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Dear Tobias

Please accept my warm congratulations on your election as Chair of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee. I look forward to working with you during this momentous time for UK defence and security. As we enter a period of review of the nation's defence, security and foreign policy, I remain committed to keeping you up-to-date with all developments, at appropriate junctures.

Prior to the General Election, I and the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) Permanent Under Secretary, Stephen Lovegrove, gave evidence to the Defence Committee, then chaired by your predecessor, Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis. We agreed to provide you with written answers to a number of questions. I have been awaiting the appointment of the new Defence Committee Chair before returning these answers. I am now delighted to enclose two memoranda containing the responses relating to Stephen Lovegrove's evidence session on the Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19; and the responses relating to my evidence session on the MOD's work and priorities.

I should like to take this opportunity to wish you all the best in your new role.

THE RT HON BEN WALLACE MP

The Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood MP
Chair
House of Commons Defence Committee
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London
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Enclosure(s)

**Responses to Follow-up Questions from the Secretary of State for Defence's
Evidence Session with the House of Common's Defence Select Committee, 23
October 2019**

1. Further information on the UK's participation in the International Maritime Security Construct (Q42)

The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) provides an immediate response to the heightened threat in the Persian Gulf by providing reassurance to shipping and deterring further threats. This is an international problem that requires an international solution. The IMSC is not part of the US maximum pressure policy.

The UK signed up to the International Maritime Security Construct in the Persian Gulf in July 2019. There are now 8 members: the US, the UK, Australia, Albania, Estonia, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, with the UK, the US, and Australia providing assets and the remaining members providing staff officers.

The IMSC is a scalable plan and envisages three Task Groups of ships: two stationed either side of the Strait of Hormuz, with a further task group stationed episodically near the Bab el-Mandeb. Military assets will monitor the area in between these task groups and help support naval assets which may accompany merchant shipping.

The UK has committed one Frigate or Destroyer and a Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker to support the logistic effort, and, additionally, has offered to command one of the Task Groups. We have provided staff to the Task Force Headquarters and the UK has taken command of the Task Force on rotation as of 30 January 2020, bringing the IMSC under European leadership. The UK continues to encourage others to join, to further internationalise the construct and provide sustainability of assets in the medium to long term.

The IMSC is the only existing mission to ensure the safety of shipping passing through the Gulf and uphold Freedom of Navigation. However, we will engage constructively with others on how they might complement the ongoing work of the IMSC.

2a. Availability of all classes of vessel in the Royal Navy fleet (including submarines) and six-monthly updates thereafter (Q58-59&Q65)

As I stated in my introductory session with the Committee in October, I have set my priority for the First Sea Lord to ensure the maximum number of warships and submarines are at sea to deliver the Government's priorities, and I am holding him to account on this subject.

I should start by highlighting that the Royal Navy continues to meet or exceed the requirements under the Defence Plan 19, and, in October 2019, Navy warships¹ delivered the most days at sea – over 400 days – since October 2015.

It has been acknowledged that, historically, Type 45 overall availability has been poor due to a lack of resilience, redundancy in the propulsion system design, and the legacy of a Contracting-for-Availability approach for the first eight years of Service life. The move to a Common Support Model is now addressing the poor in-house stores, tools, training and technical documentation. The most significant elements of this are the Equipment Improvement Plan that is implementing design changes and supportability measures to

¹ This includes all Frigates, Destroyers, Landing Platform Docks, HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH and Mine Countermeasures Vessels.

enhance reliability and availability to restore resilience in these ships, and the Power Improvement Project (PIP) that will improve performance to meet the original design intent.

The availability² of those Type 45s at readiness has now increased to being consistently above 80%. An example would be HMS DEFENDER which achieved 270 days at sea in 2019, including 93 days on operations in the Gulf with no days lost to defects. HMS DUNCAN was similarly available to support short notice activation to the Gulf at the end of a six-month deployment in 2019 and returned to the UK with a reduced number of defects.

From 2021, four Type 45s will be available for tasking and the varying levels of readiness will continue to improve through the course of the next five years as each Type 45 emerges from their PIP embodiment periods.

It is acknowledged that more needs to be done and the Navy is transitioning towards a richer understanding of platform availability and the individual elements (workforce, equipment, training and sustainability) that combine to deliver a ship on operations. The arrival of the Type 26 and Type 31 in to service will provide a step change in levels of availability.

On the specific topic of the availability of all ships and submarines, it might be helpful if I explain that all Royal Navy ships and submarines and Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships rotate through planned operating cycles involving routine maintenance, repair, training, deployment, leave, essential modifications and upgrades, and will, therefore, be at varying levels of readiness in accordance with Defence requirements. While it is acknowledged that on any given day some ships and submarines will not be available for operational tasking, they are nonetheless at a readiness level that reflects their position within their programming cycle.

You will understand that, to protect operational security, I am unable to disclose details of the specific readiness and availability of individual ships or submarines. What I can provide at this unclassified level is information regarding those ships and submarines that are currently in, or preparing for, their planned routine docking or their deep refit period. During these planned periods, they are deemed to be 'not in Fleet time' and unavailable for operational tasking until they return to the Fleet. Information as at 30 December 2019 is in the following table:

Class	Current Class Size	Number in or Preparing for Refit/Docking Period
Deterrent Submarines – SSBN	4	1
Attack Submarines – SSN	6	1
Type 45 Destroyers	6	3
Type 23 Frigates	13	6
Mine Countermeasures Vessels	13	2
Royal Fleet Auxiliaries	13	7

As directed by the Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2010, one of our two Landing Platform Docks (HMS ALBION and BULWARK) would always be kept at high readiness while the other would be kept in a state of low readiness. Currently, BULWARK is the ship held in lower readiness and currently categorised as unavailable for operational tasking.

² In this context, the definition is that there are no operational defects that affect the programme.

2b. An update on the future of Flag Officer Sea Training (FOST) and the provision of Operational Sea Training (including whether consideration is being given to reducing or closing this capability).

I can assure Committee Members that the Royal Navy (RN), and indeed the wider Ministry of Defence (MOD), places great importance on investing in the professional development of our people, carrying out rigorous training and assurance prior to people and assets being employed on operations.

Over the last few years, significant effort has been expended to develop our training system to meet future demands, specifically the generation of Maritime Task Group capability centred on the Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers and the F35-B Lightning aircraft. In parallel, the Navy is refining methods to prepare and sustain major warships forward deployed around the globe and determining how best to generate our Future Commando Force. These changes will see the RN enhancing, not reducing, its emphasis on high quality individual, unit-level and Task Group training and assurance.

Flag Officer Sea Training (FOST) has a long and proud tradition in delivering operational training across all disciplines of the Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Additionally, FOST delivers world-class Operational Sea Training (OST) to foreign Navies. Over the last four financial years, FOST South has delivered OST to 60 platforms from a total of 13 different nations (realising in excess of £22 million income generation). Focussing on UK units, in the past 12 months: FOST South has trained six RFA ships and 12 RN ships; FOST North has delivered 35 individual OST packages (to include seven submarines); Exercise Joint Warrior (FOST led) has provided training for 20 UK units and respective battle staffs.

OST prepares all classes of surface warships, submarines and auxiliaries for peacetime, peace-support and war-fighting operations. Starting with basic alongside preparatory safety and readiness training, units progress through single threat and multi-threat scenarios to advanced tactical training at Task Group level. This is achieved through a structured system of relevant and focussed operational training, with an emphasis throughout on realism, including battle-damage simulation, and all aspects of warfighting.

The training syllabus is framed around NATO doctrine and is aimed at delivering Royal Navy standards, drawing upon FOST's experience across an array of platforms to capture and promote best practice. The extensive exercise areas around the United Kingdom provide the focus for Operational Sea Training, where the many benefits include direct access to realistic supporting assets, backed up by a well-proven and highly-flexible infrastructure.

The Royal Navy has earned its reputation for being a world leader in Operational Sea Training; this accolade is certainly not taken for granted and great effort is expended in maintaining standards. It is for this reason that Operational Sea Training, as with other areas of the Service and the MOD, is continually reviewed and adapted to ensure the currency and relevance of training matches today's security environment, and that of the future.

3. How much has been spent on each Defence Transformation Fund commitments to date? How much future funding is required and has this been secured? (Qq87-91)

The future funding requirement for these transformation fund projects, as well as for other capability investment priorities, will be assessed as part of the current Annual Budget Cycle.

4. What equipment programmes are the MoD considering cancelling? (Q94)

The Department is currently in the middle of its Annual Budget Cycle (ABC). The principal objective of ABC 20 is to update our forward-spending plans to ensure that they remain relevant to the evolving threats to our national security, making best use of the additional funding allocated in Spending Round 19 to support the continuing modernisation of our Armed Forces. Should it be necessary to withdraw funding from any equipment programmes that contribute less well to the modern capabilities we need, and to allow greater investment in priorities such as cyber, shipbuilding and the nuclear deterrent, the Committee will be informed.

5. Further information on the delay to Astute Class Submarine 'Audacious' and any potential on other vessels in this class (Qq98-101)

The emergent technical issues with AUDACIOUS have required unplanned repair and rework to facilitate the submarine proceeding forward with the normal commissioning process. The delays to the build have not currently caused the programme to overrun in cost terms. There was a need to pause some work on ANSON in order to deploy extra resource to resolving the issues on AUDACIOUS, which has impacted on the delivery of ANSON. We do, however, remain committed to delivering all seven boats by the end of 2026.

6. Further information on the MoD's engagement with the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland (Q127)

The MOD engages directly with the Coroners Service Northern Ireland (CSNI) on an ongoing basis. As the Secretary of State noted in his evidence, the CSNI are an independent organisation and are therefore under no legal obligation to inform the MOD of actions that they are taking in respect of Veterans. In practice, the MOD have developed a good working relationship with the CSNI and meet with their officials on a regular basis to ensure effective communication. The CSNI have agreed to inform the MOD when they are making initial contact with Veterans. This will allow the MOD to write to the veteran in question offering legal and pastoral support.

Since the Secretary of State gave his evidence to the Committee, the Presiding Coroner, Mrs Justice Keegan, has released a public statement which includes a schedule of the upcoming Inquests due to take place from April 2020 to April 2021.

7. Information on the outcome of the Defence Secretary's discussions with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the restoration of war widows' pensions (Q140)

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans met with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on Monday 20 January 2020, where they discussed War Widows Pensions. Subsequently, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans updated the House in his closing speech to an adjournment debate on the matter on 30 January 2020. A transcript of the speech can be found on [Hansard](#).

8. Further information on the MoD's discussions with the Home Office on 'indigenous personnel in theatre' and foreign and commonwealth personnel in UK Armed Forces (Qq148-152)

Afghan Interpreters:

The MOD is continuing to work with the Home Office to identify the most appropriate way forward. The Committee may recall that in June 2018 the then-Defence Secretary announced changes to the eligibility criteria for the Ex-Gratia Scheme (EGS). It was anticipated this would allow between 7 and 40 former Afghan Locally Engaged Civilians (LECs), who had served on the front line in Helmand in support of the UK Armed Forces, to relocate to the UK, in addition to the 443 who had already relocated. As it has turned out, far fewer former LECs met the amended criteria than envisaged. The MOD is working with the Home Office to understand the feasibility of any further amendments to the EGS eligibility criteria.

Foreign and Commonwealth Personnel:

We intend to hold further discussions with HO regarding the implications of the MIR and visa costs for Service Personnel and their families. The MOD has previously articulated the specific circumstances which Service Personnel face when choosing to serve our country and what this potentially means for family life. However, the Department understands this is a complex policy area with potentially wide-ranging ramifications.

Concurrently the MOD is focusing on what it can do to help Service Personnel to understand the immigration system and what is required of them so that they are fully informed at recruitment and prepared for the costs when they arise. This includes the promotion of bespoke financial savings packages, distribution of updated policy and guidance to welfare staff, the inclusion of a non-UK section on the updated Army website and updated information on tri-Service recruitment websites. In parallel to this the Department is reviewing data on the cohort to improve understanding of the common concerns beyond immigration issues to improve the overall package of welfare support.

9. Information on the MoD's review of asbestos in the oceanic fleet (Qq155-157)

The MOD is working to eliminate and replace asbestos in Defence equipment wherever practicable, but also to ensure that any asbestos that needs to remain in situ is managed appropriately. We are engaged with the Health and Safety Executive, Unite the Union and Mesothelioma UK on this important issue, and we continue to update our approach to managing the risks arising from asbestos in both equipment and on the Defence estate.

The Committee may have seen that on 18 November 2019 the MOD published general advice on Gov.uk regarding the management of asbestos in Defence equipment, buildings, and infrastructure. This supplements internal communications to current civilian and Service personnel, with the aim of ensuring that any personnel who may have come into contact with asbestos are provided with consistent, helpful advice. My Department seeks to ensure that the relevant technical and safety data is in place where there is an asbestos risk, and that it is easily available to all, so that everyone has the right information about potential risks to exposure, which allows those risks to be properly managed.

Asbestos Compensation:

The MOD provides compensation for Service-related development of mesothelioma. Military no-fault compensation is provided under the War Pensions Scheme (WPS) and the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS), with awards made for any disablement, injury, or disorder due to service. The WPS covers service up to and including 5 April 2005; the AFCS applies from 6 April 2005 onwards. The improved control of asbestos exposure and the long

latent interval before development of the disease means that mesothelioma should only rarely be an issue for the AFCS, and only in the future.

The WPS has no time limits to claim, a low standard of proof, and the benefit of reasonable doubt is always given to the claimant. For asbestos claims, it has long been the practice that, where a claimant had seagoing service of any duration between 1939 and 1973, the claim of asbestos exposure will be accepted. This means that where these conditions are met, mesothelioma, which has a long latent period e.g. typically thirty to sixty years between exposure and clinical onset but may be caused by a few fibres of asbestos, is automatically accepted as Service-related. For other asbestos-related disorders such as asbestosis, lung cancer, or pleural thickening, acceptance would depend on case-specific circumstances. Pleural plaques are medically accepted as markers of asbestos exposure and will also be accepted but, as expert opinion advises that they do not produce any disablement, assessment is nil percent with no award paid. For any other asbestos claims by non-seagoing naval claimants, Army, and RAF members, claims are fully considered on their case facts.

Under the WPS, spouse/dependents' pensions are provided where a military person dies of Service-related mesothelioma, regardless of whether an award was made in life. In addition, following the introduction of the civilian Diffuse Mesothelioma Scheme, from April 2016 veterans diagnosed with Service-related diffuse mesothelioma due to asbestos exposure prior to 5 April 2005 have the option of receiving a full and final lump sum payment of £140,000. There is active research on new treatments, but the prognosis for mesothelioma sadly remains poor, so Veterans UK has introduced an accelerated claims process for this group of claimants, together with enhanced welfare support and advice.

The MOD and the single Services, particularly in Royal Navy ships and at dockyards, began appropriate action to eliminate or reduce asbestos exposure as early as the 1960s, but it is accepted that cases of asbestos-related disorders will continue to arise until at least 2050. The great majority of these will be in the civilian construction industry but, where cases arise in former military personnel, no fault compensation awards will continue to be made under the WPS or the AFCS. For civilian personnel, and where Service exposure has occurred in military personnel after the repeal of the Crown Proceedings Act in 1987, civil damages may be claimed.

More information about the WPS and AFCS, and how they compensate for mesothelioma, can be found in the Independent Medical Expert Group report published in March 2015. It is available at the following link:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798337/IMEG - Reort_3_2015_TOPIC_2 - Mesothelioma_Report_002 .pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798337/IMEG_-_Reort_3_2015_TOPIC_2_-_Mesothelioma_Report_002_.pdf).

10. Information on the MoD's engagement with local authorities and communities in respect of accommodation for personnel at Faslane (Qq162-164)

Personnel levels at HM Naval Base (HMNB) Clyde are due to increase as the base grows. Service-provided accommodation will continue to be available for them, complemented by the choice of private market accommodation which Service personnel may buy or rent under the MOD's Future Accommodation Model (FAM) project. This is being piloted at HMNB Clyde, for approximately 3 years from 30 September 2019. Under the pilot, Service personnel posted to HMNB Clyde can opt to live in private market accommodation of their choosing up to 50 miles from the base, rather than live in MOD accommodation.

FAM project staff and Base personnel engage routinely with local authorities and communities, via a variety of fora, and routinely discuss the potential impact of the FAM pilot,

besides wider Naval Base issues associated with a growing population and additional base-supported vessels. Data will be collected to inform how the FAM pilot is impacting the local area; this will be discussed with Local Authorities as the pilot progresses. In addition, the base has engaged with Scottish Enterprise over wider economic issues associated with a growing establishment.

11. Further information on each of the Defence Secretary's 'highest priorities' for each Service Chief (including how progress will be monitored and what performance measures are in place) and six-monthly updates thereafter (Q168).

I have given the Armed Forces' service Chiefs a single overriding objective on which I will hold them to account above all else. For the First Sea Lord, I have asked him to increase the availability of our Royal Navy surface ships and submarines. For the Chief of the General Staff, I have asked that he prioritises the recruitment and retention issues in the British Army. And the Chief of the Air Staff's priority is to reduce the number of pilots held in the Military Flying Training System and increase the system's throughput. Delivering against all three priorities will ensure that Defence meets its obligations to the country. I meet regularly with the Chiefs to discuss issues but will formally hold them to account against these objectives on a six-monthly basis.

12. Further information on future recruitment contracts for each of the Services (including consideration of contracting out the contracts for the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force) (Q169)

For context, the Recruiting Partnering Project (RPP) is the Army's 10-year recruiting contract with Capita (2012-2022). It is a matter of public record that the early years of the contract were beset with significant difficulty. However, in 2018, fault was conceded by both parties, leading to a reset and transformation of the Army/Capita strategic relationship under the Personnel Campaign Board (PCB).

I am very pleased to say that the progress made by the PCB is now starting to yield the desired results. Early indications, acknowledging the size of the challenge ahead, were that the renewed partnership would achieve 80% of the demand in the 2019-20 recruiting year. However, current performance indicates we are likely to surpass that - a marked improvement on the c.60% achieved in 2018-19.

Looking further ahead, we established the Armed Forces Recruiting Programme (AFRP) in March 2018. We expect the Programme to deliver a future single tri-Service recruiting model, taking on board the hard-learned lessons from current UK military recruiting along with approaches used by both allies and wider industry.

As I hope the Committee will appreciate, the AFRP is still being formulated and so I cannot go into the detail. It is fundamental to the future of the Armed Forces that we get this right. However, I can confirm we will continue with market engagement to shape the requirement of the programme, and that we are aiming to take to market a formal offer for any outsourced elements this summer.

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Please note: The Serving Personnel will not only be saving for their visa costs, but will most likely be the prime wage earner and responsible for saving for the whole family's visa costs.