

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [SDSR 2015 and the Army](#), HC 108

Tuesday 5 July 2016

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Richard Benyon; Douglas Chapman; Mr James Gray; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Jim Shannon; Ruth Smeeth; Mr John Spellar; Bob Stewart.

Questions 102-144

Witness

I: Air Vice-Marshal (retired) Paul Luker CB OBE AFC DL RAF, Chief Executive, Council of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association, and Clerk, United Kingdom Reserve Forces External Scrutiny Team.

Examination of witness

Witness: Air Vice-Marshal Luker.

Q102 **Chair:** Good morning everybody and welcome to the second oral evidence session of the Committee's inquiry on how outcomes of the 2015 strategic defence and security review affect the Army. We are very grateful to Air Vice-Marshal Luker, who is our sole witness today in this relatively short session. We wonder whether you would not mind introducing yourself with a few words about your role in relation to the Reserves and any other opening remarks that you might care to make.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Thank you. I was 38 years a Regular Air Force officer, mainly in the support helicopter role. I retired in 2006 to take on this role as chief executive of the Council of RFCAs. The RFCAs provide a range of support services for the Cadets and the Reserves. Largely on the background of that, we were asked four years ago whether we would start writing an independent scrutiny report on the progress with Future Reserves 2020, and that role was then made statutory in the Defence Reform Act 2014. We presented our first formal report in that guise last year. The Secretary of State for Defence laid it before Parliament on 21 July. We have just drafted our second. You will forgive me, I hope, but we are in the process where we have presented it to the Secretary of State, but he has not yet laid it in the Library. We expect him to do so within the next two weeks.

If I may, I also present the apologies of Lieutenant General Robin Brims, who leads the scrutiny team. Unfortunately, he is committed to mentoring an Army exercise at the moment, and the change of date unfortunately could not be de-conflicted.

In my guise today, I hope that you will accept that I am speaking largely in an independent sense as chief executive of the council, rather to observe the niceties of the report going to the Secretary of State first before it comes to Parliament.

Chair: I think that we are more concerned about the general themes and trends than the specific details of the report, so I am sure you will be able to give a very good account of the situation. Thank you very much for being able to accommodate our change of date from last week. To start off the questioning, I call James Gray.

Q103 **Mr Gray:** Vice-Marshal, you speak on behalf of the Reserve forces. As opposed to being the person who changes it, you are really their advocate, rather than being in charge, as it were. First, some background. Am I right in detecting a very significant change from what Julian Brazier, who is a former member of the Committee, and General Nick Houghton, when he was VCDS, would have told us only five or so years ago? They would have said that the Reserve forces were just about to become a fully integrated part of the Regular Army and Regular forces,



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whereas in the situation now—this morning we had Major General John Crackett describing something that reminded me of my days in the TA 40 years ago—we have not dissimilar specialist abilities, some backfilling, emergency support in the UK and a variety of other functions. Am I right in thinking that the entire outlook between SDSR 2010 and SDSR 2015 fundamentally changed? If I am right, what effect do you think that has on morale of personnel within the Reserve forces?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: There have been a number of changes between the 2008 timeframe, when the Reserve was in serious neglect; the time of the commission's report, which advocated a way for it to go forward; the interpretation beyond SDSR 2010 that Reserves would be routinely and regularly mobilised to work; and where we are now, with a much softer narrative, which allows for their use on a range of operations. Their commitment is predominantly to training, rather than operations, other than for those who are able to do so, where there is every opportunity for them to participate.

One thing that the scrutiny team has been concerned about is that there should always be guaranteed opportunities for Reserves to be mobilised and used on operations. Nearly every Reservist we speak to says that they joined because they want to be used. We see quite a lot of evidence that those who are able to are used, and are used very effectively. One of the things that has changed in the course of the last decade has been the absolute reliance on Reservists to fulfil some of the roles that previously would have been undertaken by Regulars and, in my view, are more appropriately undertaken by Reserves. That is significantly different from where we were in the Cold War years, when Reservists were used for mass but not necessarily for skill. I am not sure if that answers the question.

Q104 **Mr Gray:** It does to a degree. What you describe takes us back to where we were before. The specialists, namely, the medics, the image analysts, the linguists and other intelligence people, are always going to be deployed, but the gunners, the infantry and the cavalry—the TA and the Reserves—are not. Does that not reduce the purpose of joining the Reserve forces, leaving aside the specialists?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I am not sure that it does. Structurally, the teeth arms, if I can call them, now, to some extent, rely on being topped up by a Reserve component when they deploy en masse, so there is still a mass requirement for those forces. There is excellent evidence at the moment that the Army is training to use them in that way as well, so nearly all of the range of overseas exercises that are being considered in the course of this year envisage having a significant cohort of Reserves come along. For example, infantry battalions really rely on being able to take on board an additional rifle company, many of whom will be found from their Reserve partner unit. In the course of this year, all the evidence shows that that is beginning to work really well. Two years ago, I am not sure we would have said that. You also asked about morale.

Q105 **Mr Gray:** Yes. As you said, boys and girls join the Reserve forces in order



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to fight—in order to be deployed. There is a read-across into morale from that change.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Everything I have seen in the course of the last year shows morale on an upward trajectory. It is quite significantly different from five years ago. New blood coming into the Reserve is also beginning to build on that morale boost. The youngsters we meet are absolutely enthusiastic about most of the roles they are given.

Q106 **Mr Gray:** This is my final question in this strand. I remember the Brazier and Houghton report talking very firmly about Reserve formed units being deployed. That is presumably now history, is it?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I do not think that the Future Reserve 2020 programme is mature enough yet to say whether it is. At the moment, I think the Reserve would find it incredibly difficult to deploy as full formed units. What they are able to do is deploy sub-units at company or squadron-size level. For high-end operations, I suspect that that will be the norm, but for things like national resilience tasks, it is perfectly possible that a Reservist unit could deploy its own command structure to manage operations of that nature, particularly national ones.

Q107 **Mrs Moon:** In the 1980s, the territorial capability of the UK was around 63,000. In the 1990s, it was 72,000, and yet we seem to be struggling to recruit 30,000. What is your assessment of the current recruitment and manning situation? What is the problem? Why are people not attracted to join?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: If I can start with the positives, everything we have seen demonstrates to us that there is still an appetite for Reserve service. You see it not just in the Armed Forces but in the police services and the like. There is a body of young men and women out there who are quite prepared to make this sort of commitment. Therefore, we have looked largely at the processes that support it. I do not believe it helped that the Army went straight into their recruiting partnership with a mindset based on what they had previously called “one Army recruiting”—in other words, recruiting a Reserve and a Regular is exactly the same process; it is not. Notwithstanding the change of name, Reservists are still essentially territorial. They need to be able to work in the areas for which they are recruited and they live and work themselves. The recruiting process at the outset was not optimised to do that. Over the course of the last two years, we have seen a significant uplift in the number of recruits who are coming through. That is not the same as trained strength, because it can take anything from two to three years to get a Reservist to proper trained strength, but the whole initial recruiting process appears to us to have some structural flaws within it.

The amount of time it takes, for example, to take a Reserve candidate through the medical process and then reassess them if even a very minor problem is found just seems to us to be altogether too long. That causes us to question whether the construct of the contract between Capita and the Army is right. Two years ago and last year, I think we were prepared to give Capita and the Army the benefit of the doubt over the partnership,



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because they were still going through teething problems with setting up their own systems. I think by now we should be looking very carefully at whether that contract is fit for purpose.

Q108 **Mrs Moon:** Very interesting. What would you change?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: The whole process of managing candidates through the system is what has caused us to look very carefully at this. There is at the moment far too great a reliance on units to nurture their people through. It has always been right that a Reservist unit should put its arms around a candidate coming in and help them through the process. The reality, though, is that units are spending far too much time engaged with Upavon, checking to see where they are in the pipeline and rearranging their courses when they thought they had been fixed. Units are doing the job that the recruitment partnership should be doing for them. I am not saying for a moment that they should not nurture, but I don't think they should be taking on so much of the role, which they are necessarily having to do at the moment. The whole of the process needs a firm look. I also think that we need to look very carefully at how we manage medicals and whether in all cases the criteria for joining remain valid, and we definitely need to look at the referrals and deferrals process.

Q109 **Mrs Moon:** Okay. Where do you stand on the Brexit debate? All of the indications are that in the short term, and possibly into the longer term, there will be an impact on the UK's GDP, so what about that 2% ring-fenced defence budget? If the 2% goes down, in terms of what 2% of our GDP means, do you feel confident that the need to meet the cost of some of the major platforms that are coming downstream will not leave Reserves and Reserves' training struggling for funding?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I think defence has a long history of taking short-term expedience in activity to be able to protect programmes into the long term. It is a fact of life, largely because of the flexibility in the cash flow that you can play with in activity, rather than in big programmes.

In 2009, the Army felt itself forced to make a cut on man training days in the latter half of the year. Had that gone through, it would have been catastrophic. We have warned constantly about the need to protect activity, as it is the one thing that motivates Reservists. They will tolerate poor accommodation and reasonably poor terms and conditions of service—although I would add that they have never been better than at the moment—but if we start reducing the amount of activity that they can take part in, they will tend to walk, particularly if it is over a protracted period. Our counsel would be, "Look very carefully at keeping activity levels up." In the overall scheme of things, they are relatively small beer in cost, particularly for a Reservist in weekend or two-week activity, but if we do cut them, I fear it will have a detrimental effect on the retention.

Q110 **Mrs Moon:** You have talked about the problems that are still there in terms of the medical screening in the recruitment process. One of the areas that is constantly flagged up to me—I declare an interest as the



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chair of the all-party group for reserves and cadet forces—is the computer system not being fit for purpose and being a nightmare to negotiate. Has any work been done to tackle the problems with both the medicals and the computer system, which is the main way in which people are communicating their commitment and claiming the allowances?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: There are two completely different elements there, I have to say. On the medicals, all three of the services have been very inventive about how they put their arms around their recruit candidates and hold them in while the medical process is going through. Essentially, what they have been doing is pushing medical risk slightly to the right of attestation in the belief that this is a process problem, not a physical health problem that they are dealing with. That has paid dividends, I think. We are holding quite a lot of untrained Reservists who are awaiting medical clearance to begin training. That, I think, is a sensible expedient for the moment, but, as I said earlier on, there has got to be some improvement in the speed with which we can resolve deferrals.

In terms of the computer system, I think that is a very sorry story which has been going on for far too long now and it should have been fixed. I believe there is still work to do it, but it just seems that there is a constant repeat delay coming into the system. It is one of the reasons why we believe that the Army should look carefully at its contract again.

Q111 **Mrs Moon:** When Army 2020 was announced, I think £1.8 billion of funding was pledged for Reserves over 10 years. Is that sufficient? Is it still ring-fenced? Is it being well used?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I believe it was sufficient at the time, although I would say that all three services had different approaches to how they used it. In the case of the Army, I think the one area that it probably did not fully address was estate and the need to recondition the estate and optimise it for the Reserve of the future.

All three of the services have put a considerable amount of core funding into the Reserve budget as well, so there is much more than £1.8 billion being used as far as we can see. And, on all the evidence that I have seen both in my day-job capacity, attending MoD meetings, and in terms of the scrutiny there is a really robust system in place to track how the £1.8 billion is spent. I think the issue that will appear is that, as you come to the end of the 2020 programme and conflate that with a range of other savings and efficiencies measures that will inevitably be applied, it will be quite important for the Ministry to look carefully at being able to show that the £1.8 billion was used in the way it was envisaged and given to them.

Q112 **Mrs Moon:** In relation to the success or not of recruiting women, do you think that women being able to take on possible combat roles would be an incentive for them to join the Reserves?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I am not sure I am completely competent to answer it, and I do not have a particularly well-flagged personal history of this. I was initially, as a young officer, very sceptical of the role of women



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in the Armed Forces and I have had a Damascene conversion over the course of the last 20 years of my life, or even longer. I was one of the people who first employed female helicopter pilots, which caused me to change my mind.

Being more serious about your question, I suspect that the take-up for combat roles by women in the Reserve will be very small. I suspect there will be a range of factors—I do not think that impediments will be put in front of them, but I think the need to get to the right level of fitness and commitment to take on a combat role will be really challenging for a female Reservist to do. That is not to say that I think they shouldn't—if they are fit for it, they should be given a chance to do it in the same way as a Regular is—but I think combining a private life, a home life and all the challenges of maintaining that level of fitness will challenge anyone, and it will probably challenge a mother, let's say, more than it would a father.

Q113 **Mrs Moon:** And the wider question of whether or not you have been successful at recruiting women into the Reserves.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: All the evidence I see at the moment is there is a very high take-up from women coming into the Reserves. Some roles probably attract more than others, but there have been some where I have been astonished that at last we are seeing, for example, young officers come into transport regiments and really excel in what they do. There are others where you might have thought it would be easier for them, but a lot of them seem to prefer to get into a hard-edged role. That speaks volumes for how well some of the recruiting is going. That is largely, I think, down to the perseverance of the units to make it happen.

Q114 **Richard Benyon:** Many of us as constituency MPs would welcome what you say about Capita: many of us or our constituents have had bad experiences with it.

Can you give an indication of whether there has been a shortening of the flash to bang time—the time from somebody stating an interest in joining the Reserve to actually starting training—and whether, in that time, more can be done to keep them interested? I am talking about familiarisation, briefings and even attending exercises—that sort of thing—to try to make sure that interest is being maintained and that they are being carried on a journey faster into service.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Could I begin by making it clear that I am not pointing a finger exclusively at Capita? I think the whole of the partnership is something that needs to be looked at, but clearly Capita is part of that.

In terms of time of flight, as the Army call it, there is clear evidence that that is shortening. Two years ago it was excessively high, and we are convinced that many really good applicants walked away from the process because they could not get into training in time. Two years on, we can see a lot of evidence that those people who do not stutter at all as they go through the joining process can make it to enter training inside 45 days; that probably would have been 200 days plus a while ago. That said, there are still too many who take longer than that. I am not in a position to give



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you an average time of flight, but I do see that in the better part of this, it is being speeded up really quite significantly.

One of the measures, which I have already touched on, is the ability to bring people into units, attest them, as quickly as they can. They may not be physically fit to begin every aspect of training, but the units have been really innovative in the way they have given them other activities to do and the way they have embraced them. Early joiners clubs and things like that are really good initiatives that have shown, I think, real success. What we will inevitably see, I think, because of that is a slightly higher than usual outflow post attestation, because people will still struggle with some of the hurdles that are legitimately in the way. But at least they are on the inside now and they feel that they belong to the units.

So I think all the indicators that we were looking for are positive ones.

Q115 **Bob Stewart:** Air Vice-Marshal, can we talk about the Regular Reserve? That interests me. How many people are in the Regular Reserve, in rough terms?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I'm afraid I don't have the first idea.

Q116 **Bob Stewart:** You don't have an idea.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I could take an educated guess, but I really don't—

Q117 **Bob Stewart:** Well, let's have an educated guess, shall we?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Are we talking about the Army specifically?

Q118 **Bob Stewart:** No, but let's divide it down; the Army will do for a start.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: If we think of the rank and file of the Army having a return of service of something in the order of four years or so post training, with a three-year liability to follow on, it is pretty easy to deduce that of the 82,000 standing Army, we might be able to find something in the order of 20,000 that you could legitimately call Regular Reserve.

Q119 **Bob Stewart:** And we would do the same sort of cut for the other two services?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: It would be slightly different because the return of service is slightly higher, but the maths would be essentially the same, I would say.

Q120 **Bob Stewart:** This is quite a good thing, because if we had a real emergency, we could legitimately claim that we had people that we could pull back in, because they have a Reserve liability, couldn't we?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Numerically, we can. Whether we can track them is a different issue altogether. The likes of you or I, who are in receipt of a service pension, are relatively easy to find. Those who will not receive a service pension have no real obligation to stay in touch with the service; and the service, I think, finds it difficult to track them.



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Q121 **Bob Stewart:** That is a good point, actually. It's something that perhaps we ought to look at—we need to keep track of these guys. That presumably includes officers who go after a short service career.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Yes, although I think the number of people on short-service commissions at the moment is probably significantly lower than it was 20 or 30 years ago.

Q122 **Bob Stewart:** This is another pool of manpower that is not too far off trained in addition to the Reserves.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: And some of them, although they have perishable skills, have skills that take an awful lot of time to acquire. Typically, people will talk of Apache pilots, as an example: a huge investment in training and, if we possibly could, the ability to hold on to them in Regular Reserve—

Q123 **Bob Stewart:** Don't we put a liability on to them when we train them?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: We do, but it's the ability to track them that is the issue.

Q124 **Bob Stewart:** Let's go back to Reserve numbers. It strikes me that we have got real capability in the Reserves. For example, this Committee is going big on cipher warfare. We need people who understand how to counter cipher and deal with cipher. We might actually need people who can sort out the machines that deal with picking up cipher—the electronic equipment and stuff—and those are the sort of people I could quite easily see being part of the Reserve; we need to keep an eye on them. Do you think there are any plans for that sort of person to be tracked?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I think a number of initiatives are being considered at the moment where we could do a lot more. There is always the case with Reservists that some of them will want to do something entirely different from what they do in their day jobs, but all the evidence of 77th Brigade and the joint cyber unit at the moment is that these are people who want to use the skills they've got in a military context in exactly the same way that medics have done for years. I don't think there should be any resistance to finding people who can do more on the physical technical side as well. Indeed, the services, because of their anticipated shortage of STEM qualified people—in common with the rest of the nation—will need to work with industry and with individuals who have those skills to be able to sustain their capability.

Q125 **Bob Stewart:** It is not your responsibility—in no way do I imply it is—but do you think it would be correct for this Committee to say that the Ministry of Defence should get a damn sight better at tracking people who are on the Regular Reserve or people who have skills who could possibly in some context be required back in uniform? Is it a fair comment for us to say that the MoD should get their act together on tracking people, because they don't very well at the moment?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I don't think they have for a long time. So yes, it is a reasonably fair comment to make.



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Q126 Bob Stewart: They do not follow people who are disabled in the armed forces at all. I say that as someone who is 30% disabled. Not once in the 20 years since I left the armed forces has anyone in the Ministry of Defence approached me to see how my deteriorating situation—apart from the brain, which is normal—is going. They told me when I left the armed forces that I would get worse and worse. Indeed I have and I have had it fixed on the NHS, but no one has come to me. If that is the kind of quality of tracking, I am quite sure the quality of tracking for other things—for wartime experience—is required, and I think it is fair for this Committee to make a comment that the MoD's tracking of people who could be useful in a future conflict is not good enough. Would you agree with that?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Yes, broadly.

Bob Stewart: Thank you.

Q127 Chair: Thank you, Bob. Can I run over some of the numbers? At the end of the Cold War, the Territorial Army strength was, according to the data I have, 72,500. Our target for 2020 is, as we know, 38,000, of which 30,000 should be fully trained. How are we doing in relation to achieving that target? In particular, have the measures of the 2013 White Paper been effective in attracting people to the Reserves?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I would say on both counts yes, we are doing well. The numbers were slow to ramp up in net terms. We believe that was partly caused by a higher than usual outflow not being matched by an appropriate inflow, and that was slow to pick up. In the last year I think the Army has shown that it is capable of taking in numbers of adequate size and converting them to trained strength, albeit it takes something in the order of two years to do that. I would assess that they will probably not get to 30,000 trained strength in 2018. It might take a year or so longer to get to the full trained strength. I would observe, in pure capability terms, that that's probably not that serious or significant, because they probably will in the next year. In the way that individuals are cycled through operations there wouldn't be a stutter in that at all.

In terms of the White Paper, the only outstanding thing that we can detect, either from being implemented or in the process of implementation, is the recruiting partnership and the number of delays in that. We have already spoken about the IT that supports that. Other measures have been remarkably successful.

Q128 Chair: Would you care to pick out any particular measures that you thought were the most successful?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: The range of measures that were promised to employers that I deal with as part of my day job have been pretty well delivered in full. Annual notification of activity for their Reservists is now made as a matter of routine and has been improved year on year over the past two years, in terms of not double tapping them. The engagement with employers has been quite markedly improved, almost to the point where we are occasionally overwhelming them. The MoD promised to



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create a new approach to defence relationship management. One of my branches now manages that on behalf of Defence. It is dealt with in a way that is much more commercial and is approached from the point of view of the employer rather than the point of view of the Ministry of Defence. It is done in a way that they would absolutely recognise. Those things have been, I think, properly rolled out. There are a range of others.

The provision of pensions and provision of leave are now firmly in place. There are a few others that relate to things like occupational health that are certainly being progressively achieved. It is now just a case of recruiting the professionals to fill the posts that are now being funded and established. That was always going to take time. I am perhaps obliged to say that this was always going to be a five-year programme; it has not yet run its course. In terms of the vectors pointing in the right direction—absolutely.

Q129 Chair: I just have one more point before I hand over to Douglas. Historically and traditionally, Britain tends to find itself getting involved in armed conflicts with far fewer forces available than are going to be needed to fight. Invariably we have to regenerate forces rapidly and under the pressure of events. To what extent do you think the newly emerging Reserves are constructed with a view to being able to expand our Army, in particular under circumstances of a national emergency, with the rapidity that we would need?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I think that the 30,000 plus 8,000 construct is really quite an important part of that. In the past that manning and training margin, as it is called, had never really been there; it had been virtual if it had been there at all. Provided the Army doesn't take its foot off the accelerator when it gets to 30,000 and continues recruiting the margin as well, and once we have people identified within that hopper, there is an instant surge capacity to quickly train them. Provided they are full-time available—in other words, provided they are mobilised at the same time—I believe that offers a significant buffer to be able to deal with that sort of emergency.

If we are talking about a much greater style of national emergency, akin to the start of the First World War, I think the country would struggle to surge in those sorts of numbers in any meaningful way. There is a surge capacity but I think one has to be realistic about just how much it can surge for us.

Q130 Chair: Taking up Colonel Bob's point about keeping in touch—the Regular Army is evidently not very good at keeping in touch once people leave, even if theoretically they are in the Regular Reserve, but as far as your volunteer Reserves are concerned, are you happy that you maintain your databases in such a way that as people come in and they get trained, even if they step back at some point, you still have that ability to approach them if the need arose?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I think Reserve units have always been quite good at this. There are a number of Reserve units that have had changes



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of role—that has happened a couple of times—and they have had no difficulty getting back in touch with old comrades from their Reserve and persuading them to come back in. Their network is very good. How formal it is is another issue altogether, but the new management systems that have been in place for the past 10 or 15 years are capable of helping in that regard. Whether they are structured to help in that regard, I do not know and it is beyond my competence to say.

There is one point that probably ought to be made in terms of the Regular Reserve as well. Clearly, the onus is on Defence to track them, but in times of national emergency, Regular Reserves have a habit of coming forward and volunteering again. I think you should draw some confidence from that.

Chair: Thank you for that point.

Q131 Douglas Chapman: Can I return to the issue of budget? In your 2015 annual report, you highlighted an emergent potential risk that taut budgets would jeopardise the Future Reserves programme. You have already mentioned the cycle whereby you say that less meaningful training and activity perhaps leads to poor retention and poorer recruitment. Is there sufficient funding for individual and collective Reserve training following the SDSR?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: At the moment, I would say that there is. All the units that I have visited have a very full programme of activity, and at the moment, efficiencies or savings measures do not appear to have impacted on them. I just think it is one of those things that one needs to guard against year on year on year.

Q132 Douglas Chapman: In a letter we have here from Robin Brims, he says: “Any further budgetary pressure resulting from the 2015 Comprehensive Spending Review...is likely to have a direct bearing on the Services’ ability to deliver FR20—whether as a consequence of direct cuts to the programme or indirectly through reductions in activity which exacerbate recruiting and retention risk.” If the cuts axe is not going to fall on your level of activity or training, where, in your opinion, might these cuts be made? Obviously, there might be pressure, as we can see from this.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Typically, if there is not enough money to go around, as I said earlier on, activity tends to be the short-term expedient. If that is to be protected, inevitably—I think—the pressure then falls on the equipment programme. It seems to me that it is a straightforward equation: what goes up—something else must come down.

Q133 Douglas Chapman: In terms of the equipment programme, how is that going to affect your—

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I doubt that the equipment programme will affect the current batch of serving Regulars or Reserves. They are working within an equipment regime that will probably extend, for the Army, beyond their service. I do not think the current cohort are likely to see



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new equipment coming in from the Army. They probably do not yet recognise that, but that is the way that it works in terms of timing.

Q134 Douglas Chapman: In a previous question, Madeleine Moon mentioned budget ring-fencing. For absolute clarity, are you anticipating that even though your budget is ring-fenced, due to pressures on budgets we may see a movement from Reserve funding to Regular funding over a period of time?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: If I understand the question correctly, I am not expecting that that will happen; I am just cautioning that they must take measures to ensure that it doesn't. Most of the £1.8 billion is already heavily committed. There is very little manoeuvre room left. But what has happened is that all three services have injected additional money from their core funding, and that blurs the issue to some extent. I think the reality will show that all three services have put more money in than the £1.8 billion that was allocated to make Future Reserves work, but in the final two years or so of the programme, they just need to guard against those blurs becoming too manifest.

Q135 Douglas Chapman: So watch this space, or watch that gap.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: It's one to watch.

Q136 Ruth Smeeth: Good afternoon. Has the Reserves basing plan been sensitive to local needs, and has it increased access to training and the efficiency of force generation?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: The strictly truthful answer is no, because we didn't start from a good place. What has happened is that the Army have injected what money they can over the course of the past two years in what they call a betterment programme. Very sensibly, they have targeted that against the things that most impact on retention and recruiting. A lot of it would appear to be cosmetic, front-of-house stuff, but it's because we want young men and women to feel that they are welcomed into this organisation.

What hasn't happened quite so well is the ability to optimise the estate that we have currently got to make it last for another nine years or so and to ensure it is fit for purpose for the new style of unit that we have got. I wouldn't lay this at the door of the current Administration or the current people in MoD; it's been going that way for a long time. The old TA centres were predominantly designed around a 1955 construct—that's when they had lots of vehicles and no personal kit. In 2016, it's the very reverse: soldiers have got huge amounts of personal kit—that is part of the investment that is being made in them—but the estate that they live on isn't configured to cope with that, so there is a piece of work that needs to be done there.

We also have some other things that sound trivial, but to the unit they are not. If you have just taken on a new role with new vehicles, and the turning circle for access to the Reserve centre won't allow the vehicle to



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get in, we need to do something about that. We have been slow to recognise that and to allocate the funding to make it happen.

In the longer term, the Department have told us that they have got a comprehensive footprint strategy being developed. The RFCAs have been involved in that, and the methodology for it seems very sound. The worry we have is that, between now and the strategy being developed—which is typically around the 2025 timeframe—a lot of work will be needed just to keep the current estate working. The funding for that does not look strong.

Q137 Ruth Smeeth: I have to put a matter of constituency interest on the record. My base—Cobridge in Stoke-on-Trent—is currently subject to potential closure. One of the things that has been quite stark is that the way the base review has been done thus far has been chaotic. Two years ago, the site was protected and money was pledged. No money has been delivered. It has closed; it has not closed. It is a community asset as well as a military asset, and yet I have no idea what is happening in the future. In fact, the field hospital, which is based at the 202 Field Hospital, went to visit a new site and it had already been reallocated to someone else.

I am very concerned about the way in which this is being done. Therefore, I have little faith that it is strategic or cost-driven. I would be interested in your views, because one of the estimates of the value of the land was probably five or six times over the value. Obviously, the RFCA has an impact. Some of this money would be yours ultimately. I wonder how much you are really involved in the decision-making process about the land.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: We are not intimately involved in whether or not a unit will be based there, although we advise on it. We are quite intimately involved in the disposal and acquisition process as part of the RFCA's piece. There are, of course, frequently ways in which we are required to value property, which don't reflect the real world at all. That is part of the processes that you inflict upon us. There will occasionally be large differences between market value and book value on an estate.

I think you are right to be concerned about the impact on some units—by no means all, but some—of uncertainty about what is happening. We have observed from time to time that the absence of a plan is more damaging than having to live in suboptimal accommodation. That is one of the things that we would really urge the Army to close with quickly.

In the course of this year—I am sure the CGS has briefed you on this—they have been going through what they call a 2020 refine programme. Until that is concluded, it will be very difficult to put out a plan with any confidence. Therefore, the imperative is to conclude the work quickly so that Reserve units know precisely what is happening to them. There are probably too many that are in a similar situation to the one that you described, but it is by no means widespread. Some units are perfectly



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happy with where they are, what they are doing and what they've got. It is a mixed story, I'm afraid.

Q138 Richard Benyon: Is the biggest risk to your programme the cultural dissonance between Regulars and Reserve components, as mentioned in the 2015 report? Are Reserves not given full status alongside Regulars?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I don't think it is entirely full status. We have said in every report we have written so far—so it probably will not surprise you, I suspect, that we would say it again—that the major risk to the programme is cultural change, or the lack of it. It manifests itself in lots of different ways. Regulars and Reserves, once deployed, find it very easy to work with one another. They integrate really well. All the evidence from Afghanistan suggests that they become indistinguishable within a matter of weeks of being on deployment together. When they are back in barracks, attitudes quickly fall back to old traditional norms.

In other ways, it is more worrying. The training establishments are contractually set up to deliver Regular training. They find it really difficult to break out of those contracts to deliver Reserve-friendly training. By that, I mean that catering, transport and accommodation are set up for a five-day-a-week experience. Reservists train on the other two days. They cannot get accommodation, food and transport at too many sites because the contract locks them into doing things in certain ways.

Last year, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst took that head-on and changed its contracts. The academy is now open for Reserve training all the way through the summer break. Many more training establishments need to break out of that fix to be able to do it. In other ways, you will find that what are variously called trade branch capability sponsors continue to set hurdles that are absolutely appropriate for Regulars, but just do not fit with the Reservist model. They demand too much of them and they do not need to make that demand.

Although we identified that as a risk that might have been generational, we cannot afford to leave it to be generational anymore. We would advocate inculcating change rather than just directing it. That said, the senior leadership of the Army has been absolutely up front in driving through the change. We detect no resistance at all from the senior leadership. It is what other people have called the "frozen middle" that needs to be addressed now.

Richard Benyon: That is really important for our report. Thank you.

Q139 Bob Stewart: I have just one small add-on to your opening statement. You said that Reservists and Regulars work really well on operations together. Would you agree with my add-on that they do so especially if they train together prior to deployment?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: Yes, I would. They are seamless when they start if they have trained together prior to deployment. They quickly assimilate even if they haven't, but you are right that they are better if they have worked together.

Q140 **Bob Stewart:** But you are right, too, that the seamlessness is best achieved by pre-deployment joint training.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: That has to be managed with the Reservists in mind first. In other words, when you are setting up the training exercises, think of the Reservists first. Make that the core of the programme and then consider the bigger programme that can be done for the Regulars. In having committed to do it, I really advocate that the Army do not change their plan afterwards because it disrupts.

Q141 **Bob Stewart:** I agree with you. The only other comment on that is that pre-deployment training with Regulars means time away from normal jobs, which makes it even longer and causes problems with employers.

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: One has to use it really carefully.

Bob Stewart: That's right.

Q142 **Chair:** We're moving into the last few minutes. I have two more questions. First, would you say a few words about your relationship with the Ministry of Defence, the extent to which they take you seriously—you do, after all, have a dedicated Minister and it would be interesting to know what you think of his role—and whether the Department has actioned all your observations, especially the need to develop better data on Reservists' mental health, given the problems of decompression when you are back in civilian life, rather than when you are back in your Regular unit if you are a Regular?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: I think I can say unequivocally that we are taken seriously by the three services and by the Ministry of Defence. It has been really refreshing to see how open they have been with us and how inclusive they have been in the way that we work. I wouldn't want you to think that that means we are a soft touch. We would like to get to a position where we are seen as a critical friend, and we don't pull back from making fairly strong observations at times.

I don't think we are in the business of creating solutions to the issues that we identify, which is properly their business, but we might point them in the right way. They have been very receptive to that. In fact, they have gone further. The Army, particularly, has turned to people like Lieutenant General Robin Brims and Major General Simon Lalor, who is one of our team members, and has encouraged them to be part of reviewing the solutions that they are putting in place, which is a really good indicator of how seriously we are taken and of how much our work has been used. That piece is excellent. As a cynical 30-year Regular, I have been pleasantly surprised by the way that that has been taken on.

Mental health is a separate question, and it is much more difficult for us to address. We don't have the competence to do it within the team. We are very cautious of becoming too involved with groups that would have a special interest in this, and we don't believe that there is enough evidence at the moment to say whether Reservists, as distinct from Regulars, have a particular problem with mental health. The evidence that we are seeing



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from King's College, and they appear to be the leaders in this work, suggests that there are few differences between them, but that is only on recorded instances. It is much easier for a Reservist not to expose previous deployed service than it is for a Regular, because when they are treated, they are treated within their own community. It comes back to tracking data. The ability to track data in this area seems to need more work. We have taken that back to the MoD, who have said that they are taking it seriously and are pursuing it. The next year will show whether there is substance to that.

Q143 Chair: Unless my colleagues have anything further, I have one more question. Is the Independent Reserve Commission's 2011 vision of the Reserves still relevant and viable? In particular, what do you see as the main challenges remaining in respect of the Reserves for each of the services?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: The commission's vision is still right, and it guides a lot of our reporting. I think it was a really far-sighted piece of work that can endure. Sensibly, it needs to adapt as the security environment around it changes, but it is resilient and can do that. I have touched on challenge, which is always going to be cultural. The services might, from time to time, become overly sensitive to the skills of their Reservists, which will eclipse those of a Regular.

Q144 Chair: What do you mean by "overly sensitive"?

Air Vice-Marshal Luker: If we can attract, for example, the brightest and best in academia to military intelligence Reserve units, they will undoubtedly overshadow Regular intelligence. We should not be afraid of that; we should absolutely embrace it. It will be more than just that, and it will happen in all of the specialist and niche areas. Cultural change needs to address that sort of thing, too, and that is where we think the real challenge will be. If we can get the Army Reserve up to 30,000 trained strength, it will become self-sustaining. The proposition really matters, and a Reserve unit is the thing that will sell the proposition to the new generation of recruits who are coming in. That is the first important thing to do.

In the other two services, the Air Force has pretty much achieved its targets this year—it has met its trained strength target. It has been very good to see that the Air Force hasn't taken its foot of the accelerator and is continuing to recruit. Whether it will have the resources to do it is another question, but it is actively considering the creation of additional Reserve units, which is very good to see. We have every confidence that the Maritime Reserve—the RNR and the RMR—will hit their targets in the future. There might be a question mark over whether all of them can be adequately supplied with Reserve officers to do all of this, but that will be work, I think, for us to do next year. I am not sure if I have answered the question fully enough.

Chair: I think you have covered the waterfront extremely competently. We are very grateful. You have given us a lot of information that will help



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us inform our report. Thank you very much for coming today and doing such an excellent solo effort.