

Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Defence in Scotland, HC 611](#)

Monday 7 March 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 7 March 2022.

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Mhairi Black; Andrew Bowie; Deidre Brock; Alberto Costa; Sally-Ann Hart; John Lamont; Douglas Ross.

Questions 135-212

Witnesses

[I](#): Councillor Rod Cavanagh, Armed Forces and Veterans Community Champion, Fife Council; Provost Peter Smail, Midlothian Councillor and Her Majesty's Forces Champion, Midlothian Council; Fergus Murray, Head of Economic Development, Argyll and Bute Council; and Rhona Gunn, Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance), Moray Council.

[II](#): Keith Brown MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans, Scottish Government; Kevin McGowan, Head of Defence Policy Unit, Scottish Government; and Rory McGregor, Manufacturing Policy Adviser, Scottish Government.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Rod Cavanagh, Provost Peter Smaill, Fergus Murray and Rhona Gunn.

Q135 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee for our ongoing inquiry on defence in Scotland. Today we are really grateful to have here representatives from Scottish local authorities in areas with large Ministry of Defence installations that have a visible presence. We will then be joined by the Scottish Government Minister. I will first ask our first panel to introduce themselves and tell us who they represent.

Councillor Cavanagh: Good afternoon, everybody. I am Councillor Rod Kavanagh. I represent ward 12 of Fife, Kirkcaldy East. Fife is home to the Leuchars Army base and to the Royal Navy in Rosyth. I am Fife Council's armed forces and veterans champion.

Rhona Gunn: My name is Rhona Gunn. I am the depute chief executive of Moray Council. Moray is home to two armed forces bases: Kinloss barracks, which is home to 39 Engineer Regiment, and RAF Kinloss.

Fergus Murray: My name is Fergus Murray. I am head of development and economic growth at Argyll and Bute Council. We have Her Majesty's naval base Clyde in Argyll and Bute, and we have the experience of two bases closures at Dunoon and Machrihanish.

Q136 **Chair:** Excellent—thank you. We now have Provost Smaill with us. Can you hear us, Provost Smaill, and can we hear you? No. We are still encountering a few difficulties that we will try to resolve. We will get back to you when we can.

Thank you ever so much for joining us for today's session. We have a few questions for you about local authorities' relationships with the MOD, and about the consequences and implications of issues around some of the MOD sites in your local authorities. Obviously, there has been a series of reviews, a changing of plans, and all sorts of strategic programmes when it comes to military installations in your local authorities. What are the main ways in which changes in UK defence policy are affecting your councils? We will start with you, Ms Gunn.

Rhona Gunn: Thank you, Chair. I think the main way in which policy is affecting Moray Council is in economic and social terms. In social terms, both bases are fully integrated into our local communities, and have been for a very long time. I think that is partly why, when there is a suggestion that there may be changes in the bases, it is a matter of considerable concern for our local communities.

Here, across the piece, we last did an economic impact assessment of what the two bases brought to the Moray area in 2016. At that point, the economic impact was in the order of about £100 million for Moray. I think



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that impact tells us very clearly why Moray communities and both bases' personnel work closely together, providing mutual support.

Socially, there is a high degree of integration, and Moray enjoys a higher degree of retention of service leavers than most other areas across Scotland. We are fully involved in activities in the bases. The bases participate fully in activities across our communities and support us with charity and volunteering work. A recent example would be Storm Arwen, when local communities suffered power outages; they visited local bases for support, and that was very much welcomed. Equally, our personnel supported the bases when it came to interpreting regulations and guidance around the pandemic, and deciding what was and was not acceptable. As we all know, that was changing very swiftly.

Q137 Chair: Excellent. Thank you. The same question to you, Mr Murray. In what ways do the changing priorities of the MOD affect local services? What accommodation do you have to make for the diet of changes we have had over the last 20 years?

Fergus Murray: The main thing from Argyll and Bute's perspective is the expansion of HM naval base Clyde, which is known as the maritime change programme within our area. That is quite a substantial investment of capital—I think it was estimated at over £1.3 billion over a decade, and considerably more in terms of revenue expenditure. The base is becoming the UK centre for submarine activity, and that involves quite a lot of transfer of people into our area. That is good from our perspective, because we are an area with a falling population. We are trying to ensure that as the base expands, we welcome the families into our communities, and look at things such as housing and job opportunities for spouses.

It is quite a journey that we are going through with the base. We have signed a specialist partnership with them, so that we can work together both on how the base can expand within its confines, and on reaching out to the wider community. The big challenge is having the kind of facilities in place—education, schools and healthcare—so that when we bring people in from the south of England, they are welcome and can integrate into the community. That is the main impact that we have.

Q138 Chair: Thank you. I see that Councillor Smaill has rejoined us. We will just see if we can hear him properly this time.

Provost Smaill: Thank you so much. Many apologies about that gremlin. I have borrowed a colleague's laptop, which appears to be working. I join you from Midlothian. I am Councillor Peter Smaill, the leader of the Conservative group here and provost. The main interest here is our barracks at Glencorse for the Royal Highland Fusiliers 2nd Battalion, colloquially known as 2 Scots. At the time that this investigation began, it was slated for closure in 2032, but there has now been a reprieve.

Q139 Chair: Excellent. We will come back to you a minute. We will let you get yourself settled. We were asking just now about the impact that changing MOD priorities have on local authorities and councils. We will come to you with that question, Councillor Cavanagh. Obviously, Fife has Leuchars as



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well as Rosyth. Could you tell us about the impact the ever-changing focus is having on your local authority?

Councillor Cavanagh: The main basing in Fife is at Leuchars and Caledonia, which represent a mature presence in Fife. There is planned expansion for Leuchars station over the next five years, in line with the reprovision of units from other parts of the UK including Forthside and Stirling, as well as of supply chain and vehicle support units this year. This investment in Fife is welcome, but the question of the impact on the local community is relevant. We have seen with the repurposing of Leuchars station as an Army facility that the demographics of armed forces personnel have changed; it has a younger cohort than the previous RAF base. Some 56% are under 30, compared to 30% at the time of the RAF base, and there is a greater number of single persons. This change means different pressures are emerging for the local authority in areas such as in healthcare and, to a lesser extent, education.

Provost Smaill: I touched on the significance of the 200-year-old presence of Glencorse barracks. It is predominantly a training resource for the Army, but the forces there have seen active service in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is very much part of the identity of the town of Penicuik. About 550 people are there. The town of Penicuik is fast growing; it has about 16,000 people. Midlothian is one of the fastest-growing parts of Scotland, if not the fastest growing; it will grow by 38.8% over the next 10 years. The issues for us are things like pressure on housing, particularly when the troops decide to bring the commission to an end, and our relationship with veterans and Army families.

Q140 **Andrew Bowie:** Thank you, everybody, for taking the time to join us this afternoon. Mr Murray, you talked about the £1.3 billion expansion and investment in HM naval base Clyde, the UK centre for submarine activity. How many people does the base at Faslane support in the local area?

Fergus Murray: It is estimated to be the second-largest employment site in Scotland, with 6,500 to 7,000 people employed on it across a whole range of different activities—not just MOD. There are civil servants and private companies. The intention of this maritime change is to get up to around 8,000 or so over the 10-year period. They are working their way through that period now. As each submarine comes up and relocates from the south of England, it brings with it personnel associated with the boat and extra people to support it. There is quite a substantial population. It has Europe's biggest hotel on site, which hosts about 3,500 personnel. It is quite significant. It varies a lot depending on, for example, whether the Marines are relocated somewhere else for other duties. It is a substantial number of people.

Q141 **Andrew Bowie:** How do you, as a local authority, cope with the huge, increasing demand on local services from what can be a transitory population? As Provost Smaill was saying, there are issues regarding people who may retire from the forces and stay in the local area as veterans. There is also the unique situation you have with naval families ashore, who stay behind for months on end without being able to



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communicate with their partner, who may be underwater for months at a time. How are you as a council able to cope with that huge pressure on your services?

Fergus Murray: I think you have to give credit to the MOD. They have a lot of facilities on site at the base that cater for the day-to-day needs of the local personnel. There is a retail centre, and leisure and sports facilities—a whole range of activities. What we are finding as the base expands is that the demographic is changing. In the past, it was largely males living there, but now it is a mixture. People want to get married and move off the base. That is causing pressure on the local housing market. The private rented market is under pressure from people wanting to live close to the base. That is one issue.

Another issue is that there is a little more pressure on our schools and their capacity as families move up. We are finding—this is a good thing—that people who have relocated present themselves to the schools quite quickly. That puts pressure on our senior school particularly, which has limited capacity—more so than our primary schools. The same can be said for health and other types of facilities.

Q142 **Andrew Bowie:** Are any issues caused by relocating from a different school or health system, or are you as a local authority—I will ask this of the other panellists as well—now well versed in how people can change from a health board in England to a health board in Scotland, get a new NHS number, slot into the Scottish education system and so on? You must be experienced in how that is dealt with.

Fergus Murray: Yes. In recent years, we have got much more proactive. We have, for example, welcoming documents and magazines. The MOD brings up families for a tour of the area—they can go to see the hospital and the school, what the housing is like and what the place is like. That really reassures some people. If you are moving from the south of England or elsewhere, you just don't know about Scotland. We have found it is invaluable to take people up and give them time. From the MOD's perspective, over 85% or 90% of people are really positive. It reassures them. We also have web pages on the council site that people can search, giving everyone all the basic information.

Q143 **Andrew Bowie:** Ms Gunn, you were nodding when Mr Murray spoke about the pressure on the local housing market, particularly the private rented sector. Is that an issue you have in Moray as well?

Rhona Gunn: Yes, it is. We also have significant expansion ongoing at Lossiemouth. There are already single living accommodation blocks there for 1,000 RAF personnel. A further 380 are being constructed on camp to support growth, but despite that, we are already feeling significant pressure in our private rented sector. That will only expand as further personnel come on to the base at Lossiemouth. Kinloss is also refreshing its accommodation offering.

Q144 **Andrew Bowie:** Mr Murray and Ms Gunn, you have had quite a positive experience; the increased defence presence in Moray, and in Argyll and



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Bute, has been good, especially for the local economy. But could the MOD do more to support local authorities and communities? Or are these issues the result of immediate pressures as the bases expand, and will the issues be resolved in time, as the housing market develops and catches up with demand, for example?

Rhona Gunn: We would welcome early engagement on expected transitions, particularly transitions at scale, to the area. Based on communications with personnel on both bases, I would say there is also an ask that both Governments liaise on their policy approaches. There are distinctions that staff moving from England to Scotland can find quite challenging—approaches to support and education, for example. Also, on the future accommodation model, I understand that military personnel will shortly be provided with an accommodation allowance, which will encourage them to take up accommodation in the local area outwith the bases. Given that we are already experiencing accommodation challenges, that is an area where close communication on policy would be welcome.

Q145 **Andrew Bowie:** Before I go to the other two panellists, Mr Murray, you had your hand up.

Fergus Murray: Yes. The point is that the local MOD—[Inaudible]—who work and live here are very keen to help and do things. There is frustration, in that the decision-making chain slows them up. That is the reality that we have lived with for almost 10 years. A lot of things have been tried. We have the FAM project, which gives an allowance to MOD personnel to buy property and to move off the base, or whatever. It is working well, but we cannot seem to get it embedded permanently because of other considerations or decisions elsewhere. Locally, they are super keen. I think they have a challenge in getting the decision-making further down the chain, which would allow it to be more smooth.

Q146 **Andrew Bowie:** Provost Smaill, how important do you think the Ministry of Defence grants and funding to your local community have been overall?

Provost Smaill: It is certainly a positive, but as you can see from our submission the numbers are not large. The important thing for me, in terms of the veterans centre here in Dalkeith, is the personal contact that we are able to extend to those who have served in the forces and are making that transition to civilian life. We also have access to the MOD education support fund, which has helped a lot of forces families who are coming to Scotland to find the facilities that they need to settle in here. The more pressing issues for us are the questions of housing that have just been touched on, because of the extreme pressure on social housing stock in this area, which is, as you know, just to the south of Edinburgh.

Q147 **Andrew Bowie:** Every time I pass through Midlothian, if I am driving south of Edinburgh, there seem to be more and more houses being built. Presumably that is due to local demand, but how much is that affected by the Ministry of Defence presence, people who are choosing to retire there and, as we have just spoken about, the increased tendency of the MOD to be encouraging serving personnel to move off-base and buy up stock



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locally?

Provost Smaill: Yes, as previously mentioned, the increase is from about 93,000 souls here to about 103,000 in a 10-year period, so the pressure is on the social housing stock. There are about 8,000 council houses, which is actually quite a big stock, but the turnover is very low—under 5%. The issues are how we assist the forces to have their fair share here. Under the covenant, we give them additional points so they have some degree of advantage when they are applying for homes, but with a waiting list across the county of 4,000 there is probably not much more that we can do without getting into accusations of jumping the queue.

We talk to the housing charities that relate. Veterans Housing Scotland particularly considers that nomination rights might give the retiring armed forces a better security of residential accommodation when they leave. We have also been involved with Homes for Heroes. One of the issues there was that they could provide us with some land and we could have assisted as a local authority, but whereas we receive in terms of housing subsidy £57,000 from the Scottish Government for council houses in Midlothian, the Army charities do not qualify for that, so we wonder whether there is not a better future where there are developments actually devoted to the Army, and we find some way around this in terms of attracting the subsidy and making it all viable.

Q148 **Andrew Bowie:** Thank you, Provost Smaill. The very last question is for Councillor Cavanagh, because I would hate for you to feel left out. In your evidence, Fife Council said that “addressing the needs of personnel and veterans is best delivered through these partnership arrangements at a local level”. Could you give us an example of a partnership arrangement between Fife Council and the Ministry of Defence that has worked well, and maybe one where it has worked not so well?

Councillor Cavanagh: We have talked about pressure on housing. In common with other local authorities, there is pressure on local authority housing. We also allocate extra points to applicants to give them some advantage in gaining it quicker. The collaboration that I am thinking about is mainly within the different services, like NHS Fife and Fife Council, where we created a cross-government unit in Lochore for Veterans First Point to provide psychological and wellbeing services for veterans. I am trying to think of a military collaboration. We meet under the Fife Partnership community covenant quite regularly throughout the year, where we bring together any number of voluntary and statutory agencies that can share best practice and bring people up to speed with the latest developments. I am not aware of a specific MOD local authority arrangement, however.

Q149 **Alberto Costa:** Good afternoon to the panel of witnesses that we have before us. My question relates to MOD base closures. You have touched a bit on this already, but my specific question is: how have your areas been affected by MOD base closures? In deciding to close bases, to what extent has the MOD considered the needs of your local communities? I will start with Councillor Cavanagh.



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Councillor Cavanagh: The main closure that we had to consider was HMS Caledonia. That was discussed way back in 2013, I believe—long before my appointment. In the interim, there was a fair amount of indecision as to whether or not this base would be available. As a council, we were principally interested in it as a site for a replacement school for Inverkeithing High School, which is now well past its sell-by date. We looked at that site but could never really get a definitive answer as to whether or not it would be available to us. That was further complicated by the question as to whether or not the site would undergo decontamination, which caused a fair bit of delay in the planning process. Eventually, we opted to go for an area known as the Fleet Grounds, which is a former MOD property that was sold to Fife Council in the past. That has now been identified as a site that we would choose to develop for the school. But historically, there was also the problem of decontamination at Dalgety Bay and the radiation that was buried there just after the second world war. It has taken about 10 years to finally resolve. I say, “finally resolve”, but we hope that it will be finally resolved within the next 12 to 18 months. It has been a long haul.

Q150 **Alberto Costa:** Thank you. Before I move to other panel members, perhaps I could ask you some follow-up questions, Councillor Cavanagh. How would you assess the level of communication and assistance that you have received from the UK Government, MOD and DIO regarding the closure this year of HMS Caledonia, which you referred to? How could the process have been improved? What more is still needed?

Councillor Cavanagh: I think more open and direct communication, because there is a fair amount of obfuscation at times. I think there is some difficulty, because the decisions are being made elsewhere and people are unable to always give us definitive answers. More direct communication would be helpful.

Q151 **Alberto Costa:** Direct communication. Thank you. May I turn to the other panel members in respect of how your areas have been affected by MOD base closures? I will start with Ms Gunn.

Rhona Gunn: The last base closure in Moray was in 2011, when RAF Kinloss closed. But only a year later, Kinloss barracks reopened with an engineering regiment. The numbers on that base are now broadly half the whole-force numbers that were on the base at the time it was an RAF base. In terms of economic impact assessments that were done at the time that RAF Kinloss was closed, and then again in 2016 for Kinloss barracks, the difference was approximately £40 million. That is quite a significant impact, although we have to recognise the fact that with the development ongoing at Lossiemouth, much of that impact has been mitigated. Clearly, any suggestion that bases may be closed is a matter of considerable concern to our communities. When speculation broke out in the media last year about the potential closure of Kinloss barracks, we convened my economic partnership in short order, and that was attended by both our local MSP and our local MP. I think it was considered a valuable vehicle by all who participated, including representatives from the



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local community. It is an anxious matter because of that degree of integration that we enjoy.

Alberto Costa: Thank you, Ms Gunn. Mr Murray?

Fergus Murray: The history in our area is more historical. The American base at Dunoon—the Holy Loch—was closed in '92. It was a Royal Navy base before that, dating from the wars. Essentially, that happened very quickly, and I think the main area of concern was that there was one year between the speculation and then it actually happening. That base didn't have much of a physical presence within the town, because it was largely located on the water, but the big loss was the significant employment opportunity. That base had filled an economic void in that community, which was a tourist community—the “doon the watter” kind of feature of Dunoon. That had gone, but the Americans had come in and stepped into that gap, offering a lot of employment.

The bigger impact of people and employment leaving was that there wasn't enough time to get an economic base to step into place for that. Some business parks were produced, but not enough, and the area still has quite high unemployment relative to the rest of Argyll as a result.

The only other area of physical change was that all the Navy housing was sold off to the private sector—not via the public sector, but straight to the private sector. It became unattractive for people to move, because it was not affordable and everything like that. What we are seeing now is that the population has aged and the economic base has not fully recovered yet, and that must be borne in mind.

Much more recent was Machrihanish, although it was still quite a long time ago. Again, there was an American influence there, and there was much more of a physical presence—148 hectares of airport, with all the supporting logistics. It had 2,500 personnel, which meant a huge amount of jobs linked to the town of Campbeltown. Again, the closure was very quick; one minute it was operating with 2,500 jobs, but the next minute it was mothballed, with about 10 jobs.

You can tell that had a huge impact, with no real dialogue with the community. That has changed a little bit in the last decade. The community bought the site for £1, and there was decontamination and investment in the water supply. It is now a community-owned employment site for the community. The MOD was very helpful at that stage in trying to move it on to the community. The story is a bit of a mixed bag, but it no longer has any involvement in there, of course.

Q152 **Alberto Costa:** From what you are saying, I get the impression that there were lessons about how this was done in the past, but things have improved in the last decade. Is that correct?

Fergus Murray: I think now we can say that at Faslane, or on the Clyde, we have a partnership agreement and we know exactly what the principles are. We meet regularly every quarter. We meet with the commodore of the base, with our chief executive, and we have a working group of



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officers underneath that. That was not in place with Dunoon, I think, until we were reacting to it—

Q153 Alberto Costa: So there has been change over this last decade. That is very helpful. Can I turn to Provost Smaill?

Provost Smaill: Obviously, this is thankfully rather a theoretical position for us, because Glencorse is going to continue. It would be not accurate to say that it would be an absolute financial disaster, because clearly we are very buoyant economically in Midlothian. However, it would be a change to the diversity of economic activity. The Glencorse barracks is one of the biggest employers—obviously, the local authority, like in most of Scotland, has several thousand employees—with 552. Charles Letts, the dairy manufacturer, probably has about 500. MacTaggart Scott, which is in military engineering, probably down at about 450. We are rather short of quality jobs south of the A720 bypass. It is a question of the identity of Penicuik, which is so tied up with the Army. The fate of the town would be even more to become a commuter town for Edinburgh, when we would rather continue the diversification of employment in the county.

Q154 Alberto Costa: My final question—I have taken up quite a bit of time—is this. How would you, Provost Smaill, assess the level of communication and assistance that you received from the UK Government and the MOD between 2016 and 2021, when you were expecting Glencorse barracks to close?

Provost Smaill: There was not a great deal of communication at all. Had we had more, we might have done some sort of impact assessment and taken into account multiplier effects when 552 generally quite good-quality jobs might disappear over a period after 2032. It is not just a question of the direct employment; it is very much the support that it gives to the local economy.

Q155 Alberto Costa: So how could the process be improved?

Provost Smaill: The grand questions, when we are looking at the Future Soldier programme, are not for me, but clearly the make-up of the Army, the number of boots on the ground that we have, is a question that eventually means there is going to have to be training, and that the training may have to be in different skills from the skills that we currently see. Whatever happens, as long as training is diversified away from the actual battalions that are in the field, I think there will be a need for Glencorse. We would quite like, for our long-term planning, to be able to see what the next 10 or 20 years is going to be about—for sure. Now that it has been reprieved, perhaps we are more at the 20-year end than the 10.

Q156 Mhairi Black: Thank you to our witnesses for your time and expertise. Could I address this first question to Mr Cavanagh, because I think you touched on this issue before? I am keen to hear from all of you as to how or whether your local authority has benefited from any surplus MOD accommodation or land, but I will put that to you first, Mr Cavanagh.



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Councillor Cavanagh: The short answer is, in terms of accommodation, no, we have not. There appeared to be a fair amount of surplus accommodation at Leuchars when the RAF left, at one time, but we went backwards and forwards as to whether it would be made available to the council or not, and then ultimately it was not. I believe that now, currently, there is some negotiation with St Andrews University to make that available for rented student accommodation, but that has not been finalised at this point.

As I said previously, we did acquire the Fleet Grounds, down in Rosyth. That was some time ago now.

Q157 **Mhairi Black:** Sorry to interrupt you, Mr Cavanagh, but just to clarify, did the council have to pay for the accommodation or land, or was it granted?

Councillor Cavanagh: The land down at Rosyth—the Fleet Grounds?

Mhairi Black: Yes.

Councillor Cavanagh: That was some time ago. I believe it was obtained for a nominal sum, shall we say. Some part of that ground is still retained by the MOD as sports pitches and so forth, and it is hoped that we can enter into an agreement with the MOD for shared use of that once the school is finally built.

Q158 **Mhairi Black:** Excellent—thank you. Ms Gunn, you are next on my screen, so I will go to you next.

Rhona Gunn: Both bases are in full use at the moment. I think the only thing I can say is that it is widely accepted that there is unused capacity currently at Kinloss barracks. It has been our hope and aspiration for some time that further regiments might be deployed to Kinloss, but currently there are no assets that are viewed as surplus within the—

Q159 **Mhairi Black:** Have you had any indication from the MOD that surplus assets might be available in the future, or do you not find out until the last minute?

Rhona Gunn: As both bases are in full operation and there are no plans—certainly no plans in the public domain—to change the current use of the bases, any alternative future casting for land at Kinloss, in particular, that isn't fully utilised has not been shared with us. Back in 2016, when Kinloss was under threat, we were aware that some alternative scenarios were framed following a desktop analysis of alternative uses for the land, but as I said, it is currently all available for military use.

Fergus Murray: The short answer is no. Faslane is very much a live base, of course. They do have some surplus land, but a lot of it is in Coulport, and if you do not want to share or go near that place, it is not possible, really. Other areas of land that they have disposed of have gone to the private sector or to the open market and have not been given to the local authority. There are a number of ex-Navy housing areas, for example, that they are maybe looking to dispose of on the open market. We have



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not had any transfers, but I must say that it has been limited because they retain quite a large estate outwith the wire for their own purposes.

The only other thing, to go back to Machrihanish, is that the MOD did work with a community buy-out for £1. That was a lot of kit to get for a pound. They did involve the council—we just helped. I have to say that they were generous there in that side of things.

Q160 Mhairi Black: Do you know how the MOD decides between giving something to the private sector and a deal such as the one you just described?

Fergus Murray: I think it was quite complicated. I think the chain of command goes right down to England, or to wherever they ultimately decide how they wish, or not, to dispose of assets. The frustration is that we have not really been able to access any land through our rural growth deal, for example, because we have hit the, “Well, we’re going to dispose of it,” problem. I am not saying that they have a load of land available, because it is quite limited and, to be fair to the MOD, some of the land that they got rid of recently is not what we as a council would want, but that chain of command goes right down to deepest England, and we do not really get in contact with it.

Provost Smail: Coincidentally, there is a situation that I think could be of mutual advantage to both the armed forces and the council. We are due to close Beeslack school in the Penicuik in a few years and create a much better school further north. That will release quite a lot of land. Some of it belongs to the council, but the playing fields at Beeslack belong to the Army, and they have had it on licence to us for many years. I think there will perhaps be the chance to create the sort of Army housing compound that would sit well with the barracks that are pretty much next-door. It is early days, and that situation is all in the public domain, but we have so far not engaged on it.

Q161 Mhairi Black: Finally, following on from what you said about the significant pressure placed on the private sector and the housing sector in general by people trying to move near the base, I have seen that the MOD plans to reduce the number of service family accommodation units in Scotland by more than 500 properties in the next eight to 10 years. Will that exacerbate the problem, or do you think it will have little to no impact?

Fergus Murray: It may have, but the problem is that some of those units are not popular for living in. You have to really balance that. I cannot give you an easy answer. There was accommodation in a small village in Rhu, for example, that was not appropriate for anyone to live in—it could not be heated and so on—and they have demolished it. That may have a role for some social rented housing, but they have not decided what to do with that. It is quite a mixed picture, I am afraid.

Q162 Deidre Brock: Thank you to our witnesses for coming along today. Mr Murray, you mentioned a partnership agreement that the council has with HMNB Clyde or with the MOD. Could you expose a little more what goes



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on at the regular meetings you hold? What sort of things do you discuss? How important is it to the council that you have that relationship? What difference has it made since you established it?

Fergus Murray: We signed this partnership agreement in 2017 with the MOD. I think we were probably the first council to do it. I would stand corrected by the other people on the call. From that, we have focused on economic activity from the base, and how we could maximise it from moving out from within the high security of the base to more into the community.

We have four principles: building economic success, trying to grow our population—because we have a falling population in contrast to Midlothian— and delivering the infrastructure that supports the sustainable growth of the base, and ensuring that education, skills and training maximise opportunities for everyone in our community. We have been taking forward those aims. We have had varied success, because of everything from pandemics to everything that has interrupted chains of thought, but we have seen things such as investments in community facilities. We have seen things such as the MOD working closely with the school and looking at young apprenticeships or highlighting the jobs available, including the likes of Babcock and other partners. We monitor that through quarterly strategic meetings with the commodore and the CEO of the council. As I said, we have an officer working group that meets more regularly.

The things we are focusing on at the moment are housing, skills and education, and also innovation through our rural growth deal that we are trying to take forward, so creating a kind of innovation hub outwith the base, so that the private sector can mix together and create jobs in the community.

Q163 **Deidre Brock:** Clearly, there will be quite a big expansion and relocation of personnel within the base over the next 10 years. Was there any sort of consultation with you before that decision was taken by the MOD or the UK Government, or is this presented as a *fait accompli*, and then you try to work a way around the strains on the local services, the authority, health services, education and so on?

Fergus Murray: It was presented quite a long time ago. I was invited about 12 years ago and told about it. I was the only person from the council to go and sit at a table with 35 MOD personnel around me. Essentially, it was said that it is going to happen, and I basically told them numbers. We were not really saying, "How are you going to deal with this?" They were just saying, "This is what is going to happen." It has been quite a journey to get in and say, "For this to happen more smoothly and for the base to be more sustainable, you have to work with the community." It took until 2017 until we got an agreement. The commodore of the base was very open to try to work with us to try to solve things. It was quite a difficult journey at times.

Q164 **Deidre Brock:** I notice in your submission that you talked about the fact



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that the vast majority of investment proposed for the base was inside the “wire”, I think you called it. Could you tell us a bit about that? I think you touched on this earlier—that you are trying to increase the amount of investment outside the wire, if you like, and the sort of areas you are pushing on. You mentioned a bit of investment in the community facility.

Fergus Murray: The nature of what goes on at Her Majesty’s Naval Base, Clyde, means a lot has to go in the high-security area. You have things like the new training school for submarines that they are building, but it is behind the wire, unfortunately. We thought it could be more of an open facility, but it cannot be, because of the nature of it. A lot of the investment so far has been in accommodation behind the wire—single bedsits—or improving some of the community infrastructure, such as new car parking for the increased numbers on the base. We have been pushing a little bit to get more investment. They invested £5 million in a new community sports centre, for example on the waterfront. That was through Libor funding, which was very welcome. That is going to open this year. They invested £3 million in a new community nursery school-type hub as well, which they own, but they needed to invest in it.

Q165 **Deidre Brock:** The Scottish Government were proposing, and would like the UK Government to agree that if closures happen to a base, a proper economic analysis should be done prior to that to help to inform decisions. Might the reverse be true for when they look to increase a base and there could be considerable strain on local services? Some sort of impact assessment done beforehand that the local authority could be involved in and contribute to would be a useful prospect. I see nodding there.

Fergus Murray: I do not think that the MOD have a specialism in that. They would be quite reluctant to do that. One of the basic things was to ask the MOD, “Go and speak to your personnel and find out what they actually want to do. Do they want to move to the area? Do they want a job?” And we have been struggling to get that data off them for a number of years. We get so far, and then suddenly it doesn’t quite arrive because of other pressures maybe. Yes, it would be very useful if they could commit resources to help us with that.

Chair: I am conscious of the time, and the Cabinet Secretary is coming. We can extend the session for a bit, but could answers be as brief as possible? Also, we are trying to get Sally-Ann and Douglas in, too.

Q166 **Deidre Brock:** Lastly, Ms Gunn, I noticed you nodding, so do you want to make a contribution?

Rhona Gunn: We have similar arrangements to those that Mr Murray referenced, with regular partnership meetings, but our arrangements are slightly different. As I have said on several occasions, our communities on the bases are very integrated. We do not have quite the same issues, of everything being tucked behind the wire, as encountered in Argyll and Bute. We have a close relationship with representatives from Bute bases. We meet them regularly. They have been staunch supporters in one of the projects in the Moray growth deal—the aviation and innovation campus,



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our leading partner, which is growing. They run an annual STEM event for all 10-year-olds in Moray to encourage interest in STEM. There are constraints on investment outside the wire, but they are not significant.

Deidre Brock: I had better leave it there. Thank you very much.

Q167 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Good afternoon to our panel. Looking at what the UK and Scottish Governments are doing to support the armed forces in Scotland, we know that there are large numbers of troops that move between bases in Scotland, and also to bases in Scotland from the UK. Defence policy is reserved to Westminster, but education and health, for example, are devolved to the Scottish Government. What more could be done by the UK or Scottish Governments to reduce the issues that armed forces personnel and their families face in relation to child education and access to healthcare when they move to Scotland? For example, should the Government follow England in having a service pupil premium, or should there be greater collaboration between the UK and Scottish Governments with regard to school and post-16 education? Rhona Gunn first. Quite a lot of question there.

Rhona Gunn: I think you are correct in alluding to the challenges and the fact that there is a pupil premium available in England that is not available in Scotland. That is a regular frustration for parents of children coming to Scotland. Although we can access funding based on needs, that is done on a bid basis, and then there is competition and therefore no guarantee that funding will be made available, whereas pupil premium is paid for in England. That is a challenge for us.

There is a further area where the policy in Scotland and the approach taken in England may diverge. I am led to understand that there is an aspiration for an allowance to be paid for wraparound childcare to try to support postings in Scotland, but the main priority regarding childcare in Scotland is early years childcare, and wraparound care is not equally available across all areas of Scotland. It is a challenge in Moray, where we rely on private sector provision quite heavily. Those are two areas where I think our military families find it quite difficult to make the transition from England to Scotland, because there are differences.

Sally-Ann Hart: Would any of the other panellists like to add anything?

Councillor Cavanagh: Two things spring to mind. Leuchars Primary School is roughly 50% children from serving families, and one of the key supports provided there is a nurturing teacher. The MOD currently provides funding for that, but it has to be applied for annually. Therefore, it is not guaranteed, and also does not coincide with the school year, which is a wee bit inconvenient. If that could be provided on a longer-term basis—say, five years—that would be advantageous.

On another point that is more to do with the medical side of things, a recent case highlighted a lack of awareness of the differences between how the medical services operate north and south of the border. In this particular instance, a family who had a child with a severe mental and



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physical impairment was in receipt of support from a local authority down south, but when one of them was posted up to Leuchars, there was a complete disconnect. They were left floundering up here, trying to work out how they would re-engage with the reciprocal services here. As armed forces and veterans champion, I was involved in that case, and we have more or less resolved that situation, but it is a level of awareness that the MOD need to apprise themselves of to get full understanding of the potential pitfalls.

Q168 Sally-Ann Hart: Do you think that there is additional information that the MOD should share before personnel move to Scotland for the first time, Councillor Cavanagh?

Councillor Cavanagh: Absolutely. They need to circulate information among personnel about the likely changes that they are going to encounter when they move, so that everyone is fully prepared. As with the other local authorities, we have information packs and so on that assist parents, particularly in relation to schooling, so that they know all the services that are available to them. The packs illustrate the differences between the two educational systems.

Q169 Sally-Ann Hart: Just looking at the councils themselves, what are your councils doing to welcome and integrate armed forces personnel and their families when they move to your communities? Let's go to Provost Smail first.

Provost Smail: Building on what Councillor Cavanagh said, we have an attractive pack, which includes all the contact details of GPs, dentistry, social help and the council itself, so that you do not feel immediately that you have no idea where to go when you require assistance. The issue of the NHS north and south is a much bigger issue, because there are examples where those living in the south but coming back up to Scotland temporarily have had two covid jabs and then need to drive to Berwick-upon-Tweed to have the third, because it is too bureaucratic to get registered quickly. We also have GP surgeries where the lists are closed due to demand. But these are wider issues and not just Army issues.

Q170 Sally-Ann Hart: Mr Murray, what is your council doing to welcome and integrate armed forces personnel and their families?

Fergus Murray: We have service pupil advisers provided by the temporary funding referred to earlier. That has been invaluable for helping younger children and their families integrate into their schools.

We very much focus on our web pages and on giving all the information necessary. We have a pack that we send down to the bases down south, so that they have something in their hands to see and take away. A successful thing has been inviting people up to have tours around schools and places that they want to see. That physical visualisation of what it is all about gives them a lot of reassurance.

Q171 Sally-Ann Hart: Thank you. Does anyone's council do anything differently to Mr Murray's Argyll and Bute Council that they want to



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highlight?

Rhona Gunn: I just want to highlight the fact that because we have had significant transitions up to Moray from Cambridge and Waddington, we have sent down delegations to England to meet with families and military personnel directly, to try to answer all the questions they have about the area before they come up, in addition to websites, pamphlets and so on.

We also have single points of contact for things like school placements, when we get a trickle of families into the area rather than large groups being deployed up to the area.

Q172 **Sally-Ann Hart:** One last question, if I may. Every local authority in England has signed the armed forces covenant. What steps are your local authorities taking to embrace the armed forces covenant, especially in supporting serving personnel and their families, rather than just veterans. Councillor Cavanagh, can I ask you first?

Councillor Cavanagh: We are currently the holders of the silver award under the defence employer recognition scheme. We actively support veterans, but I know you are asking about serving personnel. We have organised a breakfast club up at Leuchars that involves veterans and serving personnel. As I said, there are arrangements for schools. Could you remind me of the terms of the question again?

Sally-Ann Hart: It was about what steps your local authority has taken to embrace the armed forces covenant.

Councillor Cavanagh: As I said, we provide additional points for service leavers applying for housing with the local authority. We have the armed forces champion within NHS Fife. There is also the support of the Defence Medical Welfare Service, which fast-tracks people who require medical services. I think that is pretty much it. Service leavers who are about to leave can come on work placements with the council to see if any prospective line of work that they might engage in suits them.

Q173 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Is it right that your council has not signed the armed forces covenant?

Councillor Cavanagh: It has—it signed that back in 2016, I believe, although it might have been earlier. We are now going to submit an application for the gold award under the employer recognition scheme. Within our HR department, we have made provision for full-time reservists and for cadet force adult volunteers, to accommodate both their training needs and annual camps.

Sally-Ann Hart: I would ask the rest of our panellists, but I think I need to move on.

Chair: I think we just assume you have all signed the armed forces covenant; in fact, we know that all Scottish local authorities have indeed signed it, so thank you for that. Douglas Ross.

Q174 **Douglas Ross:** Good afternoon to our witnesses. Ms Gunn, may I start



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with you? You mentioned to my colleague Alberto Costa the actions taken by Moray Council in response to the perceived threat to the future of Kinloss barracks. That threat materialised through one anonymous comment in one newspaper article. How much damage can these loose words do to morale, both on the base and among the wider community? Indeed, what was the response from the council when that potential threat was aired and, subsequently, when the base was secured for the long term?

Rhona Gunn: I think these kinds of rumours can be very damaging for the local area. Everyone remembers the dark times when both bases were under threat. As a result, our communities are hyper-vigilant about any perceived threats to the bases moving forward.

As I have said on several occasions, we work in very close partnership with those on the bases, and personnel are integrated in our communities. Therefore, when that rumour surfaced, while we did our utmost to try to assess whether it was a credible threat or not, and we were supported by yourself in that process, in order to reassure our communities that we are doing everything that we can to proactively meet any challenge that might lie ahead we convened the Moray economic partnership.

That was the body that we have used as an economic vehicle for the whole area. It links together public sector organisations across the piece. We invited community representatives, yourself, our local MSP, representatives from HIE, et cetera, and worked collaboratively on what our approach should be. It is fair to say that it was in the early stages, because at that point it was only a rumour. None the less, everyone agreed that it was important that we acted proactively rather than sitting back to wait to see whether anything happened with that rumour because, as I have said, our communities have a long memory of the dark times, which we have come through, thankfully.

Q175 **Douglas Ross:** I will focus my opening questions to Ms Gunn, because of my local interest. Something that we have not discussed across the panel today is the wider economic benefits of military establishments in the area. I am thinking of Lossiemouth, and a local firm, Robertson, being employed to build the multi-million-pound Poseidon facility. How important to the wider economy is having a base like Lossiemouth in Moray?

Rhona Gunn: I do not think that I can understate the importance and significance of that for the Moray economy. I alluded previously to quite aged economic impact assessments that we had done for the two bases back in 2016. Even then, which was significantly before the expansion at Lossiemouth, the impact was assessed at almost £100 million.

The whole-force figure in Lossiemouth is currently in the order of 3,000, and with the arrival of a full complement of Wedgetails by 2025 that is expected to increase to 3,500. When we add on an about 900 whole-force population for Kinloss, the impact of that across the whole area is clearly



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very significant. HIE has indicated deserved work with the council and the MOD on updating our economic impact assessments.

A fact that members of the Committee might find useful: 18% of personnel in Moray working in the NHS in skilled careers are supplied from spouses and partners based at RAF Lossiemouth, so the armed forces are absolutely integral to a lot of the public services that we provide in that area.

Q176 Douglas Ross: Finally to yourself, Ms Gunn, while the future for the military in Moray is very positive, and indeed the strategic importance of Lossiemouth in particular is very significant to the defence of the United Kingdom and our partners and allies around the world, it was not as bright a picture back in 2010-11. I remember—this was raised when the Committee went to visit Kinloss and Lossiemouth last year—at the time of the Kinloss closure and the threat to Lossiemouth there was a real determination to see the economic resilience of the armed forces moved on in Moray.

Do you think that our economy has changed as much as it could have done? The bases are still there, but there was a real determination to try to diversify our economy so that we were not so reliant on the military personnel and the bases there. Would you say that that has happened, has not happened, or has not happened to as great a degree as it may have done?

Rhona Gunn: I think I would have to say that it is a work in progress. It is clearly still an aspiration that we have, and there are elements of diversification that are supported by the armed forces in Moray—for example, in aerospace, the good work that is ongoing at Orbex, and the support that will be coming for the space hub in Sutherland. But it is certainly something that we continue to develop, and clearly the pandemic has had quite an impact in the area, as it has had everywhere.

We are in the course of refreshing Moray's economic strategy, and that will be looking at how we can stimulate modern technologies in the manufacturing sector, which is a really critical sector in Moray because of whisky and our food and drink. Tourism is another area that we are working hard to develop. In many respects, the economy in Moray is robust, but we need to ensure that we diversify as far as we can, over and above the benefits that we get from the armed forces.

Q177 Douglas Ross: My final question is to our two elected representatives, perhaps starting with Provost Smaill and then Councillor Cavanagh. May I ask you to mark your own homework? I understand that you are both armed forces champions. What difference have you seen in your own area with the appointment of armed forces champions, and what more do you think you need to do for serving personnel, veterans and the families of personnel in your local authority areas?

Provost Smaill: I have championed a number of initiatives to have veterans come and work with us, because they have great motivational skills and are self-starters. That has obviously not been helped by covid,



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but what we perhaps have to work on is an inventory of the skills base, which is remarkably diverse in the armed forces nowadays, against the needs of local authorities as employers.

We guarantee that anyone applying from the forces to Midlothian will have an interview if they have the basic skills that we are looking for, but we are also encouraging all other seriously engaged employers in Midlothian to sign the covenant and to give us an undertaking that anyone coming from the armed forces will be given an interview for a job.

Q178 Douglas Ross: Councillor Cavanagh, could you point to examples of where the council's appointing an armed forces champion has made the difference, and are there areas that you are still determined to work on?

Councillor Cavanagh: We estimate that we have something like 18,000 veterans resident in Fife, along with 11,000 spouses and 5,500 children. Annually, about 90 veterans return to Fife. As a council, we have an arrangement so that veterans applying for jobs with the council will be guaranteed an interview.

We also have the civilian placements, as I explained earlier, where potential veteran employees can work alongside some of our skilled tradesmen and so on, to see how well that job suits them. I also personally negotiated with the Fife Sports and Leisure Trust a 30% discount for all veterans resident in Fife, recognising the psychological benefits of physical activity. That has been ongoing for two or three years. We also have a number of drop-in points. As I say, in conjunction with NHS Fife, we have facilitated the establishment of the Rosewell Centre in Lochore, which provides psychosocial services and a meeting point for veterans who have additional medical needs.

Chair: Thank you, Councillor Cavanagh. We have got that, and we know that you are making fantastic efforts to make sure that these facilities are made available to veterans. Douglas, do you have any more questions?

Douglas Ross: No, thank you. It is not a snub to Mr Murray, but the focus of my questions was my Moray constituency rather than yourself. Thank you to all our witnesses this afternoon.

Chair: Thank you for staying with us for those extra few minutes. It was important that we got through all those questions, and we are very grateful to you for coming along to the Committee this afternoon and helping us with this inquiry. If there is anything that you feel that you can purposefully add to our proceedings in the future, please get in touch. We will be happy to take any further representations. For now, I will suspend this meeting so that we can get the Cabinet Secretary online.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Keith Brown MSP, Kevin McGowan and Rory McGregor.

Q179 Chair: We now resume the Scottish Affairs Committee's evidence session into defence in Scotland. I am delighted to welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, whose responsibilities include veterans and all the other issues related to the armed forces in Scotland. We are grateful to you for joining us this afternoon. Could you introduce yourself and your colleagues who are with you this afternoon and give something by means of a short introductory statement?

Keith Brown: Thank you very much. I am Keith Brown, Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans. I am joined by Rory McGregor from the Scottish Government and Kevin McGowan, who is head of the Defence Policy Unit at the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee on defence in Scotland. We recognise that defence is fully reserved to the UK Government, but the decisions made by the UK Government on defence can have far-reaching implications for armed forces personnel based in Scotland and Scottish communities and industries, which we have an active role in supporting.

Defence matters are in sharp focus due to the war that Russia is imposing on Ukraine. The Scottish Government unreservedly condemn the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which is a flagrant violation of international law. We also recognise the important role of our armed forces, both at home and abroad.

The integrated review and associated strategies are also under scrutiny at this time. The UK Government announced that capability in the future will be defined more by information-centric technologies, automation and a culture of innovation and experimentation—more so than people or human resources. That would also include things like artificial intelligence.

We know there is to be a cut of 10,000 Army service personnel. We remain concerned by the UK Parliament's Public Accounts Committee's findings that the MOD "continually fails to learn from its mistakes" and is wasting taxpayers' money "running into the billions." We would strongly urge the UK Government to outline how defence capability will be achieved with cuts to personnel numbers at a time of transformation for our armed forces and against a backdrop of funding concerns from the UK Parliament on how programmes critical to UK national defence are being delivered.

Turning to defence matters in Scotland—the focus of your inquiry—the existing military and industrial footprint has significant implications, including for the economy, local communities and military families stationed here. It is disappointing to note that the increase in the MOD budget by £24 billion over the next four years was published by the UK Government without the benefit of any discussion with the Scottish Government on how these decisions might impact Scotland. There is a clear lack of engagement by the UK Government on important strategic decisions that affect Scotland. That will, I am sure, be a common theme in my answers to your questions.



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The UK Government are, for that matter, failing to maximise opportunities through robust intergovernmental dialogue. It would bring benefits to both Governments if it were to seriously have that dialogue. They can and must do better to help Scotland realise the benefits for communities, industry and our wider economy. I am happy to try and answer your questions.

Q180 Chair: I am grateful, and thank you, Cabinet Secretary. You said that defence is fully reserved to this House. Scotland has almost 20,000 armed forces personnel across 113 different establishments throughout Scotland. It is a huge footprint. This will impact on the services that Scottish Government provide as well as on economic activity in practically every corner of Scotland. Can I ask what sort of communication you have with the UK Government?

Considering their defence priorities in an ever-changing landscape, and there has been a series of reviews, which you have alluded to, could you give us a sense of the types of communication you have? Were you contacted in advance of "Future Soldier" when it was announced just a few months ago? Can you give us some indication of what calls or communications you get please?

Keith Brown: Unfortunately, it is very poor. Collaboration tends to be based on respect, a partnership and a commitment to work together. Certainly during the time that I have been doing this job in the Scottish Government—not between 2018 and 2021, but for the 10 years outwith that—it has been marked by a series of ex post facto consultation—being told what is going to happen after it has been decided.

We recognise, of course, that defence is reserved, but these decisions are better made on the basis of discussions first, such as on base closures. If we had been properly consulted on base closures, we could have added information about the impact on a community or the best way to ameliorate the effects of a base closure on communities, rather than having to consistently adopt positions, such as on protecting Kinloss given the threat it faced or, on the threats to Glencorse, when we pointed out that £60 million of investment was about to be lost by ditching a barracks that was modern and fit for purpose.

We can provide information on these things. Even some of the difficulties we have had in dispensing with Redford barracks or even on Craigiehall, we could provide information on them. Also, if we were consulted to a greater extent, you might have avoided the situation where one regiment had to send its personnel's children to three different education systems over the course of 18 months—in Germany, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Consultation needs to happen, and the quality of engagement—I am not just saying this myself; I think you will find this in the Welsh Government and the North Ireland Government as well—is not good and could be far better. If it was better, we could avoid some of the consequences of these decisions, which are often very damaging to local communities.

Q181 Chair: In the latest reviews, we are seeing reasonably good news for



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some parts of Scotland where some of the bases are located. We recently visited Moray, and we saw what is happening at Lossiemouth and Kinloss. Obviously, we have received quite a lot of good evidence about what is happening in Leuchars, but you are right. There are base closures that are pre-programmed and planned. Are you advised at all about these closures? Are you told what impacts you should expect on communities? I am trying to think about how closures would impact local communities, which might need further assistance if they lost that economic activity. Is there anything that you are consulted on, so that the Scottish Government can put in place any sort of contingency planning for these arrangements?

Keith Brown: It tends to be after the decision is made. I have made requests of, I think, a number of different Secretaries of State for Defence to be consulted up front, but that does not seem to be happening. I know reserved defence issues can sometimes be very sensitive, but on any occasion when we have been provided with any information on not just defence but other areas, the Scottish Government have not once broken that confidence. There needs to be a bit of trust, instead of this childlike holding of all the information to yourself.

I will give you an example. In 2017, I think it was, the senior Army person who we dealt with in Scotland at that time told me that he had had to tell the MOD that if he was not allowed to pass on information to me about the defence base closures that were due to happen, he would not do the job any longer, because he was fed up with the absurdly protective basis on which the UK Government held this information to themselves.

If it is the case that these armed forces belong to the whole of the UK, and I believe they do, and people like Maurice Corry of the Conservative party and myself have been trying to convince people of that, we have to be involved with them. When you have a crass and appalling statement from the Secretary of State for Defence, who says he is only allowing the armed forces to operate in Scotland because the Government have failed to properly sustain the NHS, but that can be done for other parts of the UK without any pejorative comment, that just drives a wedge between people in Scotland and the armed forces. It is not a wedge that I want to see, and it is not a wedge, I think, that a lot of cross-party colleagues want to see, so a bit more openness, collaboration and partnership working would go a long way.

Q182 **Chair:** Lastly from me, have the Scottish Government looked at the economic impact of the value of bases in Scotland in the overall footprint of the MOD? Has anything been done perhaps in partnership with the UK Government, or have you requested that information? Have they done anything? What do you know about the economic contribution that is made by the facilities and the resources that we have of the MOD in Scotland?

Keith Brown: We asked for the economic impact of the Future Soldier plans—we asked for it, but have not yet had it. We have done some of our own economic impact assessments. That tends to be around the potential



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for base closures. We can certainly provide that to the Committee, if it would be helpful.

The one thing that we have been very keen on, as you say, Chair, is that there have been some positive moves, not least in relation to some of the bases that have increased in size, which is of course good. We have always felt that the ones that are personnel-intensive—have lots of people—have the biggest impact on the local economy. The obvious example is that we get no economic benefit from nuclear missiles sitting on the Clyde, but we get substantial benefit from personnel being based in local communities, which is one reason why we agreed with the UK Government when they said that they would guarantee 12,500 serving personnel in Scotland by 2020. That has just never happened, which is unfortunate.

Over and above that, we have tried hard—again, me and Maurice Corry—to make sure, especially in the north-east and at HMNB Clyde, that we tapped into the other resources that are there. First, for the people who are very highly trained, expensively trained, we can try to keep with their expertise in our local economies. Secondly, the spouses and families they bring with them can also find gainful employment, which respects the experience and abilities they have. We have tried hard to do that, because we know that that has a major economic impact. But the UK Government have not been good at sharing with us their economic analysis of some of the changes.

Q183 Douglas Ross: Mr Brown, in your earlier comments to the Chair, you mentioned the threat to Kinloss. Will you tell us what you are speaking about there?

Keith Brown: I remember very well the campaign that we had to save Kinloss. I am surprised you do not remember that, but we worked very hard on that, to save Kinloss. If that had been lost, there would have been a major impact on the economy, so we worked very hard to make sure about that and a number of other threats that were around at that time. For example, there was the almost constant threat to 45 Commando in Arbroath, and the threat to Glenrothes barracks—

Douglas Ross: Mr Brown, I am asking a question about Kinloss—

Keith Brown: We worked very hard—

Q184 Douglas Ross: Sorry, Mr Brown, I am the MP for Moray and I am asking about the threat to Kinloss. Clearly, there was a campaign in 2016, but also, as we have just heard from the previous witnesses, there was another perceived threat late last year, in 2021, which was based on simply one and clearly inaccurate anonymous source in *The Sunday Times* newspaper. Do you believe that comments like that, which clearly have no basis in any substance in terms of MOD plans, are deeply unhelpful to local communities? Kinloss has a very strong reputation, with the 39 Engineer Regiment, and Moray as a whole has benefited significantly from the massive investment at RAF Lossiemouth, with the



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Poseidon P-8 aircraft.

Keith Brown: First, to go back to that '26 campaign, it was a very important campaign—

Douglas Ross: The 2016 campaign.

Keith Brown: What happened in 2021 would not have been an issue if we had lost that campaign, so it was certainly a campaign worth fighting. I think you are probably right to say that anyone who puts out false information can have a deleterious effect on the local community. That is very true, but it is also true to say that if someone makes that comment against a backdrop of a lack of trust, a lack of good faith exercised by the UK Government in the past—I have given a number of instances already—then that kind of statement will find an audience. It is much better if we could work on the basis of trust and be much more open—as open as can be. I realise, of course, that there are areas on which they cannot be completely open. But if we were much more open and trusting, and in partnership, then that kind of thing would not happen at all.

Q185 **Douglas Ross:** On that specific point and on the many examples you gave to the Chair about where you felt that the Scottish Government were not involved in any of the discussions, would you accept that as a reserved matter, the UK Government are perfectly entitled to go to local Members of Parliament, such as me as the MP for Moray, to discuss those issues, and to have that contact between the representatives of such areas and the MOD, even if it does not happen with the Scottish Government? It does not mean that there is no consultation with anyone in Scotland, just because the SNP and the Scottish Government have not been included. Would you accept that?

Keith Brown: I don't believe I asserted otherwise. Of course it is right that the UK Government will want to talk to MPs about their local area. I have no issue with that and never have done. The point I am making is that when you have a devolved Government that is going to be providing health, transport, education and various other public services, which are of immediate relevance to people serving in the armed forces, it would make some sense to consult with it.

I will give you one last example. When Afghanistan was happening, I repeatedly asked to go to Afghanistan to meet those—some of whom had been given their P45s whilst on active service—who were shortly to come back to, for example, Arbroath or Edinburgh, and to find out what the issues of concern were. I couldn't go; they would not allow me to go. The military were more than happy for me to go; the UK Government prevented it. And yet popstars and everybody else under the sun seemed to be let go there.

It is about the services that the Scottish Government provides. That is why it's important they should consult with us. But I have no issue—I have never had any issue—with the UK Government consulting with MPs.

Q186 **Douglas Ross:** Maybe you could actually focus on the services you should



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be providing, because I don't think it's a great report card for the SNP Government on health, on transport and on education. Can I ask you what the Scottish Government's policy is on our membership in Scotland, as part of the United Kingdom, of NATO?

Keith Brown: I'll pass over the facetious comment you have made about the devolved services, which is unfortunate. Yes, I think Scotland should be a member of NATO. Scotland is a member of NATO. It has many members within—I think the vast majority of members within NATO are non-nuclear members, and that is the preferred status that Scotland would want to have as a member of NATO.

Q187 **Douglas Ross:** Sorry, I was asking for the Scottish Government position. Is that the united Scottish Government—the Scottish Government that includes two Green Ministers—position on NATO?

Keith Brown: That is the SNP's position. The Scottish Government cannot have a position on NATO; we are not an independent state. What I can tell you is that the SNP supports that position. I don't know whether you're asking us to take a position on all the international treaties that the UK Government is involved in—whether that is what's being asked for—but that is not what we do. I am answering as honestly as I can that the SNP's position—I know, because we had a big debate at conference and I voted for it—is to be members of NATO.

Q188 **Douglas Ross:** Yes, but I think it's a reasonable question. You are a Scottish Government Minister and your party invited the Green party in Scotland to join your Government, and it has a very different approach to membership of NATO. Does that sit comfortably with you as the Cabinet Secretary who has overall dealings with veterans and the military in Scotland?

Keith Brown: The government agreement that we have with the Greens does not cover NATO. We have our position on NATO; they have their position on NATO. And my position on NATO—the SNP's position on NATO—is to be members of NATO.

Q189 **Douglas Ross:** What is your view on the Green position? You think it's wrong?

Keith Brown: I have just told you what my view is, and their position is different. We can be quite comfortable with diversity in that respect. We know that NATO is not going to be a decision that we have to make in the Scottish Government, so that's not part of the agreement that we have with the Greens, but I am comfortable with my position, with my party's position, that Scotland, an independent Scotland, should be a full member of NATO.

Q190 **Douglas Ross:** Finally, Mr Brown, what do you make of the retired defence chief Rear Admiral John Gower's comments this weekend about the SNP's plans, if it ever got its way and had an independent Scotland, to remove Trident and nuclear weapons? He said that you have to be "aware, on a factual basis, of the repercussions for Scotland, the rest of the UK" and "the wider NATO alliance" if the SNP got its way and



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removed the Trident submarines.

Keith Brown: I think a couple of things. First of all, it wouldn't be the SNP that got its way; it would only happen if the people of Scotland wanted that to happen, of course, and every poll that has been done suggests they do want rid of these nuclear weapons in Scotland. And I will just say I have not seen the retired admiral's comments directly. I'm not sure whether he contacted the SNP or just plucked these things out of the air, but watching the coverage on—

Douglas Ross: Sorry, Mr Brown, can I just pause you—

Keith Brown: Watching the coverage on—

Douglas Ross: Sorry, Mr Brown—

Keith Brown: Watching the coverage—

Douglas Ross: Mr Brown, sorry—

Keith Brown: Can I just finish? I am just finishing my answer. Watching the coverage—

Douglas Ross: Mr Brown—

Chair: Order. One at a time, please.

Q191 **Douglas Ross:** I will be very brief. The question is quite specific. This is a rear admiral, John Gower, who I don't believe, despite what the Cabinet Secretary has just said, should have to tell the SNP what he is going to say. He is highlighting the dangers not just to Scotland or the United Kingdom, but to the wider alliance, of the SNP's position, which is to remove Trident from Scotland. And that's the question I'm asking.

Keith Brown: I can only repeat what I have said. It is perfectly right, of course, that Mr Ross asks the questions that he wants to ask, but he will have to allow me to give the answers that I want to give. And the answer I would give is that, first of all, I don't know whether this retired—if he is retired—admiral has had any discussions with the SNP to find out more about our position or whether this has been plucked out of the air. However the one thing that I would say is, watching all the coverage of Ukraine, and talking to people in Scotland—as we all do—about this, the one thing they are appalled by is the indiscriminate nature of the Russian attack, and its effect on civilians. Well, if you want to see that played out a thousandfold, that is the effect of nuclear weapons. We should never use nuclear weapons. In Scotland, the vast majority of people believe that we should not have nuclear weapons, and that is my position as well.

Chair: Thank you. Mhairi Black.

Q192 **Mhairi Black:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to our witnesses today for giving us time. If I could move us back on to the actual brief at hand here, we heard from the previous panel of witnesses on the experience of local authorities, in terms of the release of surplus MOD land or



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accommodation. From your perspective, could you give us any examples of where Scotland has benefited from that release of surplus MOD land or accommodation?

Keith Brown: I couldn't. I think there were discussions ongoing around Stirling, when I was involved in the growth deals, to have some MOD land transferred there. Around that time, I had discussions with the UK Government in particular. It was Lord Ian Duncan who gave me an absolute assurance that this would be done in terms of land being not just transferred at no cost but decontaminated by the MOD. That was then turned over—once again, “Bad faith,” I would say—and the UK Government have refused to do that. You will know as well as me that some of this land—in fact, much land used for industrial use can have contaminants within it, and sometimes the cost of decontamination can outweigh the benefits of using that land.

There was also scope—I think at 45 Commando—to hand over some of that land to the community. That was one of the things; the airfield attached to the land was once talked about as being given to the local community.

I cannot think of any other examples, from the top of my head, where that has been done. However, I do know that there is land, again, at Stirling, which is being used but was previously MOD land, but that is going back some decades now, so I do not know the details of that transfer.

Q193 **Mhairi Black:** Excellent. Thank you. On the decontamination issue, if land was to be gifted to a local authority—or whatever—have there been any examples of where the MOD have been the ones to carry out the decontamination, or is it always someone else's responsibility?

Keith Brown: I am not aware of any instances. I am not saying that it has not happened, but I am certainly not aware of any instances where the MOD has both transferred land and decontaminated it prior to that. Of course, the contaminants that might be associated with some military activity can be more substantial than with some industrial activities.

Q194 **Mhairi Black:** You have probably touched on this before, but is there any engagement with the Scottish Government when it comes to the release of land or accommodation? Is there any specific role that the Scottish Government play, or are they simply there if anyone needs the Scottish Parliament?

Keith Brown: As I say, there have been discussions. I mentioned the Stirling land deal, and I think, as part of that deal, eventually the UK Government agreed to transfer the land. That was from the UK Government to the council, but we were involved because we were at the other side, as the major funders of that growth deal. They transferred it, but they did so at a cost of £5 million, and did not decontaminate it, as far as I am aware.

There is also a process that we have in Scotland, which I think is mirrored in Westminster; we use the Scottish public finance manual, which obliges,



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when there is a transfer of public land, for other public authorities to be allowed to have, if you like, a look at the land first. Say an NHS facility was to close, they would be allowed to look at that for housing. I am not aware of that working on a systematic basis with the UK Government. I would have to say that, if we are honest, in Scotland, we do not do it as rigorously as we should ourselves, in any event, but I am not aware of that happening with the UK Government.

Sometimes, we would all be the winners if we could get very productive use out of former MOD sites, especially in relation to housing in local areas, and sometimes specifically for veterans' housing as well. I think there is more that we can do on that, and more, I am sure, that the UK Government could do too.

Q195 Mhairi Black: Focusing on accommodation issues in particular, would it be better for the MOD to work directly with councils, or do you think that the Scottish Government have a role to play in that?

Keith Brown: We could help, and not just councils but housing associations could help as well. Of course, we work with councils, Edinburgh and Glasgow in particular, in funding much of the council activity that goes on in relation to housing—they have their own housing account as well. In terms of the overall plan and demand for housing, I am sure there is more we could do.

You mentioned working with councils, and I recently visited Faslane and talked to some of the families who had recently moved there, and it is quite clear that they often live in completely different council areas. The Scottish Government could act to help with that. It really is about an attitude. If you have the attitude that getting more people involved around the table who have an interest will get better outcomes, then involving the Scottish Government would certainly help in relation to that.

Q196 Mhairi Black: Excellent. Finally, then, bar having a seat at the table and being part of the discussions, are there any specific additional commitments or asks that you would like to see from the UK Government with regard to the process of releasing surplus MOD land?

Keith Brown: Why do we not just sit down together as a group and look at what the interests say? It will not always be housing, but there may be other things. For the Scottish Government, it could be done seamlessly, either directly from the UK Government to the Scottish Government or directly to or with a council. It may often be the case that the Scottish Government have to be involved to help a council finance that. Why do we not just agree a process for sitting down and agreeing these things, taking into account the economic development, housing, health and educational needs of local areas? Sometimes we know that the closing down of an MOD site will also be associated with an impact on local schools, leisure facilities and all sorts of other things. It just seems eminent sense that we work together on this.

Going back to when I first got involved in the veterans side of things and this side of things from the Scottish Government, there was much more



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willingness to discuss than there is now. It was more open. It wasn't always easy, but we had discussions. People like Mark Lancaster and—this might surprise people—Mark Francois were actually quite constructive in some of these things, but it is some years since we had that constructive relationship.

Q197 Mhairi Black: Why do you think it is that the Scottish Government haven't been given a seat at the table, so to speak? Is it a political decision, or is it just thoughtlessness because it has always been done a certain way that has never been updated? What is your gut feeling?

Keith Brown: I think it is a combination of both. You may remember a report from 2006 or 2007—or maybe you won't—to Jack McConnell showing that various Westminster Departments were completely unaware, even eight years into devolution, of the need to consult with devolved authorities. I think that side of it has got slightly better, and they are slightly more aware, but it is a political thing. Although we seemed to manage to get through the independence referendum process and just beyond before things got substantially worse, so I can only assume it is a political decision. Sometimes it will just be thoughtlessness, and I am happy to listen to whether Westminster thinks we should consult with them more on certain things, but it seems to me to be a political drive not to include.

Mhairi Black: Excellent. Thank you.

Chair: Just to say, we have Mr McGregor and Mr McGowan on the line with us if they have anything useful to contribute. The Cabinet Secretary doesn't seem like he requires any assistance or support with some of these responses, but if you want to bring them in, Mr Brown, please feel free to do so. We have gone to all the bother of getting them connected, so it would be just as well to hear from them if they feel that they have anything to contribute.

Q198 Sally-Ann Hart: Looking at how the Scottish Government are supporting military communities, what are the Scottish Government doing to welcome and integrate armed forces personnel and their families when they move to Scotland from other parts of the UK? Is there anything more that the Scottish Government can do?

Keith Brown: We should always look at what more we can do. Maybe after I have mentioned a couple of things, it might be that Kevin or Rory want to jump in.

The first thing is that we produced—it was my own initiative to do it back in 2017—was a booklet that was designed to provide information to people. I know from my own experience that it can be quite disconcerting to move from Scotland down to England and vice versa. That was, as you heard from some of your previous witnesses, to help with basic things like schooling, health, and various other public services and contacts, although there has also always been a fairly good welfare function, as you will know, within military units to help personnel. We did that and we have updated that.



I also was asked, and agreed, to talk to the submariners school that came to Faslane. They were apparently very worried about coming to somewhere close to Glasgow. The Navy eventually hired a plane, brought them up with their families, and gave them some money for the weekend to familiarise themselves with the local area, all of which they seemed to enjoy. I encouraged that.

I also offered to go to the south-west of England and speak directly to people to assure them that they would be more than welcome in Scotland, and to provide them with some information about the services that we provide. We do that not just because we think it is the right thing to do and it is fair to people, but because we want them to want to stay here after they have served their time here. They are often highly qualified people, and Scotland could do with those, so that is also why we have done it. There are probably other things that I have forgotten to mention, but Kevin might want to add to what I have said.

Kevin McGowan: The welcome to Scotland guide that Mr Brown refers to is quite comprehensive. It touches on things like education, healthcare, housing, public services and employment for spouses, which is really important. The Scottish Government have put in place a number of initiatives to help with spousal employment, with the overall aim of getting people to settle into Scotland. That is the primary objective. We continue to look at that and improve it.

Q199 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Are the Scottish Government looking at ways to overcome hurdles in relation to the recognition of professional qualifications, for example, or even the difference in income tax?

Keith Brown: On the difference in income tax, there are two sides to that. On the one hand, of course, the very lowest paid members of the military are paid slightly higher in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. We do not intend to change that. It is also true to say that on average you pay around £500 less for your council tax in Scotland than elsewhere, so people will benefit from that.

We recognise the fact that there has not been a proactive approach to spousal employment, going back some 10 years. There just was not the notion that there were some very well qualified people—sorry, I should not jump over the point that you made about teaching qualifications; that is not within the gift of the Scottish Government. It is done through the teaching council—the teachers themselves. We have had a number of discussions with them and are keen to see how we can address that, but the fine analysis is their call, although we have not left it at that. Behind your question, I am sure, is a concern that you might have extremely well qualified and experienced teachers coming from England. They would be more than gratefully received in Scottish schools; we want to try to do more in relation to that.

There are others: doctors, engineers and nurses come as well, as spouses. We have to do more to ensure that we are allowing them to achieve what they want. It is not just that. As we are doing with veterans, it is not just



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about getting people a job, but trying to get them one that is commensurate with their experience and abilities. Going back to veterans, sometimes somebody comes in as a colour sergeant, with all sorts of experience, skills and qualifications, but in the past they were asked to be grateful to have a job as a truck driver. Now, a truck driver might be a great job and it might be what they want to do, but it is not necessarily commensurate with the skills they have. It is not just about having any job for ex-serving personnel. We want to ensure that they get the job that they want.

Similarly with spouses, it has been the case in the past that many spouses have been deployed with their spouse and have basically not been able to find employment. It is not just me who wants to do something in relation to that; Maurice Corry, who is from the area that includes HMNB Clyde, was very keen that we did this as well.

Q200 Sally-Ann Hart: Mr Brown, you mentioned spouses who come up as nurses and doctors, but you don't need a separate qualification to do that in Scotland than you do in the rest of the UK.

Keith Brown: The one that is the main hurdle is the teachers, as we have heard about just now, but no, the doctors are with the General Medical Council.

Q201 Sally-Ann Hart: Okay, I just wanted to clarify that. Do you think that there should be some additional information that you would like the MOD to share with armed forces personnel and their families before they move to Scotland for the first time, such as on teaching qualifications? Should the MOD, for example, provide more information on the different education systems in England and Scotland?

Keith Brown: To the extent that people might be surprised to arrive in Scotland and find out that that was an issue for them, it would be much better to be pre-prepared. We would be willing to help the MOD with that, if there was any way that we could do that. If they wanted to provide information about the different way of registering with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, we would be happy to work with them on that.

The other side of it is when people leave the armed forces and their health records are not with their local GP. So yes, I think the MOD could be more proactive and for our part we are more than happy to work with them to achieve that, whether it is on qualifications or other aspects.

Q202 Sally-Ann Hart: So when the Scottish Government said that they should be consulted fully on all defence matters that impact on Scotland, is that the sort of thing that you are talking about—more consultation and working with the MOD on defence matters that impact on Scotland?

Keith Brown: It is slightly different. When I said that earlier on, it was in relation to some of the big strategic initiatives, such as the defence reviews and the basing reviews. That is what I had in mind at the time,



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but of course closer working with the MOD on these issues would also be useful.

For the last 10 years, we have taken as our watchword—I am pleased to see this coming back to us from the MOD now, as if it were a fresh thought—the idea that nobody that serves should be disadvantaged by dint of their service. They often do not want to have an advantage, although sometimes they should, for example with state-of-the-art medical care, but they should not suffer a disadvantage. To that extent, their spouses should not suffer a disadvantage either. If we can do anything to eliminate that disadvantage, then the Scottish Government are more than happy and keen to work with the MOD on that.

Q203 Sally-Ann Hart: Just to clarify, do you think the Scottish Government should be consulted on strategic defence matters?

Keith Brown: Absolutely. An example would be basing reviews, which we have not known about until the last minute. We have lost historic regiments in Scotland and thousands of personnel from where we were before. It is really important that we keep that view among the people of Scotland that they are their armed forces as well. If we want to do that, then the Government we have in Scotland has to be consulted as well as the Government in the UK. They have to be consulted, be aware of this and get better outcomes from having been consulted. I think that is entirely reasonable.

Q204 Sally-Ann Hart: One more question. What steps are the Scottish Government taking to embrace and embed the armed forces covenant, especially in supporting serving personnel and their families rather than just veterans? What more can the Scottish Government do to build civilian employers' awareness of the armed forces covenant?

Keith Brown: As you have heard, all local authorities have signed the covenant, as have we—we are co-signatories to it—and as have health boards in Scotland. However, for us that is not a ceiling on what should be done for veterans in Scotland.

To that extent, particularly in relation to your question, around five years ago, before I established a post of commissioner for veterans—which is still unique to Scotland although Wales are about to get one as well—based on what I had found out in Canada, we asked the Prince of Wales to help us get in contact with some very large employers to help. Some are very good. For example, Barclays have always had a very strong armed forces contingent working with them.

We asked the Prince of Wales to get involved and help us get in touch with a number of large employers, which he then did. We held an event at Dumfries House. From their point of view, we were trying to put ex-military personnel in front of them for job opportunities, but it really was to put them in front of ourselves and the Prince of Wales to say, "You have got more to do in relation to this."



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We think we have taken a number of initiatives. We do not really see the covenant as the pinnacle for what we want to achieve. We want to go further in relation to that, which is why we have the commissioner's office. There have now been two commissioners, the second of whom is demitting office this month after his term. They have provided some rigorous reports on housing, health, employment and various other things, which can often be critical of the Scottish Government and our partners. We have done that deliberately. We want to have somebody—a critical friend—to help us to improve the services that we provide veterans and the armed forces community. We will continue to do that. We have our own action plan for veterans, so we are not looking to be bound by the covenant as a ceiling—we want to go further than that.

Q205 Sally-Ann Hart: You mentioned that you appointed a commission and that it has come back with some reports. Have you acted on its recommendations?

Keith Brown: I am not sure whether you said a commission, but it is a commissioner. The first person was a retired naval officer, the second an Army officer, and we are about to appoint a third. Yes, it is part of their job. They, and the office that serves them, are funded by the Scottish Government, but they are independent of the Government—although I should make it clear that they are appointed by the Government—and they are tasked with pointing out the things that we are not getting right and should improve. I think all parties in the Scottish Parliament agree that they have done that pretty rigorously so far.

Q206 Andrew Bowie: Thank you, Cabinet Secretary, for taking the time to join us. I will not keep you too long—I know how busy you are. I want to take you back to some of the answers that you gave to my colleague, Mr Ross, particularly on the nuclear deterrent. The scenes we are all seeing of indiscriminate killing of civilians on the streets of Ukraine are shocking to us all. When you speak to the Governments of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, they would tell you that they sleep much sounder in their beds knowing that they have the protection of NATO's nuclear umbrella, and I think we should be proud that we are contributing to that deterrent and preventing similar scenes in the Baltic states.

Specifically on the basing of our nuclear deterrent on the Clyde, you said that you can see no benefit to basing the UK's nuclear deterrent in Scottish waters. That is not what we heard from the representative from Argyll and Bute Council, who said earlier that expanding Faslane to become the UK's submarine hub—for want a better expression—by directly employing 5,000 to 6,000 people has a hugely beneficial effect on the local community. You even mentioned yourself the presence of the UK's submarine school, all of which would not be in Faslane were it not for the fact that the nuclear deterrent—the V-boat submarines—are based at HM Naval Base, Clyde. Surely you agree with that.

Keith Brown: I think I specifically made the distinction of the benefits of personnel being based in defence establishments. For long enough in my time, they were littered along the south coast of England—there were



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huge numbers along there—and everyone recognised the benefits of having a military base. I made this point earlier that it is a real benefit: the economic multiplier effect of many people spending money in their local communities is a given, and I am not demurring from that at all. My point is that I think we get no benefit from having the horrendous presence of those nuclear submarines in Scotland. I do not think anybody in Poland or in the other countries you mentioned is arguing for huge nuclear arsenals in their backyard, either. I think nuclear weapons are immoral and wrong. Scotland, and the UK for that matter—although it is not for me to say—would be a better place without them.

Q207 Andrew Bowie: Yes, but NATO would be a lot less secure if we were to unilaterally recuse ourselves. By the way, all those highly skilled individuals who spend large amounts of money in the local economy in Argyll and Bute would be based elsewhere, so there are obviously huge benefits to HM Naval Base, Clyde being of that size and scale and doing the job that it does.

How would you assess the level of support from the UK Government for the defence industry in Scotland in general?

Keith Brown: On that last point, not all the personal at Clyde are to do with nuclear weapons, and people such as Michael Portillo have pointed out how futile and pointless the UK nuclear deterrent is, but we will leave that just now.

I think there are real benefits to some of the expenditure in Scotland. The Chair mentioned at the start some of that expenditure in the north-east. I have one example of two very highly qualified young men who left the RAF from Lossiemouth a number of years ago and came up with their own device. I am not sure what it was, but it was defence-related, and it was sold into the American market. That goes along with my point about trying to keep those highly expert people in those locations, rather than their being dispersed to other parts of the UK or across to the States.

We do get benefit from that, and I am sure that we could exploit it even more by keeping those people. Also, we could do more to provide support for business start-ups in areas where we have those very highly qualified people. Of course, the personnel we have in Scotland provide the economic multiplier effect that I mentioned, the spend in the local economy. We also have a vibrant defence industry sector in Scotland and have had for many years. I grew up next to the Ferranti warehouse and have been to Thales and other companies, and I know that they value the work. Of course, we have mentioned Rosyth and Scotstoun, where there are vessels being built. I have never been one to say that we do not benefit—as we should—from defence procurement here in Scotland, and defence spending, and the footprint more generally.

Q208 Andrew Bowie: Absolutely, and I never for one minute doubted that you would say that, or that that would be your position or that of the Scottish Government. One of the not shocking but rather depressing statistics we have heard in the past few weeks as we have conducted this inquiry is



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that MOD spending with SMEs in Scotland accounts for only 3.5% of the whole. It does not matter which political background you come from or what your position is on the various issues to do with defence; any of us representing Scottish constituencies would regard that as far too low. What is the Scottish Government doing to try to lobby on behalf of or assist Scottish SMEs, so that they can enter that sometimes very restricted market to supply the MOD? What actions are the Government taking, and what do you have planned north of the border to support Scottish SMEs in getting into that sector more effectively?

Keith Brown: That is the push effect, if we can help those companies push themselves forward, but they need the MOD to be much more open to that. It is true that apart from in the south-east, the MOD is not good at engaging with small and medium-sized enterprises. Sometimes that is because the projects are hugely complex and massive, but there is nearly always a downstream possibility of involving SMEs.

It may be also that it becomes more difficult because of the particularly sensitive areas around defence, but other countries seem to manage to engage their SMEs to a much greater extent. As for what we will do through our economic development function—I don't know whether Rory or Kevin want to come in on this—I am pretty sure that we have repeatedly given the message to the UK Government. Sometimes it can be the most mundane thing—laundry services, for example—but our SMEs should find it easier. They have found it very difficult with the MOD. I do not know if Kevin or Rory want to come in on that point.

Rory McGregor: Thanks, Cabinet Secretary. Support to the sector on the SME side has traditionally been provided through our enterprise agencies, Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and, most recently, South of Scotland Enterprise. In terms of overall support, there are things we have done off the back of the covid-19 pandemic, which hit the aerospace industry in Scotland quite seriously. One of the things we did through the aerospace response group, which the Scottish Government formed to provide some exploration of mitigations, was run a virtual conference season, if you will. As part of that, a session was run where the MOD and the RAF came along and talked about future and running programmes in a bid to get those industries and companies operating in the civil aviation sector to start looking at what they might want to do to bid into defence work in the UK. That was quite successful, I understand.

That is probably one good example of what we have been doing, but generally the activity runs through the enterprise agencies.

Andrew Bowie: Thank you, Mr McGregor. I was going to ask about shipbuilding, but I am conscious that we are short on time, so I will make just one comment. When I was looking through the papers for this session and at all the ships that are planned to be built in Scotland by the MOD—a sizeable number—there is one that stands out. It is a P50-U, which is a Ukrainian naval vessel—a small warship. I think we can all be very proud of Scotland's contribution to that nation's defence, if we are building that for them north of the border. The sooner it can be built and shipped out to



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them, the better, and I am sure that we would all be very pleased to see it.

Q209 Deidre Brock: Hello, Cabinet Secretary. I am delighted that you could come along to speak to us today. A number of the questions that I was going to ask have already been asked, but I want to follow up on the decontamination issues. One example I can think of where the MOD has participated in decontamination activities, although not on its own land, was at Dalgety Bay, with the radioactive particles on the shore there. Of course, it took 30 years for the MOD to accept responsibility for that and to take action. We heard from the Fife councillor today that it looks like it will finally be done in the next 18 months.

I have called for an environmental audit of MOD activities across Scotland's land and sea as a result of these sort of incidents and on the back of work I have done on munitions dumps, such as that in Beaufort's Dyke. Is that something you would like to see the MOD take responsibility for? The fact that a lot of environmental legislation does not apply to MOD activities came as a bit of a shock to me when I was working on the Environment Bill. It is an area I would like to see the MOD step up in and take more responsibility for. Would you like to see that happen as well?

Keith Brown: Yes, and I cannot really think of any compelling arguments as to why it would not be a good idea to get a true appreciation of what dangers there may be, whether in Beaufort's Dyke or in the firing ranges in the north of Scotland and other areas. The MOD has—with people's consent, as far as we are aware—done things over the decades that are bound to have had an environmental impact. We would ask anyone else to be aware of and to apply the "polluter pays" principle, to make sure that the impact is remedied. Why would you not want to have clean waters and a clean ground? That seems to me to be an obvious thing to do. It is not for me to speak on behalf of colleagues with environmental responsibilities, but for my part, we would want to help with that, if at all possible.

You rightly raise Dalgety Bay and how long that has taken. That is not far from where I am. Trying to get people to take responsibility for that and to do something about it is like drawing teeth. It should not be that way. We should try again and work in collaboration on that.

Deidre Brock: As you say, the "polluter pays" principle should apply.

Q210 Chair: I have a couple of quick questions, Cabinet Secretary. We had a very positive session with defence contractors about investment in Scotland and money that has been poured in, particularly from Thales, Babcock and BAE Systems, which we heard from. It is pretty impressive. It shows confidence in Scotland as a nation; they feel it is definitely worth investing in. Do the Scottish Government ever get consulted on this investment? I am thinking most notably about the £76 million that Babcock is putting into the work at Rosyth and its frigates. Do they, as a matter of course, speak to you about this investment and seek advice on the issues around it?



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Keith Brown: I am happy to be contradicted by either of my officials, but no, I am not aware of that kind of consultation taking place. It would be good if we were consulted. This is a very welcome investment. Apart from the stuff Thales does in defence, it is doing things in transport, which means it has a lot of apprentices from Scotland who will cut across different disciplines.

Defence procurement is a legitimate function of Governments, and we think we should have a fair share of that work. On the UK's own defence procurement, of course the UK Government should consult with us. I am not sure of the rationale for not doing that, since we would be able to give them information. This is National Apprenticeship Week. I have just come back from visiting the police at Tulliallan, where they have apprentices. We could give them information they might need on availability. We could even help fund certain courses or apprenticeships that might be beneficial, so yes, of course there should be consultation. I ask my officials to tell me if I have got any of that wrong. Am I secretly being consulted without being unaware of it?

Q211 **Chair:** Have either of you got any information you could share with the Committee on that?

Rory McGregor: I won't contradict what the Cabinet Secretary has said.

Q212 **Chair:** Always a good policy when you are with the boss. We have heard your frustrations about the lack of communication and consultation from UK Government, and we will take that away from your evidence today. If you were to design a forum, have you got an idea what it would look like? The temptation would be to say, "We'd like any forum," but in an ideal situation, if you could design one—if you could have an arrangement whereby the UK Government consulted you and informed you about decisions—what shape would it take? Down here, we have Joint Committees, which you are more than familiar with. Would it be something like that?

Keith Brown: There is a Committee on which we have joint representation. It is the one the Secretary of State convenes on veterans' matters. I asked to be a member of it for six or seven years and then gave up. Lo and behold, when I gave up, I was appointed to it. It would be something like that. It would best if people came to it when it was relevant to their interests, including local authority representatives. It would be useful if people such as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy and I attended, as well as counterparts from Westminster and the devolved Administrations. There would be a really collegiate approach. It would probably have to be associated, I accept, with a degree of confidentiality, as with the armed forces personnel scheme. People do not use that to make political points, by and large, although we tried it up here and unfortunately that is what happened. We accept that there would have to be a degree of confidentiality and trust. It would have to be built up over time, but I think it could be done if all partners were willing to engage.



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Chair: It was just a thought that you may want to take away and have a look at. Cabinet Secretary, thank you for your evidence today. We very much enjoyed the session. Thank you to your officials for coming along and helping us out this afternoon. If there is anything else you think you can meaningfully contribute to this inquiry, let us know. We are doing a number of mini-inquiries into defence issues in Scotland, so we may call on your good services some other time, but for today, thank you.