. He said that it is hard to know where to get support and to



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understand that support, and that the Government are not willing to promote that to people, so people do not know where to actually get support from this sector either. Is there anything that we can perhaps change around that culture, and make it easier for people to navigate, especially in relation to female veterans?

James Swift: I have heard that commentary, and it is something that we will need to work with the charity sector on. They are, of course, each independent with their own boards of trustees and charters, so it is not an area that we have control over.

I would also share my own experience of helping veterans at a regimental level. The signposting and mutual support between the Army Benevolent Fund, SSAFA, Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion is remarkable. They each will pick up, do their bit, transfer, hand off where appropriate or signpost in a mutually supporting, rather than competitive, way, working with regimental headquarters in supporting our veterans. My own personal experience is not the same as has been shared with you, but we clearly want to learn from the evidence that you have received, and work with the charity sector to see what we can do.

Q191 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** That is really comforting to hear. I am a patron of a charity called Forward Assist, which was set up specifically to deal with female veterans. They have relied on a lot of evidence from US models. I wonder if there is any learning that anyone has taken from the models there in supporting gender-specific services that we could perhaps implement or utilise here.

Baroness Goldie: That is a very interesting suggestion, and I commend you for the work you are doing with your charity. We are always willing to learn. Indeed, one of our expectations is that we will learn from this Committee's report.

What I would add to what General Swift was saying is that we have a 24-hour helpline for veterans. We try to ensure that no one ever gets to the point that they feel they do not know where to go, and that there is help available 24 hours a day if they absolutely feel that they need some sort of support.

Going back to the sort of services that veterans probably depend on, the provision of health support—whether that is physical or mental health—housing support and social support is very much, in terms of delivery, within public sector organisations. One of the interesting features of the Armed Forces Bill is the desire to elevate the awareness of veterans in our communities, whether that is in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. The deliverers of these services are largely the responsibility of other agencies. They are the responsibility, for example, of the devolved Governments in the devolved Administrations. It is very important—you are right—that we try to make clear where veterans can go to get the help they need. It is not for us to interfere with the provision of that help. That is the responsibility of others.



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You make a good point about information. That is something we will certainly take away, consider and reflect on. Thank you for raising that.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Thank you, Baroness and General. It can just sometimes feel like a really muddled and complex field. When you are distressed and needing help, there is nothing worse than being presented with multiple options and not knowing which one to turn to, and then sometimes struggling to get through to any of them. While they are charities, there may well be a role for Government to have that signposting much more clear and much more concise, especially when it comes to female veterans. If that is something you could take on board, I would really appreciate it. Thank you for your time.

Chair: To sum up, 76% of veterans who completed our survey said that the MoD was unhelpful with them transitioning into civilian life, so I am really pleased to hear about the career transition partnership and the defence transition services.

Annabel, James, Maria and Sam, thank you very much for appearing today. Again, I would like to thank the Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, for permitting us to speak to serving personnel. It has certainly given our inquiry substance. 9% of serving women have contributed to this inquiry. The problems faced by women have evolved over decades, not on one person's watch. Despite this, nine out of 10 women recommend a career in the military. When things do go wrong, it looks as if they go wrong dramatically, and that has enduring effects on the rest of these women's lives. There are some easy fixes, and I am pleased that the MoD, particularly in the last 10 years, or particularly in the last five years, has started to address some of these issues and to acknowledge that at least there are problems, which is absolutely the first step.

Our report will be published in June. We look forward to the MoD's response with a sincere hope that the MoD will embrace our recommendations, which ultimately will make the British Army an even better place for a woman to serve, and Britain the best place to be a veteran.

Lastly and most importantly, I would like to thank all the serving women and men, veterans, civil servants, representatives and charities that have contributed to this inquiry, and special thanks to the Defence Select Committee team. Thank you very much to you and to the administrative team. It has been quite an intense year.