

Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Wales and the Armed Forces](#), HC 2031

Tuesday 23 April 2019

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Members present: David T. C. Davies (Chair); Guto Bebb; Jonathan Edwards; Susan Elan Jones; Jack Lopresti.

Mrs Madeleine Moon, member of the Select Committee on Defence, was also present.

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Witnesses

I: Professor John Louth, Director for Defence, Industries and Society at the Royal United Services Institute, and Russ Wardle OBE DL, Former Commander, 160th (Wales) Brigade.

II: Cath Possamai Chief Executive of British Army Recruiting Group, Capita

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor John Louth and Russ Wardle.

Chair: Good afternoon. I warmly welcome Professor John Louth and Russ Wardle DL, both obviously with longstanding military careers, who have served at a high level. Thank you both very much indeed for coming.

Before we start with the questions, I wanted to say that we have a guest member of the Committee, Madeleine Moon. To officially introduce her, Ms Moon has spent 10 years on the Defence Select Committee and is also president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, so we are very grateful to have her expertise here. Around the table is also one ex-Defence Minister and somebody who has served in the Army in Iraq, or perhaps it was Afghanistan, so I am going to be deferring to others today. I should also mention that we are going to have one minute of silence, we think at about 5.15—depending on when the urgent question ends—to mark the deaths of those who died in the appalling terrorist atrocity in Sri Lanka over the weekend.

Can I turn to Guto Bebb to start the questions? Thank you again.

Q1 **Guto Bebb:** Thank you, Chair. I also thank you both for turning up today and offer our apologies for being slightly behind schedule. To set the scene, could you summarise the impacts of the SDSR in 2010 and 2015 in terms of the impact upon personnel and the size of the MOD estate?

Professor Louth: Do you want me to start in general and then perhaps Russ talk specifically?

Guto Bebb: Yes, please.

Professor Louth: The defence review in 2010 by the coalition Government derived a set of understandings that we are still feeling the effects of today. The principal one was that the future defence budget, anchored around a 10-year equipment plan, was woefully short of finance, to the tune of £51 billion spread unevenly over 10 years. That was rather lumpy, so one year it could be £4 billion and the next year it could be £6 billion or £7 billion; that is 10%, 15%, 18% of the annual defence budget. There was a strong sense, and a sense across most parties as well, that something needed to be done. What needed to be done between then and now was a whole series of rationalisations, to use a polite word, or taking out vast chunks of capability, to use a less polite term. We are just today getting a grip on the effects of the review in 2010, SDSR 2015, and the reviews in 2013 and 2014 around the defence footprint and basings. It has effectively hollowed out the defence footprint in Wales.

Russ Wardle: Thank you. I am probably going to be a little bit Army-centric in some of this; it is by some degree the most significant element of the forces within Wales, so I think that is probably appropriate to some degree. It is probably appropriate to look at the strategic bit first, rather



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than pick little areas to talk about the impact in specific areas. The various defence initiatives that Professor Louth has mentioned now have culminated in the Army 2020 plans and the things they want to do with that, and a number of basing realignments and closures have been announced as part of that. I know that you are focused on a number of those. A number of the other smaller ones that are significant have not perhaps attracted the attention as much as they could or should.

There, I have set out the strategic level. Just below that is the fact that the announcements that have been made are that Brawdy should close in 2024, and that is 14 Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare), quite a large regiment, in west Wales. Other than a number of very small training establishments, that frankly takes out all of the Army footprint in west Wales and pretty much the armed forces footprint in west Wales.

Not focused on as much is that there has been, until the latest Army 2020 Refine announcements, a small regular Army unit in north Wales in Wrexham, which is 101 Battalion of the REME. That battalion is odd, in the nicest way, in that it is a proper hybrid unit that had mainly reserve soldiers but a regular headquarters. That headquarters has been moved to Bristol. Until now, the fact that they have had a regular commanding officer and his staff sat in Wrexham has given the commander of 160 Wales Brigade a sort of outreach, in that he has somebody in the regular Army in that area to act in his behalf and do a number of good things for him. With west Wales gone as far as the regular Army is concerned, the fact that 101 Battalion is gone means that north Wales is gone as far as the regular Army is concerned.

The other one I do not think we have focused on much at the moment, and it is for a good reason, is Beachley Barracks, Chepstow. As I am sure most of you are fully aware, that is because Beachley Barracks technically is in England, although in practical terms you cannot get at it unless you go through Chepstow itself. In practical terms its economic benefits and its influence benefits are all into that piece of south-east Wales. The announcement is that Beachley Barracks, Chepstow is closing in 2027. That effectively wipes out the regular Army footprint and the armed forces footprint in east Wales, leaving our reserve units in Newport, frankly, as about what we have there now.

We have, by these realignments, taken out quite a lot. Of course you can argue that in terms of Wrexham and west Wales, these are areas that really benefit from the economics of having largish units and numbers of people there as well. They are all to go on the current plan.

The next significant part of that is that up until now we have had 160 Wales Brigade sat in Brecon. As you are also very aware, the announcement is that Brecon Barracks is to close in 2027, and that is still the case at the moment. Not that long ago, 160 Wales Brigade had a two-star major general sitting in Wales, and when it moved across to being a one-star brigadier there was considerable consternation about the



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fact that we had been downgraded to a one-star. As I said to Professor Louth earlier, personally I benefited from that quite a lot, because I got the one-star job. It also meant I got the two-star house in Brecon, which was particularly nice. The reality is that that has been a significant factor in being able to interact with all elements of society in upper Wales and quite a significant amount of liaison and working with the Welsh Government, notwithstanding defence not being a devolved activity.

Of course many of the activities that are devolved that impact directly on soldiers and soldiers' families and the recruits—so in terms of education standards and health standards—are directly of interest to the armed forces, and that has been a responsibility for the commander of 160 Brigade. My understanding is that as part of a project that is called Broadway II, which is about command and control relationships within 1st Armoured Division or 1st UK Division, the current plan is that 160 Wales Brigade will lose its status as a brigade. Of course that is of some historical influence and it is not something that you can put a price on. They are to lose their brigade role, they are to lose responsibility for command-ready units, and they are to become what is known as a terribly named RPOC or a regional point of contact.

As a result of all these moves and changes around, my understanding—and I think my maths is about right—is that Wales, with about 5% of the population of the UK, currently has about 2% of the armed forces, and is looking to drop below 1% of the armed forces. In Northern Ireland the balance is about correct, and Scotland has something like 8% of the armed forces and 8% of the population, so you could argue that they are overprovisioned with armed forces there.

The particular problem I see with the brigade role going and being a regional point of contact is that we currently do not have any idea what support or what staff that requires. The suggested promise at the moment is that that will remain as a one-star job and a one-star appointment, a brigadier, but it is difficult to argue that he needs the sort of staff that he currently has to deliver the range of functions that he currently delivers in this new role. I would foresee him having a much, much smaller staff to do that. Regrettably, having become somewhat cynical after a very long Army career and being an observer of it since, I find it difficult to how, at the next round, after this first one-star as the regional point of contact, they will argue to continue to do that into the future. I can see that role being downgraded to a colonel, certainly in the next few years. That is a significant difference as well in terms of influence.

That links of course to the future of Brecon Barracks itself. The original plan—again, as I am sure you are aware—is that 160 Wales Brigade then, now the regional point of contact, would move to St Athan. I am assured that there is now a very strong chance that that will not happen, largely because of the issues surrounding the availability of St Athan and the problems with Welsh Government ownership of certainly the airfield site



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and large parts of East Camp. Whether that means that the barracks itself will be retained is difficult to say, but I think there is a good plan in place at the moment to move what is left of 160 Brigade, the RPOC, on to the Infantry Battle School site, so still within Brecon, still in the same area, but either into a new build or something similar on the IBS site. There is some logic to that, though from a personal Royal Welsh point of view, the historical significance is a shame, but difficult to quantify.

Q2 Chair: A question to either of you: you have made the point there about the 8% in Scotland—8% of the armed forces. Without being conspiratorial, a senior member of the armed forces told me recently that a deal at some level had been done between the MOD and the Scottish Government to ensure that they maintained their fair ration, if you like, of armed forces members. The same person told me that nobody in Wales had thought to do the same thing or had insisted on it and that is why Wales is being left behind. I cannot say who told me that, but can I ask you both if you think there is some possibility that that is correct?

Professor Louth: The broader issue, Chair, is perhaps that a whole of Government approach needs to be taken to where we locate our militaries. We do not have a written constitution, or our constitution continually evolves through a whole range of different instruments, but it is pretty clear that the nations will be important. The way we culturally think of the nations within this whole of Government approach becomes incredibly significant, and the military and the broader defence enterprise must have a role to play in that. I am a little bit nervous thinking about this in terms of deals.

Q3 Chair: Agreements or understandings, perhaps?

Professor Louth: Yes. I would much rather think of my Governments as offering visions and some kind of coherence to how these things should work. It is pretty clear that if one part of the United Kingdom is to have 8% to 12% of the revenue associated with the defence enterprise, let alone the softer power influence of those things, and other nations and regions are going to have less than 1%, that whole of Government approach and that governmental vision has perhaps gone wrong.

Russ Wardle: I would probably echo those views. Without putting too strong an emphasis on it, I think there is here an issue about Wales's place in a strong and stable union and how they are looked at from the defence point of view. It is very low, going down towards 1% of the armed forces, and of course there are dangers of further changes impacting upon that as well. Though I could not comment on the degree of truth in it, it has always been felt, certainly within the armed forces, that Scotland does get more than its fair share, quite possibly because a number of Scottish MPs seem to make a lot of noise about it and they do seem to do quite well out of it.

I personally have an issue: while accepting that there will be a number of these regional points of contact across the UK, it is a fact that the Army is



becoming more and more centralised in the south of England in a very small number of places. I personally have an objection to the Welsh one being called a regional point of contact as opposed to anything that reflects Wales's position as an independent country—well, not independent, but you know exactly what I mean: a country within the Union. Of course we also have the other problem of the three Welsh combat units, where they are and the possible threats to them for the future. Would it be an appropriate time to say a couple of words about those?

Q4 Guto Bebb: That was going to be my next question, to be perfectly frank. In 2013, we had the Army basing review that concentrated the Army on certain sites, and the Welsh regiments all ended up being based in England. The question is, first of all, was there any rationale for the decision to base the Army on certain sites, and secondly—and I think I already know your answer—is it acceptable that none of the combat units are based in Wales?

Chair: If you answer that first, Professor Louth. By the way, I notice that you have to leave at 5.15.

Professor Louth: I can stretch, it is fine. I always took the view that the economic case for the clustering into the seven bases was overboard. An alternative economic case could well be that, looking at work that is well-known since 2011 to 2012, we know that there is an almost immediate 35% to 36% return on investment when you locate the defence pound locally and that is a significant factor in this decision making. Just having seven sites, seven clusters, seemed—at least to my mind—a little confused. I was also very nervous about losing old military lessons, like you never put everything on the same site anyway, because the nature of the military is perhaps that someone may attack it. Unless we think that these rules no longer apply to the 21st century, having everything collocated seems inherently foolish strategically.

There was that issue for me, and that is before you get on to the messaging around Welsh regiments located in England. We know from the data, if we change services for a moment, that after the Second World War an awful lot of young lads aged 16 and 17 from south Wales and the valleys joined the Royal Navy. There were a lot of young Welshmen who were stokers, chefs, stewards—a lot of unskilled jobs—and they became skilled up over 24 years within the Royal Navy. A lot of that is now being lost, from the data that we have, because there is no history of people being involved with militaries from dads, uncles, friends, schoolmates and so on. It has to be seen within that context as well and that is before you get on to the emotional argument of Welsh regiments not being located within their nation.

Chair: Many want to come in now. I will first of all bring in Jonathan quickly.

Q5 Jonathan Edwards: You have given some very interesting figures in



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terms of the footprint in Wales falling down to 1% with 5% of the population. Do you have any figures for the amount of Welsh people in the Army? I have heard figures that as much as 10% of the British Army is made up of Welsh.

Russ Wardle: The percentage of the armed forces?

Jonathan Edwards: Welsh soldiers, yes.

Russ Wardle: I would not have access to those figures. I think your next witness is probably the right person to answer that.

Q6 **Jonathan Edwards:** With the centres and the centralisation into the centres, do you have any idea or could you give us a ballpark number of the local procurement or economic value of those centres for those local economies?

Professor Louth: Quite a lot of work was done in 2011 and 2012 within my organisation and in Cardiff University as well, which interestingly, quite a centre of excellence on these issues. We know that about one-third—up to 36% or 37%—of the defence pound returns immediately to the Exchequer within the first year just through normal dynamics of taxation, national insurance and so on. We also know that a similar figure finds its way within that year into to the local community. Wherever that defence pound lands, one-third of that pound immediately finds its way into the pockets of folks supporting that local community.

Then there is a multiplier effect, which I do not want to get into here because that can be quite contested, but that pound moves on and on and on. What we know with militaries especially and with military families is that they commit expenditure locally in a way that is quite powerful. There is a strong sense that at least two-thirds, probably more, immediately finds an economic benefit to that defence pound.

Q7 **Jack Lopresti:** You have spoken about the financial benefits of having basing and a military presence in Wales and I think you touched upon social mobility historically as far as training people. I think the Army is the biggest provider of apprenticeships, for instance, even now. Apart from the tangible economic and training benefits, what role would you say the Army plays in the communities in Wales where it is based?

Russ Wardle: In terms of having local units and local people around?

Jack Lopresti: As far as the impact on the communities, apart from the financial impact, the life of the community, where people are looking for their futures and the impact it has.

Russ Wardle: We have an interesting conundrum where we say that the armed forces reflect the communities in which they recruit; they reflect the people they represent. Increasingly some of those things that they therefore pick up to represent are not the strong traits that perhaps we would want them to. As we know, the recruiting does get difficult—fitness levels, people we are recruiting from and things like that. But equally, on



the other hand, to some degree the armed forces still work to quite high values and standards that they wish to work to.

Having local units where people are seen out and about quite often—security situations allowing that they will be able to go out and do a bit of shopping in uniform or something similar—I think the fact that they are taking part in local things, that they are joining local sports clubs, that they are part of local community life can only benefit both elements of the local society and the armed forces from which they come. The children are in the schools and so on. I think there is a real tangible benefit from that.

Q8 Jack Lopresti: How do you think that will be affected as we reduce the estate and the footprint in Wales as far as recruitment is concerned? For people looking at it as a method of social mobility and a way of expanding their horizons, if physically they can see a reduction and a shrinkage, how will that be affected?

Russ Wardle: Clearly, again I cannot put a figure on it, but it just seems obvious that if there are no armed forces in the area it makes it that much more difficult to recruit from the area. I do not think that is something difficult for anybody to comprehend. It is a fact that regular soldiers being are seen around less and less. To some degree we have abrogated all of that work to reservists, and then you hear people suggesting that the cadets are in some way doing that for us. I have a view on that as well.

Professor Louth: We know that the importance of role models is absolutely critical in terms of next generation recruitment. Without those role models, people are learning about the opportunities with the military through other formats. If that format is tainted or flawed and if that route to career is then blocked by a poor or challenged recruitment process, then those folks will look elsewhere.

Q9 Mrs Madeleine Moon: I appreciate all the comments that have been made about the impact of a defence underspend and the opportunities for young people, but is there not also a wider risk when you concentrate all capability in the south of England that the vital nature of defence is also diminished? You can leave whole areas of the country thinking defence is not important because they do not physically see it or experience the day-to-day rub with people from the armed forces. What they do see is the cadet force, so the cadet force turns out for the local mayor. It is that much-diminished sense of Britain's defence role in the world, but also the vital nature of defence to Britain's stability and security. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Russ, I wonder if you could say a little bit. It drives me crazy, because I battled with the Ministry of Defence over the movement of particularly training capabilities to Scotland, whereas Wales offers quite a specialist training environment. Is there are risk that we are losing that?

Finally, the third point—I am trying to roll them all into one—is how much



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are we going to lose Welsh personnel from the armed forces? I know the Army is less of an issue, but certainly in the RAF and the Navy, buying and locating your family in certain places, rather than using Army accommodation or using defence estate accommodation, has become the model. If you buy a house in Wales, your chance after you have sold of buying a house in the south-east of England is not high. Are we going to make that relocation too big a leap even financially for families to relocate?

Professor Louth: Ms Moon, we have talked about this before, of course.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: It is Mrs Moon. I hate Ms, sorry.

Professor Louth: Sorry, Mrs. It might be my pronunciation.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: It is either Madeleine or Mrs. I cannot go anywhere in-between.

Professor Louth: I am with you on that one, Madeleine, or Mrs Moon.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: John, you have known me long enough to call me Madeleine.

Professor Louth: I would not dare. You are right in that defence has always been about permissions and societal permission. We are assuming that a certain amount of our GDP will be spent on defence. I agree, it could absolutely be challenged, but I think it will be more and more political. It seems reasonable to say that. For defence to enjoy society's permission, society needs to see defence in action. That does not seem too unreasonable. To have defence located in particular regional ghettos, albeit very nice south-east England ghettos, seems flawed as well. If we want to make a broader case that defence has to enjoy the confidence of its peoples, which seems democratically appropriate, they have to have access to defence and they have to see defence in action, which means seeing live soldiers and sailors, women and men, and seeing them fairly regularly.

A very interesting piece of work was done recently in Edinburgh. People in the 1950s and 1960s, when they were watching mostly cinema, but also black and white TV screens, did not need to be told how defence worked. They knew that a squadron leader was senior to a flight lieutenant and that a sergeant was senior to a lance corporal. Now if you watch any TV or films on militaries, the signalling around how military works has to be there for the audience. Our people have lost the ways of understanding defence. It is incumbent upon all of us—academics, professionals and politicians—to make sure that our people can understand defence. The local argument is one of the ways of doing that.

Russ Wardle: If I could pick up on your last question, ma'am, the housing one is very interesting. Units used to move on a regular basis. In "cost of everything, value of nothing" terms, that was regarded as very inefficient and has been stopped. The music has stopped and everybody



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is now sitting on the chair where they stopped and that is where they are going to be for the rest of time, apparently. Before, people did talk about their home ownership ambitions and things, but they tended to put those arguments and those decisions off towards the end of their careers and made better use of the Army housing stock as we moved around the world. Now, if I may use the Royal Welsh as an example, they are sat in Tidworth and will stay in Tidworth under current plans and that is it. I do not sense a great move for Royal Welsh soldiers to buy homes in the Tidworth area and in Wiltshire.

As we all know, the nature of the Welsh soldier, and more importantly, the Welsh soldier's wife in most cases—I accept that we can have female infantry soldiers now, we just do not have any yet, so for the moment it is wives and spouses—is that they do tend to like to settle near their man. What this is leading to though is that, yes, it is good that they can focus on areas where quite often the housing stock is less expensive than it would be in some of these south of England locations, but the next step in that is it is creating an Army where most of the soldiers are living in barracks Monday to Friday and heading down the M4 at weekends trying to see their wife. We are getting weekly commuting. I suspect there are a number of people in this room who do not sympathise with that a huge amount; they are doing that all the time themselves, but I would contend it is not particularly healthy. The Army in particular, but the armed forces generally, was far more of a family effort in the past than it is now.

Q10 Susan Elan Jones: I know you have touched on this in your evidence, but I am a north Wales MP and I am really concerned about what has happened in the Wrexham area. Ian Lucas, the Wrexham Member of Parliament, and I brought petitions here about what was going to happen and what ultimately did happen with REME. That is very much felt in our part of Wales. My concern is, as you say, there is not that presence there anymore. What message would you have for the Ministry of Defence about that?

Professor Louth: My view has been fairly consistent for the past few years or so in that there are benefits around clustering, but there are enormous risks around clustering as well. The greatest risk, to my mind, is that we have big swathes of our country with no skin in the defence game. I am a huge fan in having a conversation around dispersal, reinvestment and having local commitments. A broader economic review beyond where we are now would perhaps demonstrate that the defence case around capability, economics and culture would veer more towards local presence and local understanding of defence as well as super-garrisons.

We will see, going forward, the real issues around the future accommodation model and housing associated with those large clusters. If we think of Yorkshire for a moment, there is not a lot of spare housing in and around the Catterick super-garrison. An awful lot of people are going to be living in and around Humberside; that is the assumption that



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folk will be having. That is tricky. I am not comfortable with the defence assumptions that we have around the large garrisons. I think we are missing very important arguments around the significance of local connections.

Wrexham and north Wales broadly are significant in terms of the young women and men who have joined the armed forces from that area. We are now getting a sense that the Royal Navy in particular, who keep good data, are losing the sort of communities that were minded to support the Royal Navy in north Wales and south Wales.

- Q11 **Chair:** Can I press you a little further, if I may, and ask you what you think of the suggestion put to us, which I am sympathetic to, that the Queen's Dragoon Guards should be based in Wales as a Welsh regiment and perhaps also the Royal Welsh and Welsh Guards as well? If they are Welsh regiments is there a good argument for basing them in Wales?

Professor Louth: The logic of my argument is clear. I think local is critical, so local national regiments should be in their national area.

Russ Wardle: Again, in the past I would not have agreed with that for two reasons. One was that we did move at frequent intervals. In terms of fulfilling varied and exciting careers, that worked well. I would also say that a little time ago when, for instance, I was the commanding officer in the Royal Regiment of Wales, the thought of being based in Wales would have somewhat concerned me, as I would have had concerns that on a Monday morning half the boys would not be there, having had a good weekend back at home with their friends. But there seems to have been a marked change. Again, as I noted earlier, clearly the armed forces reflect the communities it recruits from. Increasingly there is a desire to be based nearer home. Part of that is this whole housing thing, but there is a desire to be based nearer to home. It would seem logical to try to get at least one of the Welsh combat units based back in Wales.

Chair: We have basically jumped around and asked many of the questions we were going to ask in no particular order. Does anyone want to come in with some more? I know you have to go fairly soon.

Professor Louth: It is fine.

- Q12 **Guto Bebb:** A quick question. Professor Louth has highlighted the economic impact of having bases in Wales. Did you welcome, for example, the work that Philip Dunne did on behalf of the MOD in terms of trying to show the economic impact of MOD? Certainly when I was a Defence Minister one of the concerns we had was that because of the fact there were fewer and fewer bases at fewer and fewer locations, we felt that there were fewer and fewer MPs taking an interest. One of the arguments that we put together was to look at the economic impact of defence spending across the United Kingdom, which was a piece of work done by Philip Dunne. Was that a step in the right direction?



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Professor Louth: I think so. I welcomed the work as well. I was involved with it a little bit, as you probably know. I thought it was an excellent piece of work, but that research and the case that it makes now needs to be followed up with sensible policies. That is a piece of the jigsaw that is missing, to my mind.

Q13 **Chair:** We have Capita coming in next to talk about recruitment. If you were sitting where I am sitting, what question would you put to them?

Russ Wardle: A question that you should ask?

Chair: Yes, basically.

Russ Wardle: I would try to make sure that I made use of the time available to us by trying to get my big issue in early. The big issue is the whole change in titling and role of 160 Brigade—not necessarily its location. I think that is of significance. The other significant issue around the Welsh combat units is when you get to the minimum mass that is sustainable and the dangers that it is putting us in. We are at the point now where the Royal Welsh are a single battalion; they are one of only two regiments in the British Army that still have single battalions in that sense, and they are interestingly the Royal Irish and the Royal Welsh. Rather than wait for it to come upon us and then start the battle, the logic for the future of a Welsh and Irish merger in Army terms is a bit too good at the moment and I would be concerned about that.

When I joined the Army in a non-Welsh unit, the Prince of Wales's Division, every English regiment had a significant number of Welsh soldiers in it. We could recruit from Wales very easily. The Duke of Edinburgh's Royal Regiment (Berkshire and Wiltshire), when we managed to get to the Army Sevens final, there was me and six Welshmen on the park. Regrettably we still lost. We are now in a position where we are struggling to maintain one battalion. Something has gone wrong here. The degree to which it is the lack of units in Wales or the lack of that education and understanding of the wider roles of defence and the degree to which it is just changes in society I do not know, but I am concerned about it.

Professor Louth: The main question perhaps to Capita is the length of time between the initial inquiry and closure. That is a big issue for me.

Jack Lopresti: You are talking generally, I guess.

Q14 **Chair:** What about the reduction in recruitment centres from 10 to four?

Professor Louth: I think it is a huge mistake.

Q15 **Chair:** A huge mistake. Do you think these mobile recruitment centres make up for it at all?

Professor Louth: There is no evidence that they have yet.



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Russ Wardle: My understanding is that the mobile recruiting offices do a reasonably good job, but what is required is a consistent effort. Just appearing in Merthyr Tydfil for a morning or a couple of days and disappearing again is not going to solve the problem. To some degree, if they can say every Monday forever the recruiting office will be there, that may go some way towards it. It is the consistent approach. Again, it does seem illogical that the recruiting offices we have kept all seem to be in areas that are relatively affluent and well-off and have never had the same sort of problems in recruiting anyway—Wrexham, Cardiff, Swansea and Aberystwyth—and none in the areas that we have always done well from, but need a bit more effort.

It is not just the loss of the recruiting offices and the introduction of mobile offices; it is the loss of the recruiting sergeants. Again, in cash terms the recruiting sergeants were pretty inefficient in that for the number of soldiers each one of them produced, if you then looked at the cost of a sergeant in the British Army you could say, "This is an expensive enterprise to recruit soldiers." However, they did so much more than can be done now. The sergeant properly mentored the young man or young woman who came in through the door and said they wanted to join the British Army. Where appropriate, they visited the families and they properly tried to look after them. Long before the advent of park runs the recruiting sergeants were organising running clubs on a Saturday morning. They kept a proper arm around all the people who were trying to get into the Army, kept them connected and kept them a part of it. To a large degree we have lost that now.

Q16 **Susan Elan Jones:** Mr Wardle, in view of all your involvement with the cadet forces in Wales, could you comment on their current state? Also if you could comment on whether you feel they are getting enough flying time and how much you think the reserves, taking on board what you have already said earlier, have a role to play in general recruitment? I know it is something you touched on earlier.

Russ Wardle: I am an honorary colonel of the cadets as well as a number of other honorary appointments. I have some feel for that, mainly Army again, I am afraid, but I do have a feel for the others as well. Cadet numbers in Wales are holding up and are doing okay. The ability to gain and retain quality adults is not necessarily in the same position and that is quite hard. More than anything else, frankly, the success of a cadet detachment almost entirely depends on the ability of that adult. If they move, leave or get moved on and the wrong adult comes in, you can see a healthy cadet detachment wither and die very quickly. It is the ability to get the quality adults that is key to this.

I always think it is worth remembering that in some areas people still seem to think that the cadets are a panacea for Army recruiting problems or armed forces recruiting problems, and they most clearly are not. Of course a proportion of young people who join the armed forces cadets of any kind have an interest in an armed forces career and it is also



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appropriate that at an appropriate time in their schooling the options and the opportunities are explained to them. However, in itself it is not a recruiting tool. Of course there are no joining standards to get into the cadets and there is no medical to get into the cadets. The reality is that even if we got to a position where every single young person in the cadet forces in Wales wished to join the armed forces, only a very small proportion of them are able to do so, either because of fitness issues, education standards or similar things. They are just not going to ever get in, whether they want to or not.

The cadets are very important to us. The cadets are a fantastic asset and they are just fantastic kids, but the fact that they wear an Army uniform or an Air Force uniform or whatever should not be confused with them being armed forces. They are providing national citizen service at a good cost and really good value for money. That is what they are doing.

Chair: I am slightly conscious of time, and we have other witnesses.

Q17 Jonathan Edwards: I have a quick question about the importance of the infantry training school in Brecon. Any comment on how important it is for the Army in general and do you have any idea of its economic value for the local economy?

Russ Wardle: I am conscious, ma'am, that we did not cover all your questions about training, so I will link those two questions. IBS is key. It has gone from the little sleepy hollow that chased parachute soldiers and Special Forces soldiers up and down Pen y Fan to a very important part of the training programme. There are no plans that I am aware of for that to change in any way. If anything, it will probably grow a little bit. If 160 Brigade, in its new role, relocates on to that site, that will help cement that as well. There is no likelihood of that changing and the importance of Brecon to the Army's training system is fixed there, I think. Of course it is still the Infantry Battle School and its predominant focus has always been on the infantry. There are a lot of other parts of the Army that are now spending a lot more time learning dismounted close combat skills, so they are delivering it to wider parts of the armed forces and the Army as well now. I think that bodes well for the future of that part there.

Linked to the wider training estates and training areas issue, again I am aware of no significant plan to change any of that around. Yes, there are very large training areas in Scotland, but they tend to be the wilder areas. The fact is that at Castlemartin and places similar we still have armoured live-firing ranges that they do not have in the same way in Scotland. Also I suppose in this area the fact that most of the Army is located in the south of England is an advantage, in that it is a lot easier and simpler to get across to the Welsh training areas than it is to travel all the way up to the Scottish training areas. The value to the Army is well-recognised and I do not see that changing.

Chair: Finally and very quickly, because I think our other witness may have arrived.



Q18 Mrs Madeleine Moon: Yes. Two very quick questions: are you happy that appropriate assessments of the land and its suitability for housing have been carried out to make sure that military sites can have high-level security because of the length of time they have been utilised? Are you confident that in closing some of these sites and saying they can be allocated for housing, the appropriate assessments have been made?

Secondly, any comments on reducing our capacity to flex? Particularly we tend to think we can reduce our military footprint at the moment because we have had years of peace, but that cannot be assumed for the future. Are we retaining the capacity to flex should conflict mean that we need to increase, if not double, the size of our armed forces?

Professor Louth: The two in a way are related. I like evidence, as you know. I like data. The data just is not there that we are being rigorous enough in terms of releasing parts of the estate for whatever purpose it is going for, whether that is housing, which should be as rigorous as we could get, or whether we are going to turn it into an industrial site. I do not think we have done that with the rigour that you would perhaps wish. That may come back to bite us sometime in the future. I will be surprised if it does not.

In terms of our ability to flex or to upscale, having more and many sites and those sites being dispersed is a proven way of doing that. That is how militaries have upscaled in the past. What is fascinating me in terms of Wales at the moment is that because it is this very robust training entity in the order of battle, with the infantry school in the south and military flight training in the north, the simulation for training that we are seeing in Cardiff, Aberystwyth and Wrexham as well is not really being utilised yet. We could think through how the nature of that training estate could change and could help us to upscale or whatever we want to do. There is not enough being done with the training estate, in my mind, to think through the dynamics between virtual training and real training.

Russ Wardle: I do not have anything to add to that. Your second question though was about our ability to flex in terms of the changing nature of the threat. Do you have a feel for any of that, John?

Professor Louth: The issue is that defence at the moment seems to assume that the bad guy does not have a say. We know of course that the bad guy can have a say and he may not be the person we think he is. How we reinforce the Baltic states, how we think about having a fleet of Torpoint ferries in south-east Asia—all these things are now part of the defence debate, but we are not necessarily thinking about it in a strategic way and in a clinical way. The ability to do other things that we were not necessarily anticipating, the ability to do them well and the ability to make the best of a dispersed footprint is not part of our deep thinking at the moment and it perhaps needs to be.

Russ Wardle: Defence has recognised the need to reset and focus back on a different form of warfare. Iraq and Afghanistan have not been kind



to us overall, though they were quite good for recruiting and things similar for a long time. They have not been particularly good for capabilities. I do not think they are there yet, but they are certainly focusing back on the more traditional and back to a different kind of war-fighting mentality than they have in recent years. In some of the other new and emerging threat areas there is still some work to do and I mean in things such as cyber warfare. There is still quite a lot of work there. We are not very good at that yet.

Q19 Mrs Madeleine Moon: Finally, do you have any thoughts and concerns about the lack of understanding of the risks in the Brecon area in particular, and an understanding in particular of the weather changes that you can get there when we use it so much for training, recruitment and selection processes?

Russ Wardle: Lessons have been learned. As is the case in so many things, the rules, the procedures and the standards by which to operate are there and are well-known, but over time, when things seem quite benign and things are going well, people stop applying them properly. That is not just an issue for the armed forces. It happens in all walks of life and that is why security standards drop at buildings and all sorts of things, because people get into a routine. There have been some serious wake-up calls on the standards and the supervisory standards required and the need to put in place proper risk assessments and things. You can never say never, but I think that has been well-learned and well-recognised, ma'am, yes.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: I wish I had your confidence in that.

Chair: We will leave it on that note, if I may, as there are others here and I know you did have another appointment, Professor. May I once again thank both of you very much indeed for coming in and helping us with this evidence session today?

Examination of witness

Witness: Cath Possamai.

Chair: I welcome Cath Possamai.

Cath Possamai: Possamai. It is Italian. No one ever gets it right, don't worry.

Chair: Sorry. Thank you very much indeed for coming along to give evidence. Just to let you know, I think we will be having one minute of silence at some point during your evidence session, but it depends on what is going on in the Chamber. If I am looking away and I call us to order, that will be the reason why. Thank you very much indeed for coming along to give evidence about Capita and the recruitment process that is going on. I will start with Madeleine Moon, who is a Member of Parliament, but also a guest on this Committee, having had 10 years'



experience on defence.

Q20 Mrs Madeleine Moon: Thank you. As you know, the Defence Select Committee has carried out a number of inquiries in relation to the Capita contract and you will be aware the National Audit Office has also carried those out. Can I ask you, why has it been so difficult for Capita to meet its targets? The Ministry of Defence have 'fessed up and said some of it is their responsibility and some of it is yours. How would you break that down? Is it 60% you and 40% the MOD? Is it 50:50?

Cath Possamai: I think it is pretty much 50:50. In the Public Accounts Committee in January, at which Jon Lewis, our chief executive, appeared alongside Lieutenant General Tyrone Urch, at that point they both said, "Look, it is broadly 50:50." In terms of what has gone wrong and why we have had so many challenges, first, I am sitting here in the fortunate position of being able to say we have just had the best quarter since the contract started in terms of performance and in terms of basic training starts. We are absolutely on the right path, which is good to know. I can obviously talk in more depth about that if you want.

There are two things in terms of why it has been so difficult and partly it has been the way the contract was constructed. It was well-documented in the NAO report that it was very highly specified, with 10,000 "shalls", things we must do, which causes issues. We have also had well-documented issues with the IT provision and there were some wrong assumptions on both sides, by both the MOD and Capita, about how easy it would be to put in a new IT system. That proved to be very difficult. That did not go live until 2017, which meant a lot of the process changes and improvements we wanted to deploy we could not because we were working on old technology.

Additionally, in terms of what we and the MOD got wrong, I would say that we probably put too much faith in corporate models that were working at the time, which were very remote—a lot of telephone-based recruiting, which proved to be wrong and we had to move to correct that. We have absolutely done that now. We also probably got wrong some of the people we had in some key roles around the Army career centres around the country, making sure that we had young role model soldiers who had probably only been in the Army five or six years, rather than some reservists who had been in the Army much longer, so they were able to relate much better to the candidates. Also civilian recruiters, recruiters by trade, rather than relying on military personnel in those centres. That was something we have corrected.

There were a number of other things we could have done better. As a partnership, we have made a strong change in the last 12 months as to how we operate together and we have both recognised that it was not really a partnership for probably the first five years or so. In terms of other challenges apart from the things we did wrong, the environment has been very difficult since 2012. It is not an excuse. It is absolutely a factor that we have had very high employment for the last few years. At



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the moment, in fact, it is particularly high in Wales, as with the rest of the UK.

We now have a situation where the generation who did national service are, to use a horrible term, dying out. Only about 7% of our audience know someone who has been in the Army or who is in the Army. It is very difficult for them to relate and understand what armed services means, which has been difficult. We also have the scenario where we have a population who are less healthy, more overweight and so all of that means that effectively our target demographic or recruitable population is shrinking all the time. I could go on, but in the interests of time I will not.

Chair: There are a few things that I might come back to.

Q21 **Mrs Madeleine Moon:** Can you help us clarify a few things? It says, "The Army is forecasting expenditure will remain within the approved budget with Capita, £1.5 billion up to 2022" but the Capita contract cost has risen by 37% or £677 million. Equally, we are then told that because of the failures there has been a £26 million service credit cut to Capita or 6% of the total contract payment. How do these figures align?

Cath Possamai: Yes. Some of that I think you would probably have to talk to the Army or MOD about in terms of the expenditure from their side, because I do not have the detail on that. Again, Jon Lewis spoke at the Public Accounts Committee inquiry around this question. Capita has lost money on this contract and will continue to. Even with improved performance before the end of the contract it will still be a loss-making contract overall. There are all sorts of different accounting methodologies you can apply to come up with different answers, but the fact is we will not make money on this contract. Improving performance over the next two to three years, which we expect to deliver, will absolutely mitigate that, but we will still pay service penalties unless we hit 100% of the Army's target.

Q22 **Mrs Madeleine Moon:** I noticed a figure: in January you said you had hit a really good recruitment target of 10,000.

Cath Possamai: That is applications.

Q23 **Mrs Madeleine Moon:** What is the difference in timeframe for those applicants to come through the pipeline now to what it was, say, two years ago?

Cath Possamai: We have a term we use in the Army: time of flight. There are two measures of time of flight. One is from application through to the point at which we have a secured job offer for the candidate. That is effectively the bit we are in control of. There is also a separate measure, which is the point at which they walk through the door of the training establishment. That is typically, on average, at the moment about 100 days longer than the time it gets to job offer and that is governed by the Army's training calendar and because of the way that



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they schedule training. So in terms of application to job offer, in March 2018, about a year ago, that was 245 days. In March just gone, that was 195 days. That was the median, so a fairly significant chunk of time has been taken out. It is still not enough though. We did a fairly high-profile project that certainly referenced a number of—

Q24 Chair: To clarify that, that is from the moment somebody walks in and says, “I am interested in joining,” to the moment they start basic training, is it?

Cath Possamai: No, it is the moment they apply online to the moment we give them a firm job offer, so everything in terms of selection, medicals, physical tests and pre-employment checking is done and they have received a written offer. Then the time at which they can start basic training depends on the job they are doing. If they are infantry, for example, there are a couple of intakes a month for infantry, so they can start very quickly. If they are doing something like a port operator, there are only one or two intakes a year, so they may wait six months or longer in order to start that job, if that makes sense.

Q25 Mrs Madeleine Moon: What percentage are you losing between the application and the job offer?

Cath Possamai: Our conversion rate is about seven to one at the moment, which is 13% in percentage terms, so from 100 people who apply, 13 will start basic training. In that, it is broadly 50:50 between those who fail because of medical mainly—nearly all medical. It could be tattoos, it could be nationality or other factors, but nearly all medical, and the other half who waste out during the process. We call it wastage or drift.

Q26 Mrs Madeleine Moon: So because of the length of time they move on and get a job somewhere else?

Cath Possamai: No. As you would expect, we have done quite a lot of research into why people waste out of the process because it is really important for us, because it is the bit that we can control as opposed to the policy, which we cannot. We did a lot of qualitative research recently and only 6% said it was because the process was taking too long. The vast majority are saying their personal circumstances have changed, which could relate to time, or, “I did not think I was fit enough,” which is an interesting one, which we are doing quite a lot of work with the Army to address, because who better to get you fit than the Army, if you want to? “I did not think I was fit enough,” or, “My family did not want me to join,” so those tend to be greater factors than that the process takes too long.

Because it is such a big life decision to join the Army, people expect it to take a reasonable amount of time. What we are trying very hard to do is to make it as flexible so they can go as fast as they want. In the past it has not been possible, but recently we had someone through in 22 days to job offer. If everything is lined up, they can get their medical records



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quickly, we can get them through fast. If they want to go fast we can do fast, but for some, quite a lot, they may need to think about it, they might want to go on an insight course and understand a little bit more about what life in the Army is really like. They may need to lose half a stone, they may need to get fitter. For some it is more appropriate that they take a bit longer. What we are trying very hard to do is give that flexibility.

Q27 Mrs Madeleine Moon: If I can ask a particular Welsh question, we have a number of motivational preparation colleges in Wales, where basically youngsters will come along, will make sure they are absolutely fit, they know all there is to know about joining, particularly the Army, because that is where the majority will want to go, so they are fit, they are motivated, they know what the job is and they are ready to go. I have one of those colleges in my constituency.

Cath Possamai: They are great.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: They are brilliant and the youngsters are very dedicated, but many are dropping out because of the stovepipe. The stovepipe of getting in is so difficult. These are bright, able, capable youngsters who are snapped up by other employers.

Cath Possamai: I signed last year a memorandum of understanding with Huw Lewis, who is the MD of MPCT, and we do work very closely with them. It is an embryonic partnership in terms of how we are working, but it is already delivering positive results. That partnership is enabling us, and then if they have a candidate who is saying, "I am struggling," they can flag it to us and we make sure we fix it, which never existed in the past. It has been a real improvement in the last year.

Q28 Mrs Madeleine Moon: When was that put in place?

Cath Possamai: I signed that about last June, I think.

Q29 Chair: Just before we go to Jack, is one of those based at 104 Regiment barracks in Newport? I have been invited to go to see it.

Cath Possamai: There is a large one in Newport, certainly. It is their flagship.

Chair: That is not the one you signed with them? It is all right. I have been invited to go to see it.

Cath Possamai: I can write to you and clarify.

Q30 Jack Lopresti: As a point of information, my son is now in the military, a regular fulltime. He went to a military preparation college and had a great couple of years. It had only been a year since he broke his wrist playing rugby, so he did two years and had a fantastic time and I would go and visit him from time to time in Bristol. You spoke about the timings and the structure and procedure of getting people through the recruitment process. I was going to come in a bit later about reserves, but are you



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lumping the reserve and regular applications together or are there different figures and statistics for reserve applications?

Cath Possamai: There are different figures and statistics for reserve applications.

Q31 **Jack Lopresti:** Can you give us an example of those? More important, are they different?

Cath Possamai: There is a slightly different process for reserves and regulars. They both use the same technology and they are both managed on the same system, as you are probably aware, but the reserve units themselves have quite a large role to play in the recruitment process. The way it works is that a candidate will apply, will go through an online medical questionnaire, will then be sponsored to a reserve unit, so we will encourage the reserve unit to get in touch and the candidate to go visit the unit. In the meantime we will be busy getting their medical documents back and then booking them through to an assessment centre.

Chair: May I just close the Committee formally for a moment and we will observe a moment of silence for those who died in that terrorist atrocity? Thank you.

One minute's silence was observed.

Chair: We are ready to resume.

Jack Lopresti: Yes, you were talking about online applications. Thank you, Chair.

Cath Possamai: Yes, they are encouraged to go and visit the reserve unit of their choice and they are booked into an assessment centre. They go through exactly the same assessment centre as a regular soldier would, a lot of the time together. Then after that, they are enlisted at that point and then they are encouraged to then start training. The reserve training is obviously different to the regular training.

In terms of reserve recruitment, for reserve and regular soldiers Wales in fact over-indexes compared with population percentage. Wales is about 4.7% of the UK population, 6.4% of our reserve soldiers come from Wales and 6.3% of our regular soldiers come from Wales, so Wales is a relatively good recruiting ground for us.

Q32 **Jack Lopresti:** What is the timing between application online or the average time of joining up with a unit?

Cath Possamai: To a unit? For a first visit or for starting training?

Jack Lopresti: No, to start.

Cath Possamai: Starting training, it gets north of 200 days. It is longer than it should be.



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Q33 **Jack Lopresti:** The reason I am asking is that it is obviously not their main career. They have other options, so I think it is more important to grab them and get them on their training.

Cath Possamai: It is. We have had a project around the time of flight for regulars in the last six months, a pilot we have run, and alongside that we have had a similar project for reserves to say, "How could we slash that time of flight?" and there are a number of things we are trialling. Partly it is taking some of that control back away from the reserve units, because some of them are very good and very fast and very responsible around what they do, but others are less agile and committed. We find that can elongate the process quite a lot, so there are a number of experiments going on at the moment, but we will only implement something once we are sure it is going to have a benefit and the reserve units are comfortable and happy as well. There is a lot we could do better.

Q34 **Chair:** A couple of questions, if I may. You talked earlier on about people being less healthy. Do you mean physical health or physical fitness? I would have hoped that people overall are healthier than they were 20 or 30 years ago, so perhaps not quite as physically fit?

Cath Possamai: I think it is more around physical fitness and also weight. The BMI of the general population is rising; again, I think it has been said in the past by CDS that nearly half of our target audience exceed the Army's target body mass index range, so that is quite a significant challenge.

Q35 **Chair:** Do you think that the MOD were in any way quite happy to see you perhaps not bringing in as many recruits as your contract suggested, because they had less money to pay in terms of salaries?

Cath Possamai: I know that has been suggested elsewhere, but I could not comment. I think it is unlikely.

Chair: You have answered my other question. I think you may have dealt with Jack's, so our questions are going out of order a little bit. Susan.

Q36 **Susan Elan Jones:** Can I ask about the Welsh language scheme? Obviously the MOD has a Welsh language scheme that states its principles regarding the Welsh language. Can you tell me what work Capita is doing to encourage and assist applicants who speak Welsh?

Cath Possamai: Indeed. I brought some props along, just to prove that we do have Welsh language recruiting brochures. I picked them up in Swansea last week. We do have some of our recruiting brochures in Welsh. Partly prompted by this Committee, because it made us realise that we have probably not done enough around the Welsh language, we are currently translating another five or six of our key brochures into Welsh. They will all be available digitally within the next three weeks and then in printed format by the end of June.



I would add that we have never—and I did question the team quite extensively on this one—had a candidate struggle, request Welsh language support or have any issues at all in any of the career centres throughout the process. However, I do recognise that a Welsh language speaker may be put off by the fact that they cannot see Welsh language literature and that may inhibit them from applying in the first place. We are doing more to try to address that. I think this Committee in itself has done some good work in terms of bringing that problem through to the fore. We are absolutely trying to bring that out.

We do have a female soldier in Wales in our team who speaks Welsh and one of the civilian recruiters is learning Welsh, so if someone needs Welsh language support we can give it. We also have several Welsh speakers, ironically in Upavon in Wiltshire, where our National Recruiting Centre is, so if anyone does walk in and say, “I need some language support,” we can give it.

- Q37 **Susan Elan Jones:** Maybe I was not quite clear enough in my question. I do not doubt that every Welsh speaker who comes to you of that generation or whatever will be speaking in perfect, flawless English and could probably quote Shakespeare, Milton, whatever to you. That is not what I am saying. What I am asking you about is the rights of Welsh speakers and Welsh learners to use the Welsh language.

I would like to ask as well how many Welsh speakers do you employ and in what roles? I know you have touched on it, but I would be interested to see what proportion of staff that is.

Cath Possamai: Let me write to you with the specific details because I know I have a handful in Upavon. I know I have a female soldier in Wales and I know I have one of my civilian recruiters in Wales.

- Q38 **Susan Elan Jones:** Okay, but if we can get the statistics. Yes, the leaflets are perfectly fine as leaflets, but this is pretty much what every organisation now in Wales does—or certainly most of them do—and certainly where there is any public sector involvement, then that is what they are legally required to do. It is no more, in a sense, than what would be your requirement. Not casting aspersions on your leaflet whatsoever, but we do need those facts.

Cath Possamai: Of course.

- Q39 **Guto Bebb:** Can I follow up with some questions that are pretty irrelevant, but I am interested? You mentioned tattoos as a problem.

Cath Possamai: Yes.

Guto Bebb: What exactly is the issue with tattoos, out of interest?

Cath Possamai: I think tattoos are more prevalent in society these days—

Guto Bebb: Yes, absolutely.



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Cath Possamai: —than they probably were 30 or 40 years ago and therefore more of our target audience have tattoos and that can preclude them from serving. The Army—

Guto Bebb: This is what I was asking. What is the rationale?

Cath Possamai: The policy—and the Army relaxed this about three or four years ago—used to be that if you had anything that was visible outside a long-sleeved, round-neck t-shirt you could not join. The relaxation about three or four years ago was that you could have some on the back of your hand, that is okay, providing it cannot be viewed when you salute, so nothing on your palm, and nothing that can be viewed in a passport photo. If you are female with a load of stars down the back of your neck, for example, that would have precluded you four years ago. Now you can join with something on your neck as long as it is not offensive.

Q40 **Guto Bebb:** A second question, which is again slightly off topic, you mentioned that only 13 out of every 100 end up being recruited. You also mentioned that it could be a delay in terms of getting their medical records. Who gets hold of the medical records? Is it Capita who makes the request or is it the individual person who has to make the request?

Cath Possamai: When we get the primary healthcare record from the NHS, we get the candidate to sign a form and we then send that to the doctor. We also encourage the candidate, if they want to go fast, to pop down to their GP and give them a nudge.

Q41 **Guto Bebb:** This is just my pet subject: do you pay for that service from the GP?

Cath Possamai: Yes, we do.

Q42 **Guto Bebb:** Excellent, very good. Moving on, because I was interested in that, I have been dealing with my local GP surgeries who are very unhappy with some of the new rules with the GDPR, so you certainly have a big tick from me on that.

In terms of the comments about the blame, whether this is the Army's fault or the MOD's fault or whether it is Capita's fault, General Sir Nick Carter said very clearly that the Army shares a large part of the blame. You are saying it is 50:50, so in terms of that comment, that the Army shares a large part of the blame, was he referring to anything in particular?

Cath Possamai: There are a few things. Part is the IT issue that I referred to, the over-complexity of that and the over-specification of that. The recruitment for reserves was thrown in at the last minute when RPP was let in 2012. It was not given any major consideration throughout procurement, so that was a last-minute addition.

Q43 **Guto Bebb:** This was in addition to the contract at the last minute from the MOD?



Cath Possamai: Yes. I think where the Army could have probably done better—and they would hold their hands up to this as well, because we have talked about it at length—is their willingness to listen to some suggestions around improvements, policy change, trying to be more flexible in some of the things we wanted to do to improve matters, which probably did not get above one-star level for quite a while, but now that is very different. You will probably be familiar, if you have read the NAO report, of what is called the Personnel Campaign Board, which General Urch leads alongside Erica, my boss, which is a monthly session where all of the two-stars with interest in recruiting, and that is across policy, lived experience, brand engagement, and we all sit together and look at how we have done, what our plans are, what our co-dependencies are, how we could do better, so the culture of collaboration is night and day compared with what it was 18 months ago.

Q44 **Guto Bebb:** A final question. From an Army perspective, are they still roughly at 80% of demand at the moment?

Cath Possamai: The numbers that General Urch gave at the Public Accounts Committee was a commitment that we would get to 60% of demand by the end of the current recruiting year, which ended at the end of March. I am pleased to say we did that, which is 5,830 for regular soldiers. That is the number we finished on, which was in our range. We quoted last summer 5,600 to 6,300, so we were pleased to do 5,830, given all the other well-documented challenges in the last 12 months. General Urch then committed that we would do 80% of demand in this recruiting year. To translate that, it means 7,500 in this recruiting year. I expect that we will exceed that this year, then thereafter 90% plus of demand.

Q45 **Guto Bebb:** Your target is to hit less than 100% of demand?

Cath Possamai: No, our target is not that. We strive to do 9,404, which is demand. The commitment made to the PAC was 7,500, and no less. I believe we will absolutely exceed the 7,500. We are striving to get as close as possible to the 9,400 number.

Q46 **Guto Bebb:** Who has given you those targets, the percentage of demand? Who has decided upon that?

Cath Possamai: The target is 9,404.

Q47 **Guto Bebb:** Yes, but it is very clear that we are striving to do 7,500. Is that Capita or is that the Army?

Cath Possamai: No, we are not striving to do 7,500. General Urch's commitment was we will do no less than 80% of demand next year.

Guto Bebb: Yes, so the question I am asking, is that the Army's decision, to do 80% of minimum or is that Capita's decision?

Cath Possamai: That is what General Urch said at the Public Accounts Committee, but the demand, the target, is 9,404.



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Q48 **Guto Bebb:** Yes, so what I am getting at is that the Army's evidence to the Public Accounts Committee was that they were promising to do less than 100%, less than what they have asked you to do.

Cath Possamai: I think everyone recognised that you do not turn an oil tanker around very quickly and it is going to take quite a lot of time to get from the position we are in to the point at which we can deliver 100% of demand.

Q49 **Guto Bebb:** Yes, and in the meantime the Army's numbers are still significantly below the 82,000 that they have committed to have. The question I was asking, doing back to the Chair's question, the fact that they are still quite happy to have a percentage that is less than demand, is that deliberate or not?

Cath Possamai: You would have to ask the Army, but I would not say they were happy.

Q50 **Guto Bebb:** But you would not comment on that?

Cath Possamai: I would think that we are trying very hard. If you were at the last Personnel Campaign Board, we had a large discussion about the need to get as close to the 9,400 as possible.

Q51 **Guto Bebb:** In view of all the political controversy around these figures, does it surprise you that they are still not aiming for 100%?

Cath Possamai: We are aiming for 100%. We jointly are, as a partnership.

Guto Bebb: Clearly the evidence from the Public Accounts Committee said otherwise. Okay, thank you.

Q52 **Jonathan Edwards:** Can you describe how Capita works with the Army in the recruitment offices? How do you interact?

Cath Possamai: Yes, absolutely. As I alluded to earlier, we made some changes to personnel about 18 months ago, so within the offices we have a mixture of commercial civilian recruiters, who are Capita employees, who typically come from companies like Adecco or Office Angels. We then have a number of what we call role models, so young soldiers, typically of corporal rank, for those of you who understand military ranks, who have been in the Army maybe five to six years, who go through a selection process to come into the recruiting operation.

The way we work with them is that when candidates come in, the Army personnel, the soldiers, will do what we call an Army brief, so that is typically a 30 to 40-minute presentation supported by a video, which is the same for all the offices, to ensure consistency, which talks about the different career streams you can do in the Army, so combat, intelligence, medical and so on. We encourage the soldiers to talk very personally about their experiences, so their adventure training, where they might have deployed, what training was like for them, what trade training was



like, to personalise it. We have some fantastic young corporals around our offices at the moment doing that.

Typically a candidate will go from having the Army brief, which we do in a group, because we like to get them to know each other as candidates, because quite often they will go through a process and assessment centre together. They will then have an individual career discussion, so that is a one-on-one session with a civilian recruiter and that is much more focused on what are their interests, what they want to do in life, what qualifications they have. That gets into more detail around trying to sell the opportunity to the candidate.

Q53 Jonathan Edwards: My understanding of international law is that in terms of armed forces recruitment, risks and opportunities have to be explained to all applicants and candidates. To what degree do you make sure there is balanced information for those who are applying?

Cath Possamai: Come and sit in one of the Army briefs—if you ever wanted to do that, you would be very welcome—and you will see the kind of content that we talk about. We do make clear that as well as opportunity that it is a very large decision to join the Army and they are making a decision that they could be involved in either taking life or losing life.

Q54 Jonathan Edwards: A number of offices have been closed or reduced from 10 to four, I understand, and there has been increasing use of mobile offices. To what degree are mobile offices performing compared to fixed sites?

Cath Possamai: We do not use mobile offices in Wales. We have four fixed sites that I am sure you know are Bangor, Wrexham, Swansea and Cardiff. We also use a variety of other methods to make sure we are getting as wide a footprint as possible, so we have a pop-up in Rhyl one day a week. We also are about to start a pop-up in Carmarthen one day a week as well. We quite often use the barracks in Newport to support that. We also have a very close partnership with Careers Wales and the jobcentres, so we also use their locations and their venues if there are particular candidates who find it difficult to travel to one of the main centres.

Q55 Jonathan Edwards: How does the online recruitment targeting work? Do you target specific age groups and specific geographical areas?

Cath Possamai: In terms of attraction marketing?

Q56 Jonathan Edwards: How does the strategy work? Do you sustain local targeting of individuals either by Facebook or other social media platforms?

Cath Possamai: We use a wide variety of attraction channels. I have a great visual that I can send you if you are interested, showing since 2012 how we have broadened that attraction channel, so it was pretty much



TV, cinema and radio back in 2012. We now use a vast range, as you would expect, so TV does still play an important part, as I am sure you may have seen the advertisements recently. We also use radio. We also still use cinema, but then we do an awful lot online, as you would expect. We have partnerships with companies like UNILAD and LADbible, who are content providers to the kind of audience that we are interested in attracting.

We do a lot of very targeted video on demand, so kids these days and the audience we are looking at, 16 to 24, tend to watch the internet rather than watching TV, so the sort of videos you see before you get content on YouTube, we do a lot of that as well. We are using some very sophisticated techniques through Google called ADCloud and Google Campaign, which helps us target and retarget. If someone searches for Army jobs, for example, they are more likely to see more content again and again. Once they have applied we make sure that we then reinforce that message with more content as they are going through the application process.

Q57 Jonathan Edwards: Do you accept any criticism that you are targeting specific socioeconomic groups, deprived geographical areas?

Cath Possamai: I do not accept criticism on it. We do target those areas because they are very traditional recruiting grounds for the Army and the Army gives both populations incredible social opportunities for better careers and social mobility.

Chair: One final question from Madeleine Moon.

Q58 Mrs Madeleine Moon: One of the comments that we heard earlier was around the understanding of youngsters about military life and perhaps a gap having been created between those whose grandparents perhaps went through military service, that there is a gap of understanding. How much of a gap are you finding of awareness of the skills, the qualifications, the roles and functioning of the armed forces? Is that something that you are picking up?

Cath Possamai: Yes, I think it is becoming worse. As the Army becomes smaller and the national service generation is declining, that awareness or the likelihood of knowing someone in the Army, so having that first-hand experience, is declining. We find typically of people who apply—and this is in the regular soldier space—15% to 20% know what job they want to do in the Army, so typically either they will know someone or they will have done a lot of research and understand what sort of jobs are available. The other 80% or so, we need to explain that there are 76 different trades in the Army that they could do, so there is still a big awareness challenge out there of the variety, the scope, and the fact that the Army is the largest apprenticeship provider in the country, for example.

We are working very hard to try to bridge that gap with the Army, because it is not just a recruiting challenge. It is also a wider societal



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engagement and awareness challenge, which the Army is very much alive to. It cannot rely on the recruiting operation to do all of that. We need to be looking wider.

Q59 **Mrs Madeleine Moon:** Your role model corporals, are they regulars or reserves?

Cath Possamai: Regulars.

Q60 **Mrs Madeleine Moon:** Finally, you said you were doing pop-ups in Rhyl, Newport, jobcentres and so on. Could you give us the figures of how many people you are getting coming through the doors, how many people are saying, "I would like to take this further," and if you have any outcome figures?

Cath Possamai: I would have to take some of that away. I can give you figures for the walk-ins for our current fixed locations.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: We would like those as well, please.

Cath Possamai: Yes. Bangor, Wrexham, Swansea and Cardiff, it is between five and eight a week. That is it. This is my point, there are very few people who stroll past a careers centre and think, "Oh, I will pop in. Maybe I will do that as a job." That generation are much more used to searching online, applying online, looking on the internet for role opportunities. It is about making sure those centres are available for them to come in and meet serving soldiers and meet role models and talk to our recruiters, but they are not there and they do not really serve an attraction purpose in this day and age. There are very low walk-in numbers.

Q61 **Mrs Madeleine Moon:** Can we have the pop-ups for comparison?

Cath Possamai: Yes, sure.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Ms Possamai. It was a good session and you two I imagine are connected in some way with this as well, but anyway, thank you all very much.