



Defence Committee

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Rt Hon Dr Andrew Murrison MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families
By email: MinDPV-PrivateOffice@mod.gov.uk

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Women in the Armed Forces: follow-up

Dear Dr Murrison,

We are approaching two years since the publication of our report into Women in the Armed Forces in July 2021. The Committee was encouraged by the Government's response, published in December 2021, and the subsequent continued engagement with us, including Baroness Goldie's appearance before us in November 2022 and the Department's associated written evidence.

The Committee retains a strong interest in the full and equal participation of women in the armed forces. This is shown by our decision to seek further written and oral evidence in late 2022, to [respond](#) to the [Joint Prosecution Protocol Consultation](#) in early 2023, to publish [evidence from defence medics](#) in May 2023—whistle-blowers who felt compelled to reveal continued unacceptable behaviour affecting their patients and poor complaint handling—and to question the Chief of the Defence Staff on progress only last week. On 7th June, I also met you to convey my deep concerns about the whistle-blowers' evidence.

To support continued progress in driving change, the Committee intends to hold a further evidence session with you and relevant officials in the next few months. This letter highlights areas on which we are likely to focus at that session, and identifies information we expect to receive by 20th October to allow us to prepare for the session.

The Government cannot lose focus on this issue: every case of unacceptable behaviour is one case too many and undermines the reputation of the entire Armed Forces. Mishandling of this behaviour magnifies its effects and causes further damage.

I look forward to discussing these issues with you later this year.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Atherton MP
Chair of the Defence Sub-Committee on Women in the Armed Forces

Areas for focus at the next evidence session (non-exhaustive list)

Unacceptable behaviours and support for complainants/victims

The Committee's original inquiry revealed shocking evidence of unacceptable behaviours that disproportionately affect servicewomen, including criminal acts such as sexual assault and rape. There are strong signs that these behaviours remain a problem, from the continuous attitudes surveys, from the defence medics' evidence we have published and from cases which have come to light in the media in the submarine service and Red Arrows. We continue to have serious concerns about the effectiveness of the MoD's response to these cases. The Committee recognises that it will take time to address these behaviours and acknowledges some positive changes (such as the rollout of the BHD helpline and zero-tolerance policies), as well as supporting training. It is too early to say whether these measures have been successful in driving down cases of unacceptable behaviours. It is also not clear that the Ministry of Defence has considered the impact of legacy cases on service personnel.

Service Complaints System

In 2022, women remained overrepresented in the Service Complaints System. [Evidence from the Centre for Military Justice](#) (CMJ) in October questioned the expertise of independent service complaints teams in handling complex BHD cases, pointing to the high percentage of Ombudsman investigations upheld in favour of the complainant. According to the Ombudsman's reporting, the timeframe for resolving service complaints is often too long, and seems to be getting worse; while her [evidence](#) to us from October suggests that "delay and an overall lack of confidence in the system" are blockers to progress.

Commanding Officers

The Ombudsman's evidence also points to Commanding Officers still falling short in the way they respond to complaints, with individuals being given incorrect advice on the process. NGO evidence received asserts that in some cases service personnel are being coerced to withdraw complaints. Commanding Officers are responsible for the provision of victims' services, but the CMJ has warned, based on its work representing servicewomen, that "COs are routinely ignorant of the relevant policy". We have also heard suggestions that the Chain of Command is not always fully removed from decisions on complaints of unacceptable sexual behaviour, despite commitments by the MOD to ensure this in response to the Committee's recommendation.

Service Justice System (SJS)

The Government rejected the Committee's recommendation that cases of murder, rape and manslaughter in the UK should automatically be referred to civilian courts rather than remaining in the SJS. While we note work to improve the capability of the SJS to handle sexual offences and improve victims' experiences (notably the launch in late 2022 of the Defence Serious Crime Unit), there is still potential for continued issues around concurrent jurisdiction.

Recruitment & representation

Defence has set itself a Level of Ambition to achieve a 30% inflow of women to the armed forces by 2030. The latest statistics show that 12.9% of the total intake into the UK regular forces and the reserves were female (in the 12 months to 30 September 2022). The UK still has the lowest representation of women in its armed forces of all the Five Eyes partners. However, some attempts within the RAF to increase the female intake have been deeply misguided (see below).

Uniforms & equipment

The MoD told us that the delivery of female-appropriate kit and equipment to all servicewomen will be complete by the middle of 2023. As of November 2022, there had been significant progress, but it was not clear that this roll-out was complete ([Qq118-120](#)). Some servicewomen indicated to the Committee that they had not yet received their entitlement.

Family support

The Committee supports the roll-out of wraparound childcare across all Services, but has heard [evidence from the Families Federations](#) that there are still gaps in provision for early years and holiday care, funding disparities across the devolved administrations, and a lack of support for those overseas and reservists, who are not eligible. Childcare will continue to be an obstacle for women in particular, as they are more likely to take on the role of caring for young children, until it is available and affordable for every armed forces family, regardless of where they are based.

Career progression

There have been changes since the inquiry to improve the representation of women among military leaders, on which Baroness Goldie [updated](#) us last year, including the introduction of independent members and women to promotion boards, talent management and mentoring schemes, and the modification of job specifications, where the language used was creating barriers for women. Both the Royal Navy and the Army say it is too soon to measure the impact of changes made to the career pathway and that it could take over 5 years ([WIF0049](#)). In the RAF, data shows the percentages of women being promoted are increasing. 15% of promotions at Air Rank in 2021-22 were women, rising to 16% (to date in January 2023); 23% of promotions to OF5 in 2021-22 were women, rising to 27% (to date in January 2023); and of note, 30% of promotions in the Intelligence profession and 29% in Engineering (Air Specialist) were women ([WIF0049](#)).

Veterans: Transition/resettlement

The Committee notes the [commitment](#) to the development of a Women's Veterans Strategy by the Office of Veterans Affairs.

Requests for written information

The Committee will hold another oral evidence session on these issues in the next few months.

Rather than the MoD responding immediately, the Committee requests that the MoD share the following written information by 20th October 2023, to inform this session:

1. A detailed update on the impact of policy changes to tackle unacceptable behaviours, alongside an analysis of the latest statistics on sexual offences/other unacceptable behaviours and any evidence that statistical developments reflect any particular action taken by the three services.
2. How the Services are addressing positive cultural changes and how this is being measured.
3. How often the new zero-tolerance policies have been applied across the three Services and how many discharges have resulted as a consequence of this.
4. A statement of any further measures planned to address current culture and behaviours, systems for investigating complaints and supporting complainants, and addressing the impact on victims of legacy cases.
5. Evidence of continued work to gather data relating to cultural change (including via the tri-service sexual harassment surveys and other channels) and efforts to make more of this available online, as mentioned in November 2022 (Q43).
6. An update on the progress of the accountability process for Commanding Officers who fail to handle complaints appropriately, including the accountability and analysis mentioned in November 2022 (Q2 and Q57). This should include an update on delivery of the new IT system, including a timeline for access to the portal, and data on action taken against Commanding Officers.
7. An update on progress in ensuring that the Chain of Command is fully removed from decisions on complaints of unacceptable sexual behaviour and how this is being measured to demonstrate that it is being implemented.
8. Data on the number of occasions complainants have decided to submit non-sexual misconduct complaints through the Central Admissibility Team rather than the Chain of Command (Q55 and Q57).
9. The new Key Performance Indicators agreed with the Service Complaints Ombudsman on complaints handling, which were due to be up and running by early 2023 (Q84).
10. Evidence of how the DPP and DSP are ensuring appropriate referral of sexual offences in the UK where there is concurrent jurisdiction.
11. A detailed update on all work to improve the capability of the SJS to handle military sexual offences committed in the UK. This update should include updated statistics on investigations, including all the aspects on which the committee already recommended improved data (paras 178-179 of the original inquiry report).
12. An update on the work of the Defence Serious Crime Command (including the Defence Serious Crime Unit) and the Victim and Witness Care Unit, including

- how they are funded, their resources (including specialist investigators and specialist support for victims), how their independence is assured, how their effectiveness is measured, and what additional training has been provided.
13. Evidence of how the standard of justice received in the Service Justice System is compared for equivalence to the Civilian Justice System.
 14. An update on progress on the appointment of a woman to every Court Martial board and lowering the rank requirement for board members (Qq101-102).
 15. An update on progress on women's representation in the armed forces and a reflection on the target-driven approach, taking account also of the RAF diversity recruitment drive that led to the resignation of the head of recruitment over concerns about "impossible" diversity targets and the recommendations of the associated non-statutory inquiry.
 16. Data on the relative impact of different recruitment strategies/campaigns to boost female representation (collecting this data if it is not already collected), with a view to explaining to the committee how the MoD will roll out the most successful ones.
 17. A comprehensive picture of delivery of female-appropriate kit and equipment to date and firm assurances (backed by statistical evidence) to suggest that this rollout is complete, as promised.
 18. An update on the initiatives announced on 16 October 2022 to raise awareness of women's health issues, such as menopause, and a confirmation (backed by evidence) that sanitary products continue to be available to service personnel on bases and on deployments overseas.
 19. An update at the next evidence session on the uptake of Flexible Service and whether it has increased beyond 1% of Service personnel (Government response to para 99 of Committee's Report), including data on the number of female and male personnel using flexible Service provisions
 20. A detailed update on efforts to fill gaps in family support provision.
 21. An update on career progression for women in the armed forces, including progress on measuring the impact of the measures taken to date, especially for the Army and Navy.
 22. Evidence of a fully-fledged Women's Veterans Strategy, with actions to address gaps in provision of support for women veterans and to improve their access to services.

The Committee would also of course welcome written evidence on any other relevant issues on which you would like to provide an update.