House of Commons

Defence Committee

Ready for War?

First Report of Session 2023–24

Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report

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The Defence Committee

The Defence Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Defence and its associated public bodies.

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Summary

Readiness is the ability to deploy personnel and equipment within a set timeframe, for the personnel to be trained to use that equipment effectively and for the Armed Forces to be able to sustain the deployment until the mission is accomplished. We have examined each of the following in respect of the UK:

- operational readiness—the ability to deploy a force for a standing commitment or respond to a crisis. We find this to be proven, but with issues of overstretch.
- warfighting readiness—the ability to deploy and sustain a force that can fight at high intensity in multiple domains for a prolonged period of time. We find this to be in doubt; and
- strategic readiness—the ability of the state to identify and utilise all the tools available to it to support a warfighting effort. This appears still to be more of a concept under debate within Government than an agreed policy with measurable deliverables.

It is unacceptable that for much of this inquiry, we have been hampered in our attempts to assess readiness by a lack of Government transparency. Key information that was readily available a decade ago is no longer published for reasons that are unclear, and the Government has taken excessive time to respond to our requests for information. We have held one informative and useful exchange with the Government at a classified level, but we are unable to reflect this in a public Report. We cannot adequately fulfil our duty to the House of Commons and to the electorate to hold the Government to account for its decisions without fuller and more timely access to information about these sensitive but vitally important issues that are central to our remit. We expect the Government to work with us to design a more balanced framework to allow us and future Defence Committees to scrutinise readiness.

The UK Armed Forces have deployed above their capacity in response to the worsening security situation, but all have capability shortfalls and stockpile shortages, and are losing personnel faster than they can recruit them. They are also consistently overstretched, and this has negatively impacted retention as well as delaying the development of warfighting readiness. Either the Ministry of Defence must be fully funded to engage in operations whilst also developing warfighting readiness; or the Government must reduce the operational burden on the Armed Forces.

There is no easy answer to these problems. We recognise that the Government is considering options for improving recruitment and retention of personnel whilst also aiming to reform its procurement system with a view to building industrial capacity so that munitions stockpiles can be replenished. We welcome these initiatives, but are aware that previous reforms have not had the desired effect. It is clear that the Government will never achieve warfighting or strategic readiness without a thriving industrial base and without an offer that can attract, develop and sustain enough service personnel skilled to meet the increasing and evolving military challenges that we as a nation face. These reforms need to work, and at pace.

Despite the United Kingdom spending approximately £50bn a year on defence (plus more for Ukraine) the UK's Armed Forces require sustained ongoing investment to be able to fight a sustained, high intensity war, alongside our Allies, against a peer adversary.

1 Introduction

Purpose of the inquiry

1. We started this inquiry with the intention of assessing the Readiness of the UK Armed Forces, and reporting our findings to the House and to the public on the basis of a similar level of information to previous Defence Committees.[1] Over the course of our inquiry, it has become apparent that much of the information that was available to our predecessors and which would allow us to make a full assessment is now held at a classified level and was therefore not easily accessible. The following Report is our best assessment based on the publicly available information.

2. In this Report we have been forthright in making specific criticisms where these are justified. In doing so we are drawing on publicly available information freely accessible to all, including the United Kingdom's potential adversaries.

Timeline of the inquiry

3. The inquiry received both written and oral evidence and we are extremely grateful to all those who contributed. The oral evidence sessions were:

- Tuesday 6 June: Dr Simon Anglim, Teaching Fellow, King's College London; Professor Justin Bronk, Senior Research Fellow, RUSI; and Nick Childs, Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security, International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- Tuesday 20 June: General (Retd) Lord Houghton of Richmond GCB CBE DL, Former Chief of Defence Staff.
- Wednesday 21 June: General (Retd) Sir Nick Carter, Former Chief of the Defence Staff.
- Tuesday 7 November: Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of the Air Staff, and General Sir Patrick Sanders, Chief of the General Staff.
- Tuesday 14 November: Admiral Sir Ben Key, First Sea Lord, and Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse, Director Force Generation, Royal Navy.
- Wednesday 22 November: Rt Hon. James Heappey MP, Minister for the Armed Forces and General Sir Jim Hockenhull, Commander, Strategic Command.

4. During this period, we also took evidence from Professors Malcom Chalmers, Michael Clarke and Sir Lawrence Freedman; as well as from the Secretary of State for Defence, and from the civilian and military leadership of the Ministry of Defence. All of these sessions contributed to this inquiry.[2]

1 Defence Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2009–10, Readiness and recuperation of the Armed Forces: looking towards the Strategic Defence Review, HC 53

2 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246; Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689; Oral evidence taken on 5 September 2023, HC (2022–23) 1804; Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52; Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54

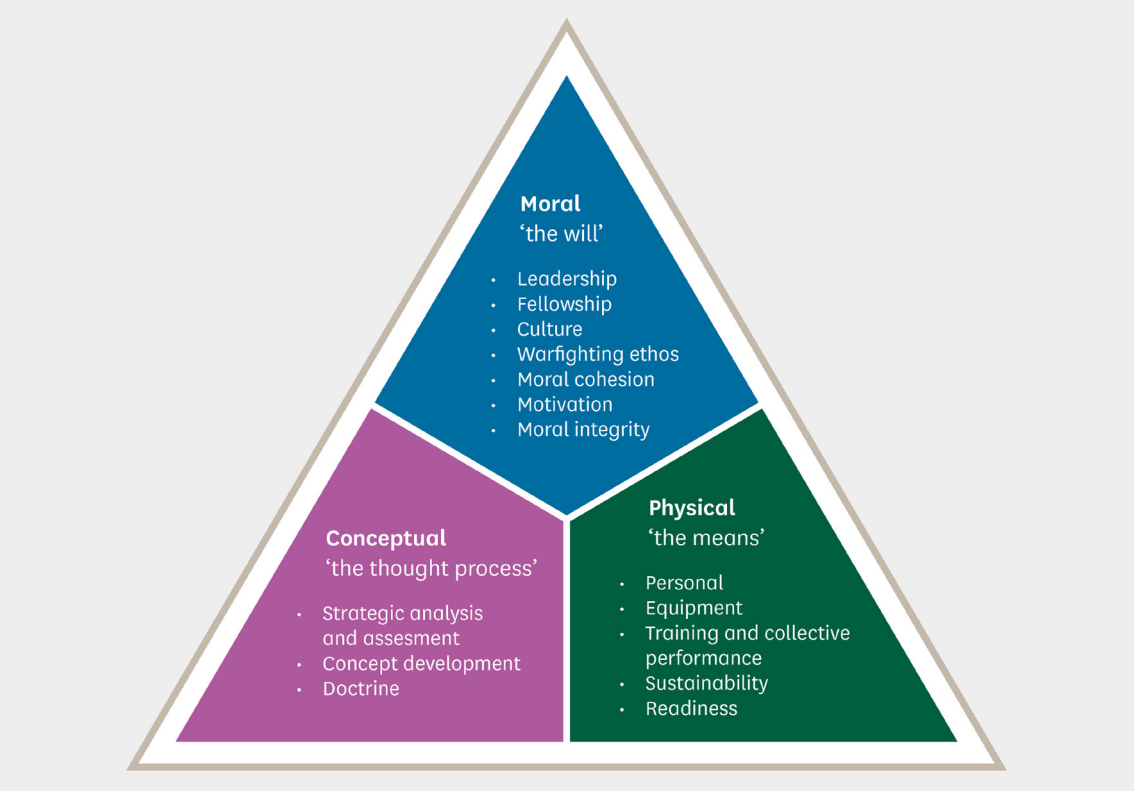
5. We would also like to thank the House of Commons Library Specialists from the International Affairs and Defence section who assisted with the compilation of the table at Annex 2. This table is a record of how a number of other legislatures of UK Allies scrutinise readiness.

2 What is Readiness?

6. Readiness is defined as being the period measured from an initial order to the moment when the headquarters or unit is ready to perform its task from its peacetime location (permanent or forward deployed) or ready for deployment.[3] According to the MOD, its readiness posture comprises a combination of:

- capacity (how much of the force is usable within a certain time frame, which is in itself underpinned by equipment availability);
- capability (the effect achieved by the combination of equipment and the personnel trained and available to utilise it);
- interoperability (an ability to work with other parts of the force which increases effect and can act as a potential mitigation for capability gaps); and
- sustainability (provision of sufficient materiel to ensure the deployed force is fully prepared to operate).[4]

7. Many of our witnesses were at pains to highlight that readiness is not just about platforms but also the systems which surround them. General Sir Nick Carter highlighted the Defence Lines of Development[5] as being key to Readiness.[6] Readiness is part of the physical component of fighting power (see graphic[7] below).



3 Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
4 Ministry of Defence, UK Defence Doctrine, JDP0–01 Sixth Edition, (November 2022), p 33
5 Also known as TEPID OIL: Training; Equipment; Personnel; Information; Concepts & Doctrine; Organisation; Infrastructure; and Logistics
6 Q149
7 Ministry of Defence, UK Defence Doctrine, JDP0–01 Sixth Edition, (November 2022), p 24

The MOD states that readiness can contribute to deterrence by demonstrating preparedness and resolve.[8]

8. The UK holds forces and supporting capabilities at varying states of readiness in accordance with its graduated response posture. The highest level of readiness (R1 or Extremely High Readiness) is "two days or less with force elements held at anything from minutes notice-to-move to the full 48 hours". The lowest readiness level (R11 or 'Very Low Readiness') is more than 365 days.[9]

'Readiness for what?'

9. One of the key questions which emerged during our evidence sessions was 'Readiness for what?' with our witnesses differentiating between 'operational readiness', 'warfighting readiness' and 'strategic readiness'.[10]

10. Dr Simon Anglim of King's College London explained that operational readiness is readiness at its most basic components: sufficient numbers of trained people and working equipment to generate the required mass to be deployed and the systems and infrastructure to "get them to where you need them to be when you need them to be there, and to maintain and supply them once they are there."[11]

11. Professor Justin Bronk of RUSI explained that 'warfighting readiness' was a step above operational readiness in not just relying on trained personnel utilising equipment but also "how ready the system is as a whole to spin into action at that scale". In an RAF context, this meant not just the planes and the pilots but that "the air crew, the air traffic controllers, the air battle managers, the mission commanders" were also properly trained to carry out warfighting tasks—training that was often displaced by the need to maintain operational readiness for "presence, signalling or, essentially, non-contested operations".[12] Nick Childs agreed, noting that the need for warfighting readiness had increased in recent years:

> In the more benign environments in the past, you would be talking about basic maritime skills with limited equipment capabilities in order to deliver a presence at a relatively low level of maritime security demand. Now you are talking about much more complex requirements for high-intensity warfare.[13]

12. Strategic readiness was defined by General Sir Nick Carter as "the ability to build, maintain and balance warfighting capabilities and competitive advantage to achieve strategic objectives across the threats, but also across time horizons."[14] He told us that:

> the fundamental questions you need to ask are about ready for what, ready for when and what needs to be ready. I do not think that we are necessarily particularly good at doing that.[15]

8 Ministry of Defence, UK Defence Doctrine, JDP0–01 Sixth Edition, (November 2022), p 33
9 Ministry of Defence, Logistics for Joint Operations JDP 4–00 Fourth Edition), (July 2015) p 115
10 Q1; 4; 74; 76; 113
11 Q1
12 Q1
13 Q1
14 Q113
15 Q113

13. The Minister for the Armed Forces noted that readiness definitions changed depending on the context:

> in an age of counter-insurgency the UK interest might require us to have this sort of force package permanently deployed in this place, with contracted logistics, with no requirement for air-to-air missiles but a very predictable requirement for [munitions] … That is a completely different set of risk calculations from where you are if you are trying to hold a force at contingency for full-on peer-on-peer war fighting. … we have an awful lot of work to do to recover the … readiness that we enjoyed during the cold war, and that we require again now; but strategic readiness—the readiness of the nation to bring to bear all the nation's strength to compete with an adversary—is another part of readiness.[16]

14. The next chapters will examine the readiness (at operational, warfighting and strategic levels) of the UK's Front Line Commands.

Measuring readiness

15. The structure of the UK Armed Forces (covering both personnel and equipment) is determined by ministerial priorities, set out in the Defence Planning Assumptions (DPAs). These are guidelines on the size (and numbers) of operations the military might be required to undertake, the types of operation, where they may occur (including distance from permanent bases) and which allies or partners with whom they may be conducted. The readiness of the Armed Forces is then judged in relation to the expectation of what the Forces might be asked to do by Ministers (as outlined in the DPAs). The First Sea Lord described it thus:

> I don't own the task allocation; I am merely forced to generate forces against that. The range of tasks would be a question for Ministers. As for whether I have sufficient forces to meet the full range of tasks all the time in the way they would wish … there is always a desire to do more than the fleet is actually capable of doing. What we pride ourselves on is the degree of agility that will allow us to rebalance against what the ministerial priorities are at the time.[17]

The UK Armed Forces have an impressive ability to maintain their standing commitments whilst also responding (often at very short notice) to crisis situations following operational tasking from Ministers.[18]

16. When asked how the Ministry of Defence measured readiness, the Chief of the Air Staff pointed to the 'Defence Capability Assessment Register' which identifies the risks which might be carried against the different scenarios included in the Defence Planning Assumptions—such as routine operations (for example, air-policing or peacekeeping), a deployment in response to an unexpected event, and full-scale warfighting. There is also a

16 Q350
17 Q309
18 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q12

'Capability Readiness Assessment Framework' which assesses the availability of the force elements at that moment in time, both in terms of operational readiness and warfighting readiness.[19]

17. General Lord Houghton described how readiness assessments are prepared for the monthly meeting of the Defence Board[20]—"a somewhat grandiose chart of every major force element or capability across all three services and of the readiness of what is now called Strategic Command" which provided a colour-coded assessment (red, amber, green) of readiness, based principally on manpower, training, equipment and logistic support. The chart also had a "forward indication of improvement or deterioration in readiness based on known factors such as future funding, future equipment obsolescence, new equipment coming into service, manning predictions and things like that". General Lord Houghton explained that the purpose of such an assessment was that it enabled the ministers, civil servants and military representatives to discuss constraints, freedoms, options, funding choices and risk.[21]

18. The Minister for the Armed Forces told us that DPAs change as the threat changes, as they are not based on what the Forces can do but rather on the MOD's assessment of the strategic environment and threat. He told us that ministers, senior civil servants and the Chiefs are "constantly balancing risk and threat, as presented by those who understand it and can articulate what we need to do to keep the nation safe, and the proximity of the threat" with all trying to "optimise the force we have to respond to those threats in the best possible way", acknowledging that this has become more difficult "in an age as unstable and insecure as this".[22]

19. The Minister drew a distinction between the Iraq and Afghanistan years which saw two ongoing medium-sized interventions with "permanent, well-found operating bases with contracted logistics and very predictable rates of consumption" and the present with its transition "back to where we were in the cold war, where your DPA is everything you have got, thrown at your adversary as quickly as you can possibly throw it at them".[23] He acknowledged that this transition was more challenging than it had been in the cold war as:

> during the cold war a lot of the British Army, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy sat at contingency, waiting for NATO to require them. Now, we are trying to operate with the same force that we are trying to hold at contingency to be ready for full state-on-state conflict. That creates a tension, so each of the chiefs, as they have come through, has said to you, "I am delivering against my DPAs"—which is true. The reality is that politicians

19 Q209; Q210; 212; 298

20 The current members of the Defence Board are: Secretary of State for Defence The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP (Chair); Minister of State for Defence Procurement James Cartlidge MP; Minister of State Baroness Goldie DL; Minister for the Armed Forces the Rt Hon James Heappey MP; Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families the Rt Hon Dr Andrew Murrison MP; Permanent Secretary David Williams; Chief of the Defence Staff Admiral Sir Tony Radakin CB ADC; Vice Chief of the Defence Staff General Gwyn Jenkins CB OBE ADC; Second Permanent Secretary Paul Lincoln; Director General Finance Kate Harrison (Interim); Lead Non-Executive Board Member Brian McBride; Non-Executive Director Robin Marshall; Non-Executive Director Kate Guthrie; Non-Executive Director Dr Brian Gilvary

21 Q72

22 Q365

23 Q349

> ask chiefs to go well beyond what they are asked to provide for. We deploy the fleet and the Army well over what the DPAs require. I do not think that we can make any apology for that. The situation requires it.[24]

This delivery against a wide range of DPAs, in conjunction with preparing for peer-on-peer warfighting takes its toll as it requires a force structure which is both adaptable and agile. The Chief of the General Staff explained that it is relatively straightforward "to calculate whether you can switch between regions or whether you can switch up and down the scale" but that "tailoring a force for everything from peacekeeping operations right the way up to warfighting operations requires a level of investment in training". His assessment was that the UK Armed Forces were as good (if not better) than most armed forces in the world at being able to achieve this balance.[25]

20. However, even when a country ensures it has an adaptable and agile force structure, it can still be subject to a so-called 'strategic surprise': an unpredicted development that has a decisive and fundamental, transformative, sometimes revolutionary, effect on perceptions of readiness. Historic examples of strategic surprises include events such as Pearl Harbour, the Argentine invasion of the Falklands, and 9/11. More recent examples include the 2021 fall of Kabul and the October 2023 attack by Hamas. For instance, it has become clear since February 2022 that UK (and indeed European) stockpiles of munitions were far below the level required to counter with certainty a threat from the Russian Army.[26]

Scrutinising readiness

21. It is difficult to track adjustments to the Defence Planning Assumptions because they are currently classified[27] at SECRET[28] and so can only be inferred from the announcements of adaptations to force structure.[29] However, this has not always been the case—in 2005, a National Audit Office Report examining military readiness was able to highlight that in the period up to 2003, the Defence Planning Assumptions were based on "two medium-scale deployments". The report noted that the DPAs were then expanded to include "emphasis on multiple concurrent medium- and small-scale deployments" with the most demanding concurrency combination for some elements of the force structure increased to "two medium-scale deployments, together with a small-scale deployment"—and these were published in the 2003 Defence White Paper.[30]

22. In a 2010 Report on recruitment and retention, our predecessor Committee also had access to published information about the DPAs via an MOD Written Ministerial Statement, and was able to state publicly that:

> the Defence Planning Assumptions … currently state that the Armed Forces are to be configured to carry out one enduring medium scale operation (involving some 5,000 personnel) plus one enduring small scale operation

24 Q349
25 Q212
26 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q11
27 Classified information is information to which Government has assigned restrictions and handling controls proportionate to: the sensitivity of that information; the damage that its unauthorised access or disclosure might cause to individuals, national interests or international relations; and the measures that can reasonably be taken – such as restricting access –to reduce the risk of information breach.
28 FOI2016/04462 dated 18 May 2016 [accessed 30 June 2024]
29 Q2
30 National Audit Office, Assessing and Reporting Military Readiness, HC (2005–06) 72 (June 2005), p 8

> (with a battle group of between 600 and 700 personnel) and, in extremis, one other small scale nonenduring operation routinely and without overstretch. The Armed Forces have been operating above the level set out in the Defence Planning Assumptions for over seven years.[31]

23. The 2010 SDSR was accompanied by a factsheet on Future Force 2020 which went into considerable public detail about the new DPAs, stating that "the Armed Forces in the future will be sized and shaped to conduct":

- an enduring stabilisation operation at around brigade level (up to 6,500 personnel) with maritime and air support as required, while also conducting:
- one non-enduring complex intervention (up to 2,000 personnel), and
- one non-enduring simple intervention (up to 1,000 personnel);

OR alternatively:

- three non-enduring operations if we were not already engaged in an enduring operation;

OR:

- for a limited time, and with sufficient warning, committing all our effort to a one-off intervention of up to three brigades, with maritime and air support (around 30,000, two-thirds of the force deployed to Iraq in 2003).[32]

In contrast, the 2015 SDSR offered "little insight into the type, quantity, and duration of operations the armed forces would be sized and shaped to conduct".[33]

24. When we questioned the Service Chiefs and the Minister for Armed Forces as to why the decision had been made, apparently between 2010 and 2015, to classify the Defence Planning Assumptions, none of them could provide a reason for the change in approach. The Minister was surprised to be told that they had previously been publicly available,[34] and went on to say that:

> The DPAs were of their time. What the DPAs allowed you to do was to seek to optimise a more limited military resource against the limited threat. In the process, it allowed you to take quite a lot of risk against the war-fighting enablers, because you were making a set of DPAs and saying, "We're not going to war-fight, but we are going to do counter-insurgency at this scale." The DPAs probably need to be refreshed, or just binned altogether, because we are back into a cold war-type thing, but what you are really about is making a commitment to NATO about what it can have straightaway and the rest of your inventories available to NATO as quickly as possible. That is the kind of DPA of the day.[35]

31 Defence Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2009–10, Readiness and recuperation of the Armed Forces: looking towards the Strategic Defence Review, HC 53, para 46

32 Ministry of Defence, Fact Sheet 5: Future Force 2020 – Summary of size, shape and structure, accessed 26 January 2024

33 Dr Andrew Curtis, Integrated Force 2030 - The New Force Structure, October 2021

34 Q230; Q398

35 Q401

He also acknowledged that reports of our predecessor Committees demonstrated that the Department had provided them with much greater access to information, and he committed to working with us to find a manner in which the Defence Committee would be enabled adequately to scrutinise the readiness of UK Armed Forces.[36] Two former Chiefs of Defence Staff supported the suggestion that the Defence Committee needed to be able to hold the Government to account, even where that required access to classified information.[37]

25. This is not the only example of key MOD information which is no longer publicly available. Up until 2013, the MOD continued to publish figures of the number of Force Elements (typically ships, ground force sub-units and aircraft) showing critical or serious weakness against the total number of Force Elements for Strategy for Defence priorities. In 2011, 30% of Force Elements were showing critical or serious weaknesses; this dropped to 10% in 2012 and then 8% in 2013.[38] In the 2013–14 Annual Report and Accounts, the MOD announced that the figure could "no longer be calculated as a consequence of changes under the delegated operating model."[39]

26. The MOD also used to publish lists of 'pinch points' (trades where there are not enough trained regulars to perform operational tasks without taking mitigating action) in its Annual Report and Accounts up until 2016, when tables with information on the specific roles were replaced by far less detailed lines of text (as demonstrated below).

Naval Service pinch points from the MOD Annual Report and Accounts 2014–15

Naval Service Operational Pinch Point Groups 1 April 2015		Liability	Shortfall	% Shortfall
1	Above Water Warfare specialist – Rank: Leading Hand	130	20	15%
2	Above Water Tactical specialist – Rank: Leading Hand	160	35	20%
3	Weapon Engineer Officer (Submarines) – Rank: Lieutenant	90	~	~
4	Marine Engineer General Service – Rank: Leading Hand	515	35	~
5	Weapon Engineer General Service – Rank: Leading Hand	355	70	20%
6	Medical Technician (Operating Department Practitioner) – Rank: Leading Hand to Chief Petty Officer	25	~	25%
7	Submarine Coxswain – Rank: Chief Petty Officer	25	~	~
8	Strategic Weapons Systems Engineers – Rank: Leading Hand to Warrant Officer 1	255	90	35%
9	Seaman specialist – Rank: Able Rate	410	30	~
10	Marine Engineer General Service: Rank: Chief Petty Officer	400	85	20%
11	Medical Assistant (Submarines) – Rank: Senior Rates	40	~	10%
12	Chef – Rank: Able Rate to Leading Hand	500	10	~
13	Hydrographic Services – Rank: Leading Hand	25	10	40%
14	Mine Warfare – Rank: Leading Hand to Petty Officer	155	40	25%
15	Tactical Weapon Systems engineer – Rank: Petty Officer to Chief Petty Officer	285	115	40%
16	Underwater Warfare specialist – Rank: Able Rate to Petty Officer	300	95	30%
17	Submarine Sonar specialist (SSM) – Rank: Able Rate	155	~	~
18	Marine Engineer General Service – Rank: Petty Officer	560	240	45%
19	Weapon Engineer General Service – Rank: Petty Officer	375	140	40%
20	Nuclear Watchkeepers – Rank: Petty Officer to Warrant Officer 1	590	115	20%

36 Q398
37 Q81; 117
38 Figures taken from the Annual Report and Accounts Reports for 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13.
39 Ministry of Defence, Annual Report and Accounts 2013–14, HC 764, November 2014, p 8

Naval Service pinch points data from the Annual Report & Accounts 2015–16

> **Naval Service**
>
> The number of Naval Service OPPs is 18 which is a decrease of two since April 2015. The key pinch points relate to engineering roles plus some specialist roles such as warfare specialists.

In 2018, a Defence Minister told the House in response to a written question that:

> The Ministry of Defence does not publish the names or specific details of Operational Pinch Points (OPPs) as this information would, or would be likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces.[40]

However, that explanation has been rejected by retired senior military personnel.[41] When asked why the decision was made to cease publishing the information, the Minister for Defence People and Families promised to look into the matter.[42]

27. On 17 January 2024, the Minister for Defence Procurement refused to reveal to the House the expected size of the surface fleet (frigates and destroyers) in the years 2024–26, on the grounds that the detail of "forward availability forecasts" was not disclosed in order to "preserve the operational security of the Fleet".[43] However, that information had previously been publicly available—for instance, in November 2021, we were told that the intention was for HMS Glasgow to enter service at the point that HMS Westminster (the first of the ASW Type 23s to leave service) was retired.[44] Snapshots of the status of the surface fleet (captured by open source journalists and commentators) are also widely available.[45] We have produced a table at Annex 1 to demonstrate the types of information no longer available.

28. We reached out to NATO Allies to determine how their governments kept their legislatures informed about their armed forces readiness. The full list of responses can be found annexed to this Report. Many produce annual reports, some of which are unclassified (and therefore publicly available) containing details such as the percentage of deployable equipment in the different domains.[46] Some governments provide committees responsible for scrutinising defence policy with additional information in confidence. For instance, as well as public annual reports on the state of defence, both the Finnish and German Defence Committees receive regular classified briefings on the operational readiness of their nation's armed forces. The standing Committee for Defence of the Netherlands in the House of Representatives is currently considering a proposal from that country's Ministry of Defence to increase the information provided to elected representatives on the efforts to improve operational readiness.[47] In the US, as well as classified semi-annual reports

40 PQ 1572 1 [Army: Recruitment] 25 June 2018
41 End the 'cover-up' over shortages in military, ex-defence chiefs tell ministers, *The Daily Mail*, 08 Jan 2024, Pg. 26
42 HC Deb, 8 Jan 2024, col. 19
43 PQ 86 9 [Navy: Warships] 9 January 2024
44 Oral evidence taken on 2 November 2021, HC (2021–22) 168, Q162
45 The Status of the British Fleet, The UK Defence Journal, 15 October 2023
46 See: Ready Forces - Canada.ca;
47 The Dutch Defence White Paper 2022 states that the Dutch MOD will issue "confidential annexes and briefings to the House of Representatives containing information on the steps being taken to improve the operational readiness and deployability of our units, and the effects of such action".

to Congress, the Government Accountability Office also reports on military readiness issues and delivers public testimony to the Armed Services Committees (and their sub-Committees).

29. We originally requested on 1 February 2023 that the MOD provide witnesses for a public evidence session on the readiness of UK Armed Forces with a proposed date of 1 March. We were subsequently informed that the MOD would only be able to provide witnesses following the Budget on 15 March. Despite this, no date was ever proposed by the MOD. We then decided to hold a full inquiry—to hear from voices outside the MOD—which was launched on 23 April, asking all interested parties including the MOD to submit written evidence by 5 June. We did not receive written evidence from the MOD by the deadline, and began holding oral evidence sessions on 6 June, without the benefit of their perspective. Despite suggesting that the delay was down to the need to complete the Defence Command Paper Refresh (DCP23) which was published on 18 July, the MOD did not provide their written submission to the inquiry until 21 November—the day before the final evidence session with the Minister. Some of the information in the submission was out of date and it did not provide the detail requested, instead indicating that such detail could be provided in a closed private meeting. This closed meeting took place following the final evidence session and we want to recognise openly that it was both informative and useful. Further public written evidence was requested at the end of November. As at 30 January 2024, that information has still not arrived.

30. One of Parliament's main roles is to examine and challenge the work of the Government. House of Commons Select Committees are appointed to fulfil that role in respect of different parts of Government.[48] In 2019, the Liaison Committee concluded that the overall aim of Select Committees ought to be to "hold Ministers and Departments to account, and to investigate matters of public concern where there is a need for accountability to the public through Parliament".[49] Without the provision of necessary information, we are hampered in our ability to carry out this vital function.[50]

Conclusions and recommendations

31. **The protection of sensitive information plays a vital role in the security of this country. However, the Ministry of Defence has become demonstrably less transparent over the past decade. The fact that the Minister and senior military personnel did not realise that information which is now classified was once widely available suggests that this trend towards greater secrecy has been either clandestine or unconscious. Other nations, facing very similar threats, provide significantly more information about readiness than the UK, both to the public and to relevant parliamentary committees.**

32. **Readiness is about acceptable risk. The decisions on what risks to take are ultimately political (based partly on military advice) rather than solely military or parliamentary decisions. Ministers will also inevitably need to reach judgments about the availability of information regarding threats and the UK's readiness to respond**

48 Meg Russell and Lisa James, Parliamentary scrutiny: what is it and why does it matter?, UCL Constitution Unit briefing, September 2023

49 Liaison Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2017–19, The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system, HC 1860, para 51

50 Liaison Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2017–19, The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system, HC 1860, para 91

to those threats, and these judgments may change as the threat landscape changes. However, Parliament's role and our role in particular is to hold Ministers to account for their actions. We cannot fulfil this role without adequate information, along the lines that was available to our predecessors. At present there is no regular mechanism which allows us to scrutinise ministerial decisions on readiness and their impact on risk.

33. **The Government's reaction to this specific inquiry has also been unacceptably slow and has impeded our work. Responses to our requests for written evidence have arrived many months late and contained very little useful information. We took up the Government's offer of a meeting in private to review classified information. This was both constructive and informative, but it took place 10 months after our initial request for this data, and there is no guarantee that it will be repeated in the future, which raises the concern about whether there is sufficient ministerial grip on readiness.**

34. **In the absence of adequate official information, public and parliamentary scrutiny of and debate about UK armed forces readiness currently relies on media reporting and corridor conversations, leading to suspicion that the forces are less ready than in fact they are. It does not need to be like this. The information flow in many of our NATO allies is far franker. Our request is not for very detailed, very highly classified information, but for information that only the most naïve would think was not already in the hands of the UK's potential adversaries and their intelligence apparatus.**

35. ***In a functioning democracy, the House of Commons Defence Committee needs to be routinely informed about the planning assumptions and readiness of the nation's armed forces. We therefore recommend that—following the Minister's welcome commitment to work with us—the Government propose how we and our successors can receive at least annually a meaningfully detailed update on the readiness of the UK Armed Forces, taking account of our conclusions above.***

36. ***We also recommend that the Government explain why previously unclassified information about readiness is no longer published, recognise the reduction in public and parliamentary accountability that this has brought about, and seek to rectify the situation. In future, when a decision is being considered to classify previously available information, we recommend that the Government should consult the relevant House of Commons Select Committee before that decision is made.***

3 Readiness of the UK Armed Forces

Operational readiness

37. At the end of 2023, over 7,000 UK Armed Forces personnel were deployed on more than 40 operations abroad.[51] Some of these operations are long-standing commitments whereas others are in response to unexpected events. In the last quarter of 2023, the Secretary of State deployed a Royal Navy task group to the east Mediterranean and both a P-8 Maritime Patrol Aircraft and a Rivet Joint to the Middle East following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October and the Israeli response. HMS Diamond was also deployed east of Suez, originally to increase the size of the UK's ongoing Operation KIPION and later joining the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian to secure trade routes. These deployments resulted in an increase of some 1,000 personnel in the region.[52] A battalion was also deployed to the NATO KFOR mission on the Kosovo-Serbia border in response to increased tensions.[53] In late December, HMS Trent was deployed to Guyana in support of that Commonwealth nation which is facing claims to part of its territory by neighbouring Venezuela.[54]

38. Standing commitments and 'flying the flag' operations can play a vital role in building alliances and partnerships that could help deter or win a future war. The Minister for the Armed Forces highlighted the work which the Rangers carried out countering Russian influence[55] and the Secretary of State cited the deployment of the Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific as being critical in building relationships with partners in the region.[56]

39. The Secretary of State told us that in relation to the additional deployments to KFOR and the Middle East, his "experience of our Armed Forces has been that when I have needed something so far, it has been there":

> They will say yes, but they will also say, "But these are the compromises you will be making." … I haven't found any of those to be unreasonable or unsustainable decisions to make. … I have been very impressed, with more in reserve on each of these if we wanted.[57]

Appropriate operational readiness was essential to enable these deployments and the ability of the Armed Forces to respond to crisis situations in an effective and timely manner is evident.[58]

40. The Minister for the Armed Forces acknowledged that the UK Armed Forces were deployed in excess of what the force structure was designed for, noting that "there is absolutely no pretending that we are not spending resource more keenly than our

51 X (formerly known as Twitter) post by the Ministry of Defence, 21 December 2023 [Accessed 26 January 2024]
52 HC Deb, 20 November 2023, col. 3; Defence Secretary visits Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories to explore options to boost humanitarian aid, Ministry of Defence Press Release, 7 December 2023 ; HC Deb 19 December 2023; HCWS163 [Commons Written Ministerial Statement]
53 Defence Secretary deploys UK forces to Kosovo for NATO peacekeeping mission, Ministry of Defence Press Notice, 1 October 2023
54 Guyana: UK to send warship to South America amid Venezuela tensions, BBC News, 24 December 2023; Royal Navy patrol ship visits Guyana amid border claim, Royal Nay press release, 18 January 2024
55 Q406
56 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q35
57 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q12–13
58 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52 Q12

current force levels would require, but in an age as unstable and insecure as this is—and worsening—we have no choice but to do that".[59] When we questioned how sustainable crisis response deployments were, the Minister declined to tell the Committee what the opportunity costs of such deployments were, beyond acknowledging that the UK Armed Forces had a finite number of personnel and platforms.[60] However, the CEO of DE&S cited the high operational tempo as the reason that a number of platforms have not entered planned maintenance.[61]

41. Professor Michael Clarke told us "British forces over the past 30 years have done a great deal of operating, but have not prepared for war fighting, and there is a big difference between operating efficiently and well, and preparing for war fighting. The Ukraine war has brought the spectre of industrial warfare back to Europe in ways that have been relatively surprising, I think."[62]

Warfighting readiness

42. All three witnesses in our first evidence session questioned the warfighting readiness of the UK Armed Forces.[63] General Lord Houghton later told us that the "hollowing out" of the Armed Forces since 2010 had led to shortfalls in the UK's warfighting resilience:

> one of the ways in which we were able to cope—take risk with less money—was to take risk against the warfighting consumables, or stocks, that we held for major warfare. Arguably, you could say that at the time—2010—that was a fair risk to take; clearly, in the judgment of the Government of the day, it was a fair risk to take. By the time I was writing my first letter on arrival to the [then] Prime Minister, from memory, I was warning him then that the threats of the possibility that we might be called on to cross the threshold of formalised warfare against an aggressive Russia were no longer latent but patent, to use my language. And they were acknowledged.[64]

General Sir Nick Carter noted that the reduction in the size of the Armed Forces undermined their resilience, with the lack of mass and scale meaning that in a peer-on-peer conflict, the Forces would have exhausted their capabilities "after the first couple of months of the engagement".[65] Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman told us that if we had to fight a come-as-you-are war, the Armed Forces would have difficulty given their current resilience in relation to equipment and stockpiles.[66]

43. The MOD have acknowledged that there are gaps in their warfighting readiness. In written evidence submitted to this inquiry, the MOD highlighted that investment is required in:

- Defence rail outload theatre capability;
- Infrastructure and warehousing munitions;

59 Q427; 365
60 Q429;431–2; 435
61 Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 22 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 451, Q114
62 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q11
63 Q1
64 Q75
65 Q167
66 Oral evidence taken on 5 September 2023, HC (2022–23) 1804, Q33

- Infrastructure at key ports and airbases;
- Operational medical capacity;
- Armoured vehicle equipment support; and
- Interim and future strategic lift concept phase.[67]

44. The Chief of the Defence Staff also told us that the MOD was investing in capabilities such as "complex weapons, general munitions, and operational spares stocks to meet the needs of sustained operation".[68] The Minister for the Armed Forces argued that decisions taken to make savings at the expense of warfighting readiness were correct when they were taken but recognised that "there is a whole load of stuff that we disinvested in that we urgently need to reinvest in".[69] He acknowledged that the MOD "have an awful lot of work to do to recover the … readiness that we enjoyed during the cold war, and that we require again now".[70]

45. Using open source evidence provided to us, we have below set out a range of capability gaps and readiness shortfalls in each of the Front Line Commands. We do not doubt that the Government will be able to point to procurement programmes and arrangements with Allies which alleviate the situation. Nevertheless, the evidence we have received demonstrates the scale of the issue.

The British army

46. General Sir Nick Carter told us that the Army was the "weakest service" and that it had "significant capability deficiencies".[71] Both Dr Simon Anglim and General Lord Houghton questioned whether the UK could field the heavy division which is committed to NATO without an Ally providing a Brigade.[72] Professor Malcolm Chalmers questioned whether any such division could be deployed given that the British Army lacked both equipment and the logistics required to support it.[73] Dr Rowan Allport of the Human Security Centre listed the capability resource and readiness shortfalls of the Army which he described as "substantial". These included:

- The lack of Infantry Fighting Vehicle once Warrior is replaced by Boxer (which is an Armoured Personnel Carrier);
- The lack of funding for new and upgraded systems with resources only available to procure 1,016 Boxer APCs out of a requirement for 1,305 and 61 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) of a requirement for 75, plus only eight recovery vehicles out of a requirement for 10;
- The reduction in the fleet of Challenger tanks as they are upgraded to Challenger 3s and ammunition shortages for the Challenger 2's 120mm rifled main gun;
- The delay in the delivery of the Ajax Armoured Fighting Vehicle;

67 Ministry of Defence (AFR0009)
68 Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
69 Q392; 410
70 Q350
71 Q174; 176
72 Q22; Q107
73 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q37

- The readiness of the AS-90 self-propelled artillery fleet which has been reduced by the (necessary) donation of 30 vehicles to Ukraine. The announcement that the UK will purchase 14 Archer artillery systems is not a full recapitalisation;
- Inadequate domestic air and missile defence capabilities. The British Army holds responsibility for the majority of UK ground-based surface-to-air missile unit but only one medium-range and one short-range SAM regular regiments, plus one short-range Army Reserve regiment, are in existence. Ballistic missile defences are absent. Electromagnetic and laser defence systems are largely still in development;
- The bottleneck in procurement and delivery of the replacements for the roughly 6,000 NLAW anti-tank systems and 155mm artillery ammunition which have been vital in the Ukrainian Armed Forces fight against Russia. Replacements will only begin to be delivered at scale during 2024;
- An absence of regular Army close support artillery, engineering, REME and logistics support within the 4th Light Brigade Combat Team, with only Army Reserve units in these roles attached. This leaves the brigade unusable at short notice;
- A lack of air transport (chiefly sourced from the RAF) to support the 'Persistent Engagement' strategy.[74] The forward deployment of Special Forces, elements of the Army Special Operations Brigade and Security Forces Assistance Brigade will require extensive fixed and rotary winged air transport support. This lack of air transport capacity appears to have led the MoD to outsource parachute training to the private sector, with a contract opportunity of up to eight years running from Q1 2025 having been recently published;
- 3 Commando Brigade, historically the lead UK northern flank land formation, is no longer able to deploy at brigade strength. The Army has made some advances in this area but more can still be done to ensure an adequate capacity to operate in this increasingly important region. The MoD's 2022 Arctic defence strategy document, The UK's Defence Contribution in the High North, outlines current departmental efforts but is short on quantifiable specifics.[75]

47. Many of Dr Allport's assessments of the capability shortages regarding the Army's fighting vehicles align with what we discovered when we produced our 2021 Report on the challenges faced by the Army in updating its heavy armoured capability.[76] When we suggested that there were serious deficiencies in the Army's capabilities to the Chief of the Defence Staff, he told us that:

> We have a warfighting division that we put forward to NATO, and we recognise that we need to strengthen that division. That is what is in existence now, and we will strengthen it even further. … I have to be careful when it comes to specific numbers, but I absolutely acknowledge, on the Challengers that we provided to Ukraine and the AS-90s, that we had, on

74 As outlined in the 2021 Integrated Review and the subsequent Defence Command Paper.
75 Human Security Centre (AFR0004)
76 Defence Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2019–21, Obsolescent and outgunned: the British Army's armoured vehicle capability, HC 659

> paper, quite large fleets, but the number of tanks and batteries of guns that we could put forward with confidence was lower than we anticipated. … We accept that the vehicles are really old. We are investing like crazy in our warfighting division to improve it for 2030. It is still a warfighting division; it is not the one that we want.[77]

48. These capability shortfalls exist despite the fact that the Army budget has increased over the past decade and investment in the Army as an overall proportion of Defence spending has been maintained. Between the financial years 2013–2014 and 2022–2023, the Army's overall budget grew in real terms by 15%[78] and over the past three years the Army consistently received around 25% of the overall budget, which represented the largest area of spending within MOD. The Chief of the Defence Staff told us that the British Army's budget is currently £12 billion a year and will soon rise to £14 billion. This will "amount to more than £130 billion over the next 10 years, of which over £40 billion will be spent on equipment".[79]

49. When we discussed the current state of the Army with the Chief of the General Staff, he acknowledged issues existed but pointed to the work which he had done to "mobilise the Army so that it would be ready to fight with what it has in the course of the next two or three years" which included "significant uplifts in investments, in our workforce, in improving the availability of our equipment and in accelerating modernisation, to significant investment in training and increasingly—not at the pace I would like and not at the volume I would like, but increasingly—to investment in stockpiles".[80] He gave examples of actions taken—the replacement of gifted artillery pieces within a two-month timeframe and doubling the amount of logistic lift.[81] On training, he emphasised that whilst in 2020–21 only 10% of the Army's battle groups had undertaken combined arms training, this will have risen to 90% by next year. Furthermore, the Army had carried out a divisional-level exercise in 2023 which consisted of 4,000 troops, 2,000 vehicles and 40 sub-units at 22 different training sites. He also announced that investments in stockpiles would result in "sufficient stockpiles for fighting, among the brigades that would make up a division, within a year or two".[82] He went on to highlight that the British Army was the most productive in Europe and currently delivering 130% of its capacity (given its resources).[83]

50. Despite these actions, the Minister for the Armed Forces acknowledged that the "complete renewal of the British Army's fighting echelon is in order to sustain our ability to put a British Division into the NATO fight under a British-led corps" would not be realised until " the two Armoured Infantry Brigades and the Deep Recce Strike Brigade are fully constituted in the middle of the next decade".[84]

77 Q65; 70
78 In comparison the Navy's grew by 15% and Air's by 18%.
79 Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
80 Q222
81 Q237
82 Q236–7
83 Q223
84 Q 441;443

The Royal Navy

51. We have been told that the Navy is undergoing a "maritime renaissance"[85] and that the UK is moving towards a maritime strategy (which prioritises a naval response above land or air capabilities).[86] The Chief of the Defence Staff told us that the Royal Navy made up 20–25% of NATO maritime capacity (as compared to the RAF making up 10% of NATO's air capacity).[87] Despite this, there are still capability gaps—Nick Childs pointed to the ability to deploy a carrier strike capability being hindered by "questions over aircraft that you could put there, the airborne early warning capability aboard, the actual weapons capability and integration of stand off weapons that would make a difference in terms of being able to take the fight to the enemy".[88] He also questioned whether the SSN[89] force—platforms and personnel—would be able to cope with the demands of deploying simultaneously to the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.[90] General Lord Houghton pointed to the shortage of available vessels and further noted that he found the high proportion of naval equipment which was inoperable to be "quite disturbing".[91]

52. Dr Rowan Allport of the Human Security Centre produced a detailed list of what he perceived to be Royal Navy readiness gaps and capability shortfalls which included:

- Delays to the Type 26 frigate programme which have resulted in the Type 23 frigate force being run on far past its expected lifespan, meaning sustainment of the platform had become increasingly difficult and expensive.
- The reliance on RFA Fort Victoria as the only RFA solid stores ship is compounded by the fact that it is at reduced readiness due to personnel shortages. The replacement Fleet Solid Support Ships are (currently) due to enter service from 2028 onwards—meaning that RFA Fort Victoria will more than likely be required for the Carrier Strike Group deployment when it travels to the Indo-Pacific in 2025.
- The availability of SSNs has dropped as a result of delays in the Astute-class attack submarine building programme. Even once all seven Astutes are in service, it is questionable whether the force will be able to sustain their current tasks and the additional deployments to Australia and wider region from 2026 onwards.
- Delays to the Power Improvement Project (PIP) upgrade on the Type 45s to replace the two existing diesel generators with three more powerful models have impacted availability of the vessels.
- The Littoral Response Group (South), which will operate in the Indo-Pacific, will be led by RFA Argus—the ship "is now 42 years old and will inevitably be increasingly prone to mechanical and other issues as time passes".

85 Q100
86 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q44
87 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689, Q63
88 Q13
89 SSN (Ship Submersible Nuclear) is the designation for a nuclear-powered attack submarines.
90 Q26
91 Q100

- The Royal Navy's Merlin HM2 fleet has only 30 aircraft but is over-tasked, responsible for both most Navy airborne anti-submarine warfare missions[92] and Airborne Surveillance and Control taskings.[93]

- Both the Type 31 frigate[94] and the Type 26[95] will receive the Mk.41 vertical launching system but will therefore require significant additional procurement of munitions for their utility to be fully realised.

- Delays to the Dreadnought-class ballistic missile submarine programme have resulted in the Vanguard-class having to continue in service beyond their design life. While the material state of the vessels is publicly unknown, there are reasons to believe they will require additional servicing and maintenance as they significantly exceed their lifespan.[96]

- The reduction in numbers of Royal Marines and the move "towards a forward-based littoral model utilising small units supported by advanced technology"[97] raises questions about their resilience in hostile environments.[98]

53. These gaps are compounded by the efforts which have previously been made to improve the availability of Royal Navy vessels. Nick Childs described these as "in part, robbing Peter to pay Paul within the fleet in terms of stores, key equipment to cannibalise and sometimes personnel. It will be a difficult problem to fix".[99] We raised many of the above issues in our 2021 Report which looked at the role and capabilities of the Royal Navy.[100]

54. In response to questions on naval readiness, the Chief of the Defence Staff told us that the Royal Navy was "on the up" with significant transformation between 2020 and 2030 as it "becomes a carrier Navy again, that alongside the Air Force goes from fourth generation jets to fifth generation jets, and that then has, by dint of previous investment, 22 ships and submarines coming through", citing the Fleet Solid Support Ships, Type 26, and both Astute and Dreadnought-class submarines as examples. He also stressed that all commitments (across defence) are being met.[101] The First Sea Lord also pointed to future capabilities as being the key to readiness:

> We are going through a tremendously exciting transformation at the moment: the Type 26, which is a world-leading ASW frigate; the Type 31s, which are a really innovative way of thinking differently about a general purpose frigate; and the new submarines that we have on order. All these are just about to arrive, in strategic terms. For us, that represents one of the single biggest transformations in the history of the Navy—when we

92 As Wildcat HMA2 helicopters do not possess a dipping sonar.
93 When fitted with the Crowsnest system.
94 With 32 missile launch cells.
95 With 24 missile launch cells
96 The Resolution-class Polaris missile-carrying submarines were known to have had a number of technical problems towards the end of their lives. The longest-serving Resolution-class remained in service for 28 years. The longest-serving British nuclear submarine was operational for 33 years. HMS Vanguard was commissioned 30 years ago and will likely serve into the 2030s.
97 Brigade-scale Royal Marine landings are no longer envisaged.
98 Human Security Centre (AFR0004)
99 Q29
100 Defence Committee Third Report of Session 2021–22, "We're going to need a bigger Navy" HC (2021–22) 168
101 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689, Q74

> genuinely move from an analogue Navy to a digital Navy. It is something almost as powerful as when Jackie Fisher, my predecessor many back, took the Navy from sail and coal into oil, which conceptually drove a different way of thinking and operating. For me … the first thing I would really look forward to is the acceleration to these new platforms, which will be more available than the old ones they replace.[102]

55. However, both First Sea Lord and the Director Force Generation of the Royal Navy (Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse) acknowledged that there were further steps to be taken, in terms of maintenance of vessels,[103] both increasing lethality and managing stockpiles (including working closely with the supply chain to ensure they "understand the imperatives")[104] and continuing to improve training.[105] The First Sea Lord also acknowledged concerns with the pressure put on personnel as a result of the current state of platforms, citing both the submarine service and naval engineers as professions which have had huge demands made of them.[106]

56. The difficulty of crewing naval vessels has resulted in consideration being given to removing some ships from the Fleet.[107] The Royal Navy currently has two amphibious assault ships (HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion) which cycle in availability with one placed into maintenance and extended readiness whilst the other is held at readiness for operational duties. These ships are used by the Royal Marines and can deliver, sustain and recover troops via helicopter and/or specialist landing craft in potentially hostile environments. In early January, there were reports suggesting that the MOD were considering retiring HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark in advance of their out of service dates in the 2030s. When questioned the Government originally stated that the matter was still under consideration.[108] However, on 24 January, the Minister for Development and Africa responded to a question in the House to say that Government was supportive of retaining the vessels rather than seeing them scrapped or mothballed.[109]

The RAF

57. Both Generals Lord Houghton and Sir Nick Carter questioned the RAF's ability to engage in peer-to-peer warfighting. General Lord Houghton suggested that the RAF had "good kit" in relation to its platforms and weapons but not enough of them—and a pilot shortage problem.[110] He went to note that the RAF was rarely asked to carry out a short notice operation (other than QRA[111]) on its own, meaning that whilst it worked well in alliances on standing tasks, it would face difficulties in a warfighting situation because the

102 Q311
103 Q315
104 Q320
105 Q322–3
106 Q325; 336–7
107 Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 22 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 451, Q48–50
108 HC Deb, 20 November 2023, col. 3
109 HC Deb, 24 Jan 2024, Col.400; Col. 401
110 Q100; Q143
111 Quick Reaction Alert—the rapid deployment of RAF Typhoons against aircraft threats.

RAF "can force packet—that is run from CAOC[112]—in a way that is impressive, but [is] far more ugly with ground combat".[113] Professor Justin Bronk was in agreement with this assessment, telling us that:

> The big thing on munitions is also that they are not the right kind of munitions. We have a reasonable number of munitions for permissive or semi-permissive environments—for, essentially, very precisely blowing up technicals, killing snipers on rooftops and things. … [On fighting the Russians] we would have to beat them on the ground, but, ultimately, our armies will never be resourced or the size required to beat them land for land. Our strategy is predicated, as is the entire western military instrument, on air superiority. Put bluntly, we have a Russia problem if we cannot establish air superiority over where we have to fight.[114]

58. The Human Security Centre again produced a list of outstanding or near-future capability, resource and readiness shortfalls which the RAF faces:

- A shortfall in combat aircraft numbers. The retirement of 30 Tranche 1 Typhoon aircraft in 2025 (with the majority of their airframe lives remaining) will leave only 107 Typhoons in service. 48 F-35B aircraft should be delivered by the end of 2025,[115] but these will be jointly operated by the Royal Navy and will have a commitment to carrier operations.

- There is also a shortfall in fixed-wing transport aircraft numbers and capabilities caused by the retirement of the C-130J Hercules[116] with plans to procure greater numbers of the A400M judged by the National Audit Office to be unaffordable.

- Delays in the procurement of 14 new model Chinook helicopters with extended ranges have occurred due to budget shortfalls. The new Chinooks are intended to replace older model Chinooks but the new model's increased range could help cover some tasks previously assigned to the C-130J fleet and in supporting the Persistent Engagement strategy.

- There has been a lack of a dedicated Suppression of Enemy Air Defence/ Destruction of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD/DEAD) capability since the RAF retired the Air-Launched Anti-Radiation Missile (ALARM) in 2013. The planned introduction by the UK of the SPEAR 3 missile with a multi-mode seeker and a range of around 80 miles could—particularly if used in conjunction with the F-35B's electronic warfare system—provide a new SEAD/DEAD capability.

- Failures in the pilot training system have led to shortfalls in pilot numbers.

- There are insufficient numbers of Maritime Patrol Aircraft and Wedgetail AEW1 airborne early warning and control aircraft.

112 Combined Air Operations Centres—multinational headquarters responsible for planning, directing, tasking, coordinating, supervising and supporting air operations.

113 Q101

114 Q11

115 Additional orders are planned to bring the F-35B fleet size to 74 and plans to further increase the use of UAVs will eventually help mitigate shortfalls, but the low number of airframes will endure for the rest of the decade at least.

116 The retirement of the Hercules will reduce net air transport capacity and create a special force support capability gap which will last until at least 2025.

- There is a lack of air-to-air refuelling capacity for the Poseidon MRA1, Wedgetail AEW1, RC-135W Rivet Joint and C-17 Globemaster aircraft as they all lack an in-flight refuelling probe to make them compatible with the RAF Voyager tanker fleet.[117]

- The RAF does not have kinetic ground-based air defence systems or an anti-ballistic missile capability.[118]

59. Professor Justin Bronk also raised the issue of F-35 fleet size, describing the F-35 force as "triple or quadruple-hatted in terms of how many parts of UK defence are counting on it for how many mission outputs in the case of a war [and] … there are not very many of them."[119] Professor Bronk also addressed other issues raised by the Human Security Centre including the pilot shortage—which he attributed to a lack of RAF engineers and supply of spares to sustain the fleet and keep them flying; the lack of SEAD/DEAD capability (which, despite the planned introduction of SPEAR CAP 3 in 2028,[120] will be compounded by the small number of F-35s) and the need for the hardening of air bases or the ability to disperse aircraft to a wider range of air bases and airports to avoid their destruction by enemy attack.[121] We also examined many of these points in our recent report on aviation procurement.[122]

60. The Chief of the Defence Staff told us that whilst there may be a tension between training and operational sorties, by Spring 2023 the RAF had delivered twice as many operational sorties as in the previous 12 months while also managing to deploy to the US Red Flag series of training events. The Red Flag series had seen the RAF being tested "against some of the most difficult air threats in the world, [and the RAF] did incredibly well. Some of our missile systems are far superior to even the Americans'."[123]

61. The Chief of the Air Staff argued that the RAF had benefitted significantly from investment in the past 15 years which had resulted in the bringing into service the F-35 fleet; A400M fleet; the Voyager fleet and the P-8 Maritime Patrol Aircraft fleet. This had made the RAF "more capable" and therefore "better able to meet the threats of the high-end fight". However, he acknowledged the concerns about dispersal. He told us the current level of "agility and operational flexibility" was hampering the RAF's warfighting ability leading to a need to increase flexibility in the airfields the RAF utilised. This would require "investment in spares and some further investment in infrastructure and in people".[124]

Strategic Command

62. Strategic Command is a joint force Command, working across defence and with the three Front Line Commands to integrate capabilities across all domains. Commander, Strategic Command told us that he would regard the different parts of his organisations as some of the jewels in the crown of defence's capability: Permanent Joint Headquarters

117 The new aircraft are compatible with the boom-receptacle in-flight refuelling system used by the US Air Force amongst others. The A400M is also capable of boom-receptacle in-flight refuelling but the use of UK A400Ms for such a purpose has been ruled out by the MOD.
118 Human Security Centre (AFR0004)
119 Q46
120 Letter from the Minister of State for Defence Procurement to the Committee, Ministry of Defence, 10 July 2023
121 Q37; Q42; Q46
122 Defence Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2022–23, Aviation Procurement: Winging it?, HC 178
123 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689, Q93
124 Q241; Q243

(PJHQ) which "effectively co-ordinat[es] defence-wide operations"; Defence Intelligence; Special Forces; the National Cyber Force; Defence Digital ("looking at both defensive cyber operations but also providing the digital capability and digital transformation for all of defence"); Defence Medical Services; the Chief of Defence Logistics and Support; responsibility for the UK's overseas bases and the Defence Attaché network; defence thinking and education (including the development of concepts and doctrine); and an innovation hub.[125]

63. He acknowledged the difficulty of talking about readiness in relation to Strategic Command given that "a lot of my organisation operates at readiness all the time, and readiness does not apply to quite a lot of my organisation". He cited the nature of "constant engagement" in the work of PJHQ; Defence Intelligence; Special Forces and defensive cyber operators. However, he also acknowledged that there were weaknesses, for example he had "concerns over our ability to provide the scale of medical cover that we are going to need in the context of a war-fighting operation".[126]

64. In July the Chief of the Defence Staff told us that, as well as in medical and health, there were also skills and capability shortages in cyber/digital[127] and in addition, the MOD Annual Report and Accounts highlighted intelligence as a "key workforce capability area for priority action". The shortfall in those professions (alongside engineering) is now being addressed through the development of pan-Defence plans.[128]

65. When we asked the Commander Strategic Command how he was working on alleviating shortfalls, he provided the following examples:

Health

- Increasing the level of medical stocks whilst working with the NHS to ensure rotation the stock from MOD shelves through the NHS in order to avoid wasting product by having it go out of date on the shelves.[129]
- Considering defence's ability to deploy civilian medical staff (depending on the environment alongside the nature and level of threat) and working with NATO to understand where other nations might be able to provide capability.[130]
- Employing locums as surge capacity to resolve current domestic medical and dentistry capacity shortfalls.[131]

Digital

- Exploring the potential for introducing bursaries for 16-year olds to encourage them to come into the service at 18 with an expectation that they will serve a shorter career than traditional. He told us that the "vision is that they will serve for seven years. We will give them an in-service degree. We expect many of them to leave in their mid-20s, hopefully then going out into the UK economy and

125 Q366
126 Q367
127 Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
128 Ministry of Defence, Annual Report and Accounts 2022–23, HC 1468, July 2023, p 46
129 Q367
130 Q369
131 Q374

> helping with the right skills, qualifications and approach to life to make them influential members in the digital and cyber business of the UK. We hope they will come back at lateral entry later in their career, and certainly that they will join the reserves."[132]

66. Both he and the Minister for the Armed Forces highlighted the importance of exploring a range of interventions in order to attract a modern workforce, with the Minister highlighting the Haythornthwaite Report as an ongoing project in this area.[133] Commander, Strategic Command also pointed to the Reserve as being a significant source of skill and capability, highlighting the role of Reservists with specialist skills in providing capability in the aforementioned Strategic Command shortfalls: medical, cyber and intelligence.[134] We examine the utilisation of the Reserve and the Haythornthwaite Report later in this chapter.

What are the cross-Service issues?

Stockpiles

67. When we asked each of the single service heads what shortfalls their Forces were carrying, all mentioned stockpiles as an area of significant (current) concern.[135] The high rate of consumption of munitions in the war in Ukraine has exceeded the assumptions (and therefore the quantities held) by most Western forces. Estimates for the use of artillery rounds in Ukraine were 5,000 a day in February 2023 (equivalent to a smaller European country's annual order in peacetime)[136]. In June 2021, the rate at which Ukraine was using Javelin missiles would have exhausted the entire US stockpile in 42 days.[137] Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman told us that "a very high priority is to crank up the industrial base so that we have got the stocks even just to sustain Ukraine in the current war, never mind to fill in the backlog that we have".[138]

68. Although all of the Chiefs had pointed to events in Ukraine as the catalyst for investment in stockpiles, General Lord Houghton and General Sir Nick Carter both told us that stockpiles had been reducing for a number of years before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[139] We have also heard concerns in previous inquiries from General Ben Hodges (who recounted how the British Army ran out of munitions 8 days into a 10-day US wargaming exercise in 2021) and General Sir Richard Barrons (who told us in April 2022 that he would be surprised if the UK had sufficient munitions to sustain high-intensity conflict for more than a week).[140]

69. The Government has previously pointed to its successes in signing contracts—in June 2022 it noted that it had secured "contracts for Next Generation Light AntiTank Weapons, Starstreak High Velocity Missiles, Lightweight Multirole Missiles, Archer 6X6 Artillery

132 Q406
133 Q406–7
134 Q453
135 Q213; 220; 237; 322
136 Ammunition supply chain crisis: Ukraine war tests Europe in race to rearm, Financial Times, 7 February 2023
137 Alex Vershinin, The Return of Industrial Warfare, RUSI Commentary, 17 June 2022
138 Oral evidence taken on 5 September 2023, HC (2022–23) 1804, Q29
139 Q76; 162
140 Oral evidence taken on 6 July 2021, HC (2021–2022) 166, Q282; Oral evidence taken on 19 April 2022, HC (2021–2022) 608, Q93

Systems and Carl Gustaf recoilless rifles".[141] In addition to the £560 million announced at the Autumn Statement in 2022, the IR23 had announced £1.95 billion to replenish stockpiles in 2023–24 and 2024–25 "and to increase them in line with a reassessment of appropriate levels … and to invest in the resilience of the UK's munitions infrastructure"[142] and DCP23 a further £2.5 billion on "replenishing—and augmenting—" munitions and stockpiles "through the coming decade"[143]. However, the NAO's recent report on the Equipment Plan 2023–33 found that the £1.95 billion allocated in the IR23 (and then the Spring Budget 2023) was not ringfenced and so the MOD "is considering using it to help offset its funding shortfall in 2023–24 and 2024–25".[144]

70. Beyond securing investment, there are further difficulties in replenishing stockpiles at pace. We heard from Professor Michael Clarke that the companies responsible for supplying precision weapons to UK Armed Forces have had small production runs for some time which there are challenges in scaling up, partly because of the consolidation of companies in defence industry both at the prime and sub-prime levels.[145] Media and think tank reports have also demonstrated that there is insufficient industrial capacity to replace munitions transferred to Ukraine at the speed required, as set out in the box below.[146]

Box 1: Challenges for industry in increasing production of munitions

- The small pool of consumers of military equipment means that a production line will be closed if there are insufficient orders to maintain it. Many components and subcomponents are likely to be provided by a subcontractor—without revenue from that line, these may go out of business or switch focus to providing parts for a different production line making the original line difficult to restart, as happened in relation to NLAW.[147]

- There are supply chain bottlenecks and a lack of available raw and processed materials. The manufacturing of components and subcomponents—which in many cases stopped or slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic—requires the sourcing of production materials ("chemicals for explosives to metals and plastics for fuses and artillery shell casings") some of which can take months to arrive. Without an increase in the capacity of the supply chain, there cannot be an increase in the production of the finished product. This is further hampered by other supply chain issues, for example: the difficulty of sourcing castings and forgings (the US Navy is investing in metal additive manufacturing due to the scarcity of producers[148]); the scarcity of semiconductors (for instance, the British Army has found that the lead time for delivery of semiconductors has increased from one to three weeks to more than 50 weeks[149]); and the reliance on critical minerals in the defence supply chain

141 Defence Committee, Sixth Special Report of Session 2022–23, Special Relationships? US, UK and NATO: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report, HC 1533, Para 16

142 Cabinet Office, Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 811, March 2023, p 34

143 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 57

144 National Audit Office, Ministry of Defence: The Equipment Plan 2023–2033, HC 315, December 2023, p 41

145 Q14; 16 18 Apr 2023

146 For instance: Alex Vershinin, The Return of Industrial Warfare, RUSI Commentary, 17 June 2022; Ammunition supply chain crisis: Ukraine war tests Europe in race to rearm, Financial Times, 7 February 2023 and Cynthia Cook, Reviving the Arsenal of Democracy: Steps for Surging Defense Industrial Capacity Centre for strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 2023

147 Oral evidence taken by the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee on 1 November 2022, HL (2022–23) 124, Q176

148 Manufacturing woes could sink US sub fleet. Can 3D printing save it?, Defense News, 6 November 2023

149 National Audit Office, Ministry of Defence: The Equipment Plan 2023–2033, HC 315, December 2023, p 33

(the majority of which are processed in China and are subject to political bans on export[150]). This means that a lack of secured supply presents a significant risk to production.

- A significant increase in production tends to require capital investment—few companies have the 'spare' manufacturing capacity to set up additional production lines (although some companies have hired additional shift workers on their current production lines). It takes significant time to find a site for a new production facility, construct it, supply it with the necessary equipment and employ a workforce in order to staff it.
- Staffing issues also hamper efforts to increase production capacity. There is a shortage of trained, available staff in the West and so new staff will need to be trained and may require certification. In some areas this can take years (such as welding—as a result of a shortage in welders, Rolls-Royce have started to explore automated welding in some places on the SSN production line[151]). Setting up new or reconfiguring existing teams, even of trained workers, also requires additional adjustment time.

Source: Compiled by Committee staff

71. In our March 2023 Report 'Special Relationships? The US, UK and NATO' we highlighted the issue of industrial capacity in relation to supply chain capacity and a lack of skilled workers.[152] We were told by Government that:

> Further developing strategic alignment with industry will mean that together we can better understand long-term strategic challenges and identify solutions to issues such as the availability of critical skills, resilience within the supply chain, and productivity. We will outline how we are working more closely with industry in the upcoming Defence Command Paper Refresh.[153]

72. We address the DCP23's policy intentions on the MOD's relationship with industry and the steps it has subsequently taken to improve industrial capacity in the final chapter on strategic readiness.

Recruitment and retention

73. The Haythornthwaite Review (examined in the section below) found that in 2022 there was a net outflow (the difference between the number of people leaving and those joining) of 4,660 from the UK Armed Forces with the "overall voluntary outflow rate increasing to 6.0%, up 1.7% from the previous year". In the past decade the forces' proportion of untrained personnel has "significantly increased", which means that the "rising demand for skills is already not being met in some key areas, including cyber, engineering, nuclear, digital, logistics, aviation and medical" and that there are now "significant risks to overall capability arising from skills shortages in cyber and digital, intelligence, engineering

150 Foreign Affairs Committee, First Report of Session 2023–24, A rock and a hard place: building critical mineral resilience, HC 371, paras 5; 9

151 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q77

152 Defence Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2022–23, Special Relationships? US, UK and NATO, HC 184, Paras 86–95

153 Defence Committee, Sixth Special Report of Session 2022–23, Special Relationships? US, UK and NATO: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report, HC 1533, Para 16

(including nuclear), logistics and health/medical professions".[154] Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman underlined that without sufficient numbers of trained personnel, the Services simply would not be able to operate the equipment that was available to them.[155]

74. In January 2024, we took evidence on Army recruitment from Capita with which the Army has a contract to administer recruitment services.[156] We heard that in 2022–23, Capita recruited 68% of the target number of people that the Army said it required to maintain the workforce. In 2023–24, it expects to recruit 70% of the target number (although three quarters of the way through the recruitment year it had successfully recruited barely half).[157] In relation to the 'pinch point' professions, the Army had given Capita 73 specific professions where recruitment was necessary—in two of them (HR and Communications Specialists) current recruitment was only one in five (22%) of the target number but against others ("Paras, combat med techs, vehicle mechanics, dog handlers and police") we were told that recruitment was within 10% of the target. We have requested a full list of the requirements and Capita's performance against those targets.[158]

75. The MOD publicly concedes that for every eight service personnel who leaves, it currently recruits five people, although we understand the situation may have deteriorated further.[159]

76. The Chief of the Air Force highlighted the difficulty in recruitment presented by the UK labour market which had 1.3 million vacancies at the start of 2023.[160] The First Sea Lord described the Armed Forces as being "in a battle for national talent" which required the Armed Forces to be "as attractive a place as it possibly can be for young people to come to and commit to."[161] The most recent figures (from October 2023) show the current state of the UK Armed Forces:

154 Ministry of Defence, Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era, A review of UK Armed Forces incentivisation by Rick Haythornthwaite, June 2023, p 2; 15
155 Oral evidence taken on 5 September 2023, HC (2022–23) 1804, Q16
156 This means that Capita is responsible for attracting candidates and the application process until the recruits arrive in basic training.
157 Oral evidence taken on 16 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 480, Q13; 17
158 Q39–42
159 Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 22 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 451, Q7; Q11
160 Q220
161 Q344

▼184,860	**Strength of UK Forces Service Personnel** at 1 October 2023 A decrease of 7,440 (3.9 per cent) since 1 October 2022
▼131,310	**Full-Time Trained Strength (RN/RM & RAF) and Full-Time Trade Trained Strength (Army)** at 1 October 2023 A decrease of 3,630 (2.7 per cent) since 1 October 2022
▼10,470	**People joined the UK Regular Armed Forces** in the past 12 months (1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023) A decrease of 1,520 (12.6 per cent) compared with the previous 12 month period
►16,260	**People left the UK Regular Armed Forces** in the past 12 months (1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023) Remained stable compared with the previous 12 month period
▼29,920	**Strength of the Trained Future Reserves 2020** at 1 October 2023 A decrease of 1,110 (3.6 per cent) since 1 October 2022
▲3,780	**People joined the Future Reserves 2020** in the past 12 months (1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023) A increase of 60 (1.6 per cent) compared with the previous 12 month period
▼5,580	**People left the Future Reserves 2020** in the past 12 months (1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023) A decrease of 410 (6.8 per cent) compared with the previous 12 month period

77. We understand from witnesses including the Minister for the Armed Forces and Capita that this labour market challenge is not just an issue in the UK, and that partner militaries in NATO, Australia, New Zealand and Japan are also struggling to recruit.[162] Indeed, when we visited the US in March 2023 we heard of difficulties that the US Services were encountering in recruiting and retaining personnel.

78. In November, the Secretary of State told us that recruitment and retention was an area of concern for him given that in September 2023 there had been "183 pinch points, of which 61 were assessed as having a significant or acute impact".[163] The Minister for the Armed Forces echoed this:

> The existence of these pinch-point trades where we have shortages is a real concern. You are absolutely right to speculate that they are mostly the trades that are very technical and, frankly, make the force work. … We have to do some pretty urgent work to fill some of those pinch points because they are limiting what we can do with the force for as long as we are carrying the gaps that we have.[164]

162 Q402; Oral evidence taken on 16 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 480, Q90; 96
163 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q46–7
164 Q402

Utilisation of the Reserve

79. A number of our witnesses were concerned with how the UK Armed Forces utilised their reserve forces. Professor Justin Bronk suggested that neither the Army nor the Air Force had "really figured out how to use the reserves sustainably" and Lord Houghton told us that that the UK did "not have a properly functioning Reserve" which he described as a "national embarrassment".[165] Professor Vince Connolly told us that part of the issue for the Army Reserve was that it was expected to provide both "individual backfill and some measure of collective capability" but that its size and its training (focused on "a wide set of missions and tasks") hindered its ability to provide sustainability in an enduring high intensity large scale conflict.[166] Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman thought that the Reserve ought to become a "pretty high priority" and that work ought to be carried out by the Services on how best to use reservists as well as integrating the Reserve with the Regular Force. He suggested that "there is an awful lot you could do with the reserves at a time when you are finding it difficult to recruit the regulars. It is a cultural thing as much as anything else".[167]

Box 2: The Reserve Forces

The reserve forces are made up of the following components:

- The volunteer reserve forces (also referred to as the Active Reserve) are the Army Reserve, the Maritime Reserve and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. These are volunteers who commit to train for a certain number of days each year. Both civilians and ex-regular service personnel can join.
- The ex-regular reserve force (also referred to as the Strategic Reserve) are those personnel who have left the Armed Forces but are subject to call-out (able to be mobilised for the period specified in their original commitment to serve) or recall (able to be mobilised in a national emergency despite having completed their residual commitment).
- The Sponsored Reserve are reservists who are employed during a third-party contract to fulfil a specific function. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary are also classed as a sponsored reserve but are employed as civil servants (so by Government rather than a private sector contractor).

Both volunteer reserves and ex-regular reserves can also be employed by the UK Armed Forces as either Full Time Reserve Service or part time on Additional Duties Contracts. Reserves can bring specialist skills to their roles which they have gained through employment in the public or private sector. Some of the most widely recognised examples of this are the cyber reserves and those who work in civilian medical services (such as the NHS) but are also deployable on military operations both in the UK and abroad.

Source: MoD: Reserve Forces Review 2030–May 2021 (publishing.service.gov.uk)

80. As with the regular Forces, the Reserve Forces also saw a higher outflow than intake in the year up to October 2023.[168] The External Scrutiny Team (mandated to report on the 'state of the volunteer reserve forces') found in their 2023 annual report that "the state,

165 Q47; Q108
166 Professor Vince Connolly (AFR0006)
167 Oral evidence taken on 5 September 2023, HC (2022–23) 1804, Q18–20
168 Ministry of Defence, Quarterly service personnel statistics 1 October 2023, 14 December 2023

or health, of the Reserve is poor and declining".[169] Despite this, they welcomed what they saw as a "strong narrative emerging which recognises the purpose of the Reserve" and a desire amongst the senior leadership of the Single Services and Strategic Command to make better use of the Reserve. In particular, they welcomed decisions by the newly established Army Reserve Executive Committee.[170]

81. Both the Chief of the General Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff told us that they were trying to grow their reserve forces but were concerned by their ability to recruit.[171] Conversely First Sea Lord felt that "recruiting reserves is in some areas proving easier" than recruiting regulars.[172] Despite this, the Maritime Reserve still saw a reduction in strength of 7% in the year to October 2023.[173] There was a general recognition of the importance of the "niche skills" that the Reserve currently brings but the Chief of the General Staff, the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Minister for the Armed Forces all acknowledged that the Reserve did not provide the mass which would be required in a time of war (a "second echelon force").[174]

Overtasking

82. Professor Justin Bronk told us that the IR23 and DCP23 had demonstrated "the broad challenges and ambitions that the UK is faced with" but had given no indication of priority.[175] We made the same criticism (which the Government rejected) of the 2021 strategies.[176] This lack of prioritisation has resulted in leaders of the UK Armed Forces feeling the need to show the Services "doing things all over the place all the time", otherwise "not only will they not get additional investment to plug gaps or increase capability, but they will risk being cut".[177] Professor Malcolm Chalmers told us that a number "of the issues around personnel in relation to the Army are about the breadth of their commitments".[178] General Lord Houghton agreed, telling us that "the Armed Forces are consistently on some form of operation. Not a lot of them are left at home, in the locker".[179]

83. The Chief of the General staff told us that the Army is currently delivering 130% of its capacity.[180] The First Sea Lord admitted that there are always more tasks for a Navy than there are ships.[181] We heard that by Spring 2023 the RAF had delivered twice as many operational sorties as in the previous 12 months.[182] The Minister for the Armed Forces acknowledged the pressure that the Forces were under:

169 Council of Reserves Forces' and Cadets' Associations, The United Kingdom Reserve Forces External Scrutiny Team Annual Statutory Report 2023, December 2023, Para 9
170 Council of Reserves Forces' and Cadets' Associations, The United Kingdom Reserve Forces External Scrutiny Team Annual Statutory Report 2023, December 2023, Para 10
171 Q244; 272
172 Q346
173 Ministry of Defence, Quarterly service personnel statistics 1 October 2023, 14 December 2023
174 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689 Q45; Q272; Q446; Q453
175 Q17
176 Defence Committee, Third Special Report of Session 2022–23, The Integrated Review, Defence in a Competitive Age and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report, HC 865, p 6
177 Q17
178 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q37
179 Q74; 76
180 Q223
181 Q287
182 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689, Q93

> The reality is that politicians ask chiefs to go well beyond what they are asked to provide for. … We are just going to have to accept that we will be running the force very hot indeed, and well beyond any reasonable planning assumptions. … we are asking more of the force right now than it is designed to deliver.[183]

84. In December 2023, we were told that budgetary constraints meant that training had been cut in 2023 (and had the potential of being cut similarly in 2024) in order to manage the pressures on the defence budget.[184] As the Chief of the General Staff noted, training is a vital part of maintaining an agile force which can undertake "everything from peacekeeping operations right the way up to warfighting operations".[185] We heard that as well as impacting on warfighting readiness, the tempo of activity was also negatively impacting retention[186] and the planned maintenance of platforms.[187]

85. Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) requests are an additional operational pressure on the armed forces, but we are unable to quantify this without information on the impact of MACA on the readiness of the Armed Forces, requested from the Government in November 2023, but not received at the time of writing. We have concerns that other Departments have become over-reliant on calling for assistance from the military rather than building civilian capacity.

Can readiness be improved through policy changes?

86. Readiness is determined by the number of trained personnel and viable equipment the Armed Forces have available to deploy and sustain on operations determined by ministerial priorities. However, whilst the size of the Forces and the equipment available to them is primarily controlled through budget allocations, policy changes can also have an impact.[188]

The Haythornthwaite Review of Armed Forces Incentivisation

87. The Haythornthwaite Review 'Agency and agility: Incentivising people in a new era', was an independent study commissioned by the MOD and published in June 2023. The Review looked at a number of areas where recruitment and retention could possibly be improved within the UK Armed Forces.

183 Q349; 427
184 Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q40–2
185 Q212
186 Q23; 37; 67
187 Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 22 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 451, Q114
188 Policy changes relating to the MOD's engagement with industry are covered in the final chapter on strategic readiness.

Box 3: Agency and agility: Incentivising people in a new era

The Review considered the offer to personnel in relation to: their accommodation and food; their family life; their career structure; working conditions and renumeration; the training available to those in service; and a reduction in bureaucracy.[189] The most far-reaching recommendations related to career structure, working conditions and renumeration: the 'spectrum of service approach' and the 'total reward approach'.

The spectrum of service approach (often referred to as the 'zig zag career') is a recommendation to replace the current blanket terms of service with individualised ones. This would allow an individual to determine their engagement type, engagement length, compulsion, mobility and military training factors, making their service much more flexible. The Review describes this as allowing the differing expectations placed on those serving to range "from those giving 24/7 whatever their Service asks of them, to increasing levels of control over working patterns or geographical stability, through to occasional weekends or short-term projects". It would also allow personnel to leave and re-join the service after working in a different profession (such as in government or industry).

The total reward approach, a complementary recommendation, would allow personnel to determine which elements of reward (both financial[190] and non-financia[l191]) were of greatest priority to them.

Source: Agency and agility: Incentivising people in a new era (publishing.service.gov.uk)

88. Defence Command Paper Refresh (DCP23) identified the areas of the Haythornthwaite Review that Defence would take forward as a priority:

- greater career flexibility through a Spectrum of Service, which will enable Defence to be better at retaining and surging talent across the whole force. This will include increasing fluidity between the military, the Civil Service and industry. Defence will promote 'zig-zag' or 'portfolio' careers for all of those who want them;
- enhanced effectiveness of Defence's offer by adopting a Total Reward Approach, to offer a more compelling and competitive incentivisation package; and
- the digitalisation and simplification of Defence's people management system, to remove the barriers that prevent flexibility and workforce agility and restrict access to talent.[192]

89. Service accommodation is also part of the package of incentives available to the Armed Forces and their families. We expect to report separately on this later in 2024.[193]

90. When we took evidence from Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, he welcomed the proposals in DCP23 but told us that he would have liked to have seen actual targets and descriptions of how the MOD was planning to achieve them:

189 Ministry of Defence, Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era, A review of UK Armed Forces incentivisation by Rick Haythornthwaite, June 2023
190 In relation not just to take home pay but also pension contribution.
191 Non-financial rewards might include: gaining qualifications; annual leave entitlement; flexible working; mobility; and deployment opportunities and/or requirements.
192 Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
193 Service Accommodation - Committees - UK Parliament

> you have to look at implementation. In terms of all the things they say they are going to do in opening up, how well are they being enacted? What sort of response do they get? What adjustments will be made?[194]

91. In Autumn 2023 the Chief of the Defence Staff told us that the Secretary of State "will continue to study the Review's 67 complex, interconnected recommendations and make a more detailed formal response later in the year".[195] At the time of writing, this has yet to happen.

92. In December 2023, the MOD Permanent Secretary acknowledged that "inflow [into the UK Armed Forces] is not at the level we need, and outflow is too high" and (alongside the recommendations produced by the Haythornthwaite Review on zig-zag careers and total reward) pointed both to work being carried out on new routes in, including allowing lateral entry into the Armed Forces, and on bringing people who had previously served back into the Armed Forces. He told us that pilot studies were being carried out and that he hoped to have a detailed implementation plan before Ministers before the end of 2023. He acknowledged that the Department had to "get after it at pace".[196]

93. The Minister for the Armed Forces welcomed the work ongoing in relation to the Haythornthwaite recommendations but when asked whether that work could be speeded up, told us that whilst the MOD's inclination was to implement as many of the recommendations as possible, that work was not cost-neutral and the Department was facing some "pretty severe pressures" on its budget.[197]

Reserve Forces Review 2030

94. The original Defence Command Paper (DCP21) had committed to reserve forces being "given new, more clearly defined roles" including providing "capacity, alongside their regular and civilian colleagues, and an alternative source of diverse talent to conduct operations at home and abroad". The MOD would "create an efficient and fluid spectrum of military service, providing our people with a range of commitment options at different stages of their lives" and improving "the way we recruit and employ reserves, enabling us to bring expertise from across society, government, industry and academia to bear on some of the greatest challenges we face". In addition, DCP21 committed the MOD to considering the recommendations from the Lord Lancaster-led Reserves Forces Review 2030 (RF30) "in due course".[198] That Review was published in May 2021 and the Government has yet to respond to its 18 recommendations (despite our recommendation in July 2022 that it ought to prioritise the work).[199]

194 Oral evidence taken on 5 September 2023, HC (2022–23) 1804, Q13; 15
195 Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
196 Q46
197 Q407
198 Ministry of Defence, Defence in a Competitive Age, Cm 411, March 2021, p 35
199 Defence Committee Second Report of Session 2022–23, The Integrated Review: Defence in a Competitive Age and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy, HC 180, Para 56

Box 4: The Reserve Forces Review 2030

The Reserve Forces Review 2030 was commissioned by the then-Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, and conducted by a small team led by a senior serving reservist and former Minister of Armed Forces, Brigadier The Rt Hon the Lord Lancaster of Kimbolton TD PC.

The Report offered 18 recommendations for consideration, in four key areas:

- Re-defining the Reserves' relationship with society, recognising the need to cooperate and share expertise with, for instance, industry and academia.
- Expanding the role of the Reserves as part of an integrated joint force, helping deliver 'active' tasks—such as homeland resilience and defence diplomacy—whilst preserving and enhancing their assured capability to meet 'contingent' tasks such as war fighting.
- Ways to unlock the full potential of the Reserve component of the UK's armed forces, such as simplifying commitment types.
- Transforming how the Reserves are supported to deliver their mission, recognising the unique needs of the force and with a strong emphasis on digital enablement.

Source: Reserve Forces Review 2030 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

95. Both the Chief of the Defence Staff and the MOD Permanent Secretary pointed out that much of the work relating to the Haythornthwaite Review would impact on thinking about the Reserves.[200] In July 2023 the Chief of the Defence Staff told us that the MOD intended to respond to Lord Lancaster's 2021 report on the Reserve Forces Review 2030 (RF30) in April 2024[201] and in October, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans announced the creation of a Reserves Roadmap which would look at synergising the recommendations of both the RF30 Report and the Haythornthwaite Review in order to align and implement them. The Minister told the House that the intention was:

> To enhance the way reserves are utilised and supported, Defence will take a more strategic, top-down approach, to address policy and process frustrations, and tackle the cultural and resource issues Reservists face. This will also improve the structures and mobilisation processes needed to generate second- and third-echelon forces to reinforce and sustain warfighting capabilities, protect the Homeland, and strengthen national resilience.[202]

Prioritisation and specialisation

96. General Lord Houghton told us that the UK Armed Forces have maintained high levels of readiness for standing commitments (to domestic security and overseas non-discretionary tasks) and contingent commitments (commitments to allies and alliances such as the commitment to deploy forces to NATO at varying levels of readiness). Therefore readiness for these tasks (as opposed to warfighting readiness) was unlikely to be an issue because the Armed Forces had long been subject to demands to engage in significant

200 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689, Q44; Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q95

201 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689, Q43

202 HC Deb, 26 October 2023, HCWS1097 [Commons Written Ministerial Statement]

operational activity, geographically widely dispersed and across a range of tasks.[203] The First Sea Lord also acknowledged this, and when questioned about the range of tasks carried out by the Royal Navy noted that:

> You will always have more tasks for a Navy than there are ships, by dint of the fact that we are a maritime nation. … I don't own the task allocation; I am merely forced to generate forces against that. The range of tasks would be a question for Ministers. As for whether I have sufficient forces to meet the full range of tasks all the time in the way they would wish, as I said at the beginning, there is always a desire to do more than the fleet is actually capable of doing. What we pride ourselves on is the degree of agility that will allow us to rebalance against what the ministerial priorities are at the time.[204]

97. Professor Michael Clarke told us that both Integrated Review documents (the original and the refresh) had demonstrated that ministerial priorities were that "Britain should have a series of multiple roles that it can perform in the world and that it has high aspirations to a significant place in world politics, at a time of darkening international relations".[205] Professor Malcolm Chalmers agreed, describing the strategic narrative in both documents as "very geographically and thematically ambitious and not having a very strong sense of prioritisation".[206] Both suggested that the documents had the potential to enable the Prime Minister to make demands of government departments which they were not necessarily being equipped to fulfil.[207] Professor Clarke told us:

> all three branches of the services, in their own separate ways, are inadequate to the tasks that the refresh suggests they will undertake.[208]

98. General Lord Houghton was clear that the only way to reduce risk to readiness was to increase funding, while noting that this was a political choice, not a military one. The readiness assessments carried out by the MOD were shared with the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the NSC for discussion. As the decision whether to increase resources to reduce the risk to defence and security was discussed in those forums, they are effectively the ultimate owners of that risk.[209]

99. One option that was suggested was that the UK Armed Forces could specialise in certain roles, relying on Allies to fill gaps in capability. Professor Bronk used the example of the Typhoon force which he described as covering "far too many mission sets" following its adoption of the roles previously covered by Tornado. The range of activities which the Typhoon force trains for and carries out means that "they cannot possibly be good at everything" and instead are "not particularly excellent at any mission". He contrasted this to the situation in the early part of the 2010s, when "Typhoon was somewhat mature but was only doing air superiority, where that fleet was specifically and very highly valued by the Americans, because it was superb at air superiority". He warned that:

203 Q74; 76
204 Q289; 309
205 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q1
206 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q1
207 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q2
208 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q5
209 Q73

> The biggest issue with high-intensity warfare now is that it is so lethal and so demanding that the generic force of gifted amateurs that can try and span everything, which is essentially what Britain has always tried to be very good at and in the past has been excellent at, does not really work any more. You need to be very good at one or two things.[210]

However, General Sir Nick Carter warned that specialisation "is obviously a risk, but … these things are about trade-offs. You may need to invest in that because you fear that others might not mitigate it for you."[211]

100. When we raised the prospect of specialisation with the Minister for the Armed Forces, he suggested that the greatest challenge would be coming to a consensus on what the UK might specialise in.[212] He acknowledged that due to the current period of "great geopolitical uncertainty and instability" the UK Armed Forces were being asked to do more than they were designed for, but maintained that it was important for Britain to have a tier-one Army, Navy, Air Force and cyber force which could fulfil a range of tasks. He gave an example of a task which was not warfighting but was still considered "non-discretionary":

> Dauntless … was rushed out of refit successfully to go and furnish a non-discretionary task to be available to the Overseas Territories during hurricane season. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office rightly pushed us on that. Dauntless successfully met the requirement. While she has been there she has been able to do all sorts of great stuff, working with partners in the region doing counter-narcotics and, more widely, flying the flag for freedom, all very valuable. She will come back, refurbish and will be ready again for operations. The tempo at which she has been doing all of that you won't find in any handbook, and the First Sea Lord would rightly say to you that some risk comes with that.[213]

101. A further example was presented at our sessions with the Secretary of State and senior MOD officials, when we questioned the utility of a contract to procure the Chinook CH-47. The project had already been delayed and (as a result of that delay and inflationary pressures) had increased in cost.[214] However, we also heard that 14 of the 51 Chinooks would be the Extended Range variant and the military advice was that without them, Special Forces would be "unable to prosecute the targets we need to against the adversarial threat. If we wish to prosecute the targets against Government policy today, … operational judgment is that you need that capability."[215] The Permanent Secretary explained that:

> There was concern in the summer about cost growth in the programme, and how that could be afforded and what the impact would be on other related capabilities, including, conceivably, other helicopter projects. That has a question around whether this is the best deal that we can get, and if it is the best deal that we can get, do we want to carry on with it? As the

210 Q37
211 Q148
212 Q433
213 Q435
214 Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q75
215 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q21

> General said, if we do not carry on with it in the way that we are currently planning, there will be an impact on the range of operations that our armed forces are able to prosecute.[216]

102. Professor Bronk told us the choice was stark: either sufficiently resource the UK Armed Forces to allow them to have "full spectrum forces that can concurrently provide a reference force as a backbone of European NATO, while also doing expeditionary things for signalling, diplomacy and all sorts around the world" or to ruthlessly prioritise:

> If you specifically tasked the MoD and said, "Your primary role now is to provide a backbone of European deterrence against Russia, with credible warfighting capabilities in Europe in the next three to five years", you would see an enormous change in the way that it plans its force structure and its planning, but you would also find a lot of objections from people … If you want to keep doing what we are currently doing and get ready for warfighting in three to five years' time, it is probably [needs to be] closer to 3% of GDP as a ballpark figure. If you were to say, "This is now all hands on deck. We need to get the force we currently have as ready as we can, but we are prepared to pull the plug on all sorts of things and go right down to just getting ready for the big fight, as it were, and buying weapons stocks," you could probably do it with a relatively modest uplift, but you would have to cut so much in terms of what people are used to seeing as the standard pattern of activity to do it.[217]

103. Professor Chalmers thought it unlikely there would be an increase in defence spending anytime soon given the UK's poor economic performance, as any increase would have to come either from cuts in other government spending or an increase of taxation.[218] The Minister for the Armed Forces recognised that the funding was not available for an increase in the size of the Armed Forces so it could continue to manage both its operational and warfighting readiness: "We are just going to have to accept that we will be running the force very hot indeed, and well beyond any reasonable planning assumptions."[219]

Mothballing

104. Successive Defence Committees have looked at the possibility of mothballing equipment due to be retired[220] to create a strategic reserve of equipment which could be utilised in the event of high intensity warfare. In 2018, the Government told our predecessor Committee that:

> When equipment is approaching retirement, Defence always has the option to retain it in reserve if it might be needed rapidly to provide additional capacity in the event of a major crisis. This will require the consideration of a number of factors, including the availability of suitable storage facilities, the cost of maintaining the equipment and the human resource to support

216 Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q74
217 Q23; 67
218 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q20
219 Q349
220 Defence Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2022–23, Aviation Procurement: Winging it?, HC 178, Para 37–38; Defence Committee, Eighth Report of Session 2017–19, Indispensable allies: US, NATO and UK Defence relations, HC 387, Para 41; 44

> its effective re-mobilisation. Ultimately, deciding to take this option for equipment depends on whether retaining the equipment is considered the most cost-effective decision when all relevant factors are taken into account.[221]

105. In response to our recommendation last year that the Government mothball the 30 Tranche 1 Typhoons it is proposing to retire in 2025 (with 60% of their airframe fatigue lives remaining), we were told that whilst it would be feasible to retain the aircraft in storage, the investment required to maintain them and then "address significant capability, obsolescence and regulatory needs" upon regeneration would be at least £300 million. We were also told that that it would preclude the RAF from cannibalising the airframes for components which could be used for tranche 2 & 3 Typhoons.[222] We note that some of these issues are more easily solvable than others—for instance, the US military stores their retired aircraft in deserts in order to reduce the cost of maintenance as the arid air prevents significant degradation and rust.[223]

106. The Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Financial and Military Capability) told us that there was no point in holding on to capabilities which would become extinct, a point supported by the Secretary of State. However, he also acknowledged that mass would still be a requirement in future conflicts.[224] The Minister for the Armed Forces emphasised that it was "inescapably the case that no one platform can be in two places at one time"[225]—leaving little room for attrition of capabilities. We have seen that Russia, having lost significant numbers of more modern main battle tanks (MBT) in Ukraine, has deployed T-62 MBTs which are 60 years old. Whilst the capabilities are inferior to more modern alternatives, the T-62s were upgraded and deployed less than a year after being removed from storage.[226]

Conclusions and recommendations

107. ***The commitments made to replenish and increase stockpiles made since the 2022 Autumn Budget have all been welcome. The question remains whether this is anywhere near enough to meet the potential threats we face. It is therefore disturbing to hear that the £1.95 billion awarded as part of the Spring 2023 Budget may instead be used to meet budget shortfalls. We recommend that the MOD reconsider further delaying its ability to regenerate warfighting resilience in this manner. We further recommend that the MOD produce a breakdown of the allocation of the awards from the Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023 Budgets to provide clarity as to how much is allocated in practice in support of replenishing and increasing stockpiles.***

108. **There are multiple capability shortfalls within the UK Armed Forces. For that reason, we welcome the decision to maintain the Albion-class vessels in operational service until their out of service dates in the 2030s. However, we are also increasingly concerned about the ability of the Armed Forces to attract and retain personnel. Whilst**

221 Defence Committee, Ninth Special Report of Session 2017–19, Indispensable allies: US, NATO and UK Defence relations: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report, HC 1569, Para 11

222 Defence Committee Second Special Report of Session 2023–24, Aviation Procurement: Winging It? Government response to the Committee's Tenth report of Session 2022–23, HC 187, p 3–4

223 The World's Biggest 'Graveyard' Houses Almost 4,000 Aircraft, Interesting Engineering, 16 August 2021

224 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q3–4

225 Q435

226 X (formerly known as Twitter) post by the Ministry of Defence, 6 March 2023 [Accessed 26 January 2024]

we welcome the Government's recognition that these issues require fresh solutions and look forward to reviewing plans based on recommendations from the Reserve Forces 2030 Review and the Haythornthwaite Review to alleviate the crisis in the recruitment and retention of both Regulars and Reserves, we do not believe it is being carried out at the required pace. We heard no evidence that gives us confidence that the recruitment crisis will be resolved anytime soon.

109. ***Efforts to improve the recruitment and retention of both Regulars and Reserves are currently being considered by the MOD. We therefore recommend that once decisions have been made to adopt these recommendations, an implementation timetable with measurable deliverables is produced and shared with us so that we can scrutinise the progress made by the Department.***

110. **The UK Armed Forces have sufficient Readiness for operations—they can carry out standing operations and contingent commitments. However, the breadth of their commitments is having an inevitable impact, in terms of budget requirements, subsequent constraints on training and the retention of personnel. It also appears to be delaying the development of warfighting readiness.**

111. ***Despite the Secretary of State's insistence that the UK Armed Forces still have sufficient capacity to deploy in response to world events, we remain to be convinced. We are concerned that the breadth of ministerial requirements is in danger of pushing the Armed Forces far beyond what is sustainable. We recommend that either a budget uplift or a (strictly adhered to) prioritisation ranking is introduced. Any prioritisation ranking adopted needs to be drawn up within the National Security Council to ensure agreement amongst the Prime Minister, Treasury and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, given that all of those Departments play a role in determining and enabling the deployment of UK Armed Forces.***

112. ***We understand the financial implications of retaining capabilities after they have been retired but we question whether the MOD have considered all the options. We accept that maintaining equipment comes at significant cost but argue that such platforms do not need to be fully maintained—in a war of existence, a platform which is even halfway viable for regeneration is better than none at all. Given the long lead times to build complex platforms (such as warships, tanks or combat aircraft) combined with the importance of mass and resilience on the battlefield (as demonstrated on both sides of the war in Ukraine), we question whether less expensive alternative storage solutions could be sought, for example through access to US desert facilities. In this context it is worth noting that the United States, China and Russia have for many decades had a policy for mothballing warfighting equipment, whereas the UK policy has been to dispose of it—often at a fraction of its original acquisition cost. Russia has been able to draw on these reserves to add to its capacity to fight in Ukraine.***

4 Strategic Readiness

113. Strategic readiness is described by the Minister for the Armed Forces as "the readiness of the nation to bring to bear all the nation's strength to compete with an adversary".[227]

114. Describing the key components of strategic readiness, the Minister for the Armed Forces highlighted the importance of the industrial base and its ability to increase its capacity; enablers which project and sustain the force (not just in terms of equipment and warfighters but also medical services, signallers, logisticians and engineers as well as Reserves who can form part of the second echelon force); and resilient (and therefore dispersed) warehousing and stores.[228] He acknowledged that the Government needed to consider all of this as part of its future thinking:

> The MOD generates a first echelon force to get us into the fight. A war of national endeavour requires a whole of government, whole of industry and whole of society mobilisation to sustain us in the fight thereafter. No private business has a peacetime contractual obligation. So, thinking through how we mobilise the UK industrial base to sustain us is a really important piece of work. … We just simply have not had to think about this for a really long time. What is the skills base? What is the capacity to generate a second echelon force? How do you mobilise industry? How do you assure your supply chains? What are your access to the critical minerals, the semiconductors, and all the other things that are needed? The consideration of our national resilience and our ability to war fight will require us to consider what we need to be sovereign and then to start making policy to do so.[229]

115. It therefore goes wider than the remit of the Ministry of Defence—for example, having appropriate infrastructure and sufficient skilled and experienced workers are areas which are vital but are responsibilities of other government departments.[230] A current example of this is that the national skills shortage is the main cause of the issues in at least two thirds of the programmes rated 'red' in the Defence Major Projects Portfolio (DMPP).[231]

116. As well as addressing its own resilience and readiness issues, the MOD is involved in drawing up the national defence plan which will address the wider issues in strategic resilience and readiness. Initial work was carried out for the Defence Command Paper Refresh (DCP23) and the intention is for this to become a central part of the next integrated review.[232]

Commitments in the Defence Command Paper 2023

117. The Defence Command Paper Refresh (DCP23) looked at the requirements for strategic resilience in its final chapter. In relation to the defence of the homeland, the MOD highlighted areas where Defence plays a critical role, including the policing of national airspace (through the constant provision of Quick Reaction Alert aircraft) and UK waters (monitored by maritime patrol aircraft, surveillance software, coastal radar,

227 Q350
228 Q351; 361; 374; 402; 446; 453
229 Q472–3
230 Q473; Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q56
231 Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q118
232 Q383

aviation operations, space-based reconnaissance, and government vessels)[233] The DCP23 committed the MOD to increasing efforts to deliver integrated air and missile defence with the RAF promoting the use of "advanced ground-based, airborne, at sea and space-based sensors, and an extensive range of air and missile capabilities, including counter-UAS, to detect, protect and defend the UK".[234] The MOD also announced it would examine the missile "detection and interception technologies of the future".[235] In November 2023, we heard that proposals to strengthen "medium-range air defence system and improving its command-and-control capability, to go beyond what we currently have in the Falklands and to develop a contingent capability" were shortly to go before the investment approvals committee in the MOD.[236]

118. The DCPR23 committed the MOD to working with partners across Government to plan and test how vulnerabilities could be identified and to work together to exercise the systems required in a time of war. It states that Defence will "support a wider Governmental effort to better anticipate, assess, prevent, mitigate, respond to, and recover from risks" as well as working with other Government Departments to implement the 2022 Resilience Framework.[237]

119. Finally, the DCP23 highlights the work carried out by Defence to "identify and mitigate a range of economic security risks" including the screening of investment in defence-relevant sectors of the UK economy. Work is ongoing to establish how Defence can stop adversaries from gaining specialist defence knowledge through research collaboration, the employment of UK defence and technical experts and business partnerships or technical support contracts. Further work focuses on supporting the UK's contribution to international efforts to access critical minerals and secure the defence supply chain.[238]

120. External to the DCP23 process, the MOD has also been engaged in Exercise AGILE STANCE which is a five-year programme originally set up by General Sir Nick Carter to "up [the UK Armed Forces'] game in terms of what our readiness looked like and be realistic about it" by exercising the Services' ability to disperse from their bases in order to maintain survivability in the event of an attack. He explained that it was based on a Cold War concept exercise called Active Edge:

> If you were based on the inner German border, you were at four hours' notice to move. An exercise called Active Edge tested your ability to leave your barracks, get into a forest and hide yourself. It exercised the ability of RAF squadrons to leave their bases in Germany and go and park themselves on the autobahn, in cover. I wanted to return to a system where we exercised that regularly. For example, Brize Norton, where every single logistic Air Force egg is in the same basket, had to disperse to—I do not know—an airport in Leeds or wherever it might be. Coningsby should be able to empty itself and send the F-35s on to the M1, whatever it may be. It is the same with the Navy getting out of the three big ports we have.[239]

233 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 88–9
234 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 90
235 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 91
236 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q10
237 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 87;91
238 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 92
239 Q124

121. The Chief of the Defence Staff told us that the Reserve was also being mobilised under Exercise Agile Stance with a series of mobilisation exercises of Active Reserve elements taking place across each of the single Services, between January and March 2024 and in September 2024 which will "inform and develop the UK's ability to mobilise Reserve Forces at pace and scale". This will be followed by a strategy and concurrently an updated Agile Stance directive "to develop the capability and capacity to mobilise the Strategic Reserves at scale"—something which has not been done since 1991.[240] In December 2023, the Permanent Secretary told us that the "the use and availability of, and ability to call out, a strategic reserve" had been a neglected area of MOD thinking in recent years.[241]

The role of the defence industry in the UK readiness

122. Defence industry plays an integral role in Armed Forces readiness. The First Sea Lord explained that the UK Armed Forces rely heavily on the defence industry to deliver "world-leading capability to deal with those who may wish us harm".[242] Nick Childs and Professor Justin Bronk both highlighted that contracts with defence companies are vital to ensuring UK Armed Forces readiness in relation to maintenance and sustainment of equipment.[243] Beyond equipment, the British Army currently relies on a private company (Capita) to manage its recruitment of personnel, a model which looks to be extended to all the Front Line Commands under the proposed Tri-Service Recruitment contract.[244]

123. Despite the acknowledged reliance on industry, both General Lord Houghton and General Sir Nick Carter questioned whether the relationship between the MOD and industry was effective in supporting strategic readiness. General Lord Houghton told us that despite numerous reviews on defence procurement, the relationship between Defence and the defence industry "is still not anywhere close to where it needs to be".[245] General Sir Nick Carter pointed out that defence industry reports to its shareholders rather than Government and so if the Government required resilience from industry then it would need to incentivise that rather than focusing on efficiency and value for money.[246] Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman described the lack of thinking about industrial capacity as a strategic failure.[247]

124. In 2023, we examined the organisation responsible for the majority of MOD procurement (Defence Equipment & Support).[248] Pointing to the conclusion by the Public Accounts Committee that defence equipment "arrives into service many years late and significantly over-budget, with depressing regularity", something which means that "neither taxpayers nor our Armed Forces are being served well",[249] we welcomed the acknowledgement by the CEO of Defence Equipment & Support that "we have some really horrible, broken programmes that aren't good enough".[250]

240 Oral evidence taken on 4 July 2023, HC (2022–23) 1689, Q46; Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
241 Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q97
242 Q318
243 Q34–5; 48–9
244 Ministry of Defence (CDS0001)
245 Q99
246 Q115
247 Oral evidence taken on 5 September 2023, HC (2022–23) 1804, Q37–8
248 Defence Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2022–23, It is broke — and it's time to fix it The UK's defence procurement system, HC 1099
249 Public Accounts Committee, Forty-Eighth Report of Session 2022–23, MoD Equipment Plan 2022–2023, HC 731
250 Oral evidence taken on 21 February 2023, HC 1119, Q110

125. Professor Clarke warned us in April 2023 that the implications of the Ukraine war were "taking time to filter through to Governments."[251] One of the most obvious examples of this is the length of time it took to conclude a contract for an increase in production of 155 mm artillery shells.[252] This is despite regular pleas from Ukraine for these shells in the Spring of 2023.[253] It was first reported that the Government had issued a letter of intent (telling industry that it intended to purchase more artillery shells) in November 2022[254] but it took 9 months of negotiation before a contract was finally signed in July 2023.[255] When we raised this with the Minister for the Armed Forces, he told us that the delay had been caused by the lack of a "going-concern production line and there was some debate about how the manufacturing capacity was going to be funded". The contract, when agreed, was a multi-year contract which specified a number of shells to be delivered each year ensuring the long-term viability of the production line, but the Minister acknowledged that it had demonstrated a need to change the way in which the MOD approaches procurement.[256] There are possible lessons to be learned from the pace at which our US allies have increased capacity and production.

Box 5: Timelines of contracting for NLAWs and 155 shells

NLAW

- Letter of intent presented to Saab as Authorisation to Proceed: September 2022
- Contract to Saab: 7 December 2022
- Delivery from July 2023

155 Shells

- Letter of intent presented to BAE as Authorisation to Proceed: November 2022
- Contract to BAE: 11 July 2023
- Delivery: Q1 2025

Source: Compiled by Defence Committee staff

126. When we took evidence on DE&S, we heard from industry that it wanted: long-term consistency on required capabilities; earlier engagement in the requirement setting process, multi-year budgets; an improved (and consistent) social value framework; and decisions made with reference made to imperatives other than lowest up-front cost (such as end-user needs, through-life cost, or industrial resilience).[257] There was a recognition among witnesses that improvements were taking place but a warning that much of the required change would need to be cultural (as opposed to process-based).[258] ADS also

251 Oral evidence taken on 18 April 2023, HC (2022–23) 1246, Q17
252 Q271; Defence Committee, Sixth Special Report of Session 2022–23, Special Relationships? US, UK and NATO: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report, HC 1533, Para 16
253 Ukraine asks EU for 250,000 artillery shells a month, Financial Times, 3 March 2023; Why the 155 mm round is so critical to the war in Ukraine, Associated Press News, 23 April 2023
254 UK Asks BAE to Ramp Up Artillery Shell Production Amid Ukraine Drawdown, The Defense Post, 17 November 2022
255 DE&S places new order with BAE Systems to increase 155mm shells stockpile for British Army, DE&S press release, 11 July 2023
256 Q378; 381
257 BAE Systems plc (DES0035); ADS (DES0021); Lockheed Martin UK (DES0022)
258 Oral evidence taken on 17 May 2023 HC (2022–23) 1099, Q25 [Lucia Retter]

highlighted that many of these issues had a different impact on SMEs meaning that when changes were introduced, their impact needed to be considered not just in relation to defence primes, but in relation to the whole of the supply chain.[259]

127. In our Report on DE&S we recommended that:

- The MOD should engage with industry at an earlier stage, particularly on future requirements and their feasibility;
- The MOD should consider the implications of the shortage of skilled and experienced workers and draw up a plan to help develop and foster the defence workforce over the next 10 years;
- The MOD and the Treasury should provide a clearer definition of social value in defence contracting, specifying how the criteria will be applied in procurement competitions;
- The Front Line Commands and DE&S should aim for a 'spiral development' model as default rather than over-specifying requirements;
- The procurement system should place more emphasis on the value of time in relation to the delivery of capabilities;
- The MOD should explore with HM Treasury whether there could be greater flexibility around budgetary cycles, moving from fixed one-year funding to multi-year funding of procurement programmes.[260]

128. Our Report did not cover issues with the outsourcing of Army recruitment as that is (currently) a contract managed by the Army rather than DE&S. However, we raised it and the proposed future tri-service recruitment contract with the Secretary of State and the Minister for the Armed Forces. The Secretary of State assured us that he was "looking at it carefully"[261] and the Minister told us that he was in no doubt that the future tri-service recruitment contract needed to work better than the current model. For him, this included ensuring that society's connection with the military was maintained—a difficulty when its personnel were consistently deployed away from the communities from which it needed to recruit.[262]

129. Shortly after our Report was published, the DCP23 was produced by the Government. It announced that key lessons from Ukraine had resulted in the following conclusions:

- The pace of battlefield innovation means that decades-long acquisition programmes and upgrades are no longer suitable—instead simpler platforms which can be upgraded at speed (and by a range of companies, rather than just the original prime contractor) are required;
- Defence must partner with industry, sharing both advances in technology and the risk in exploiting them in recognition of the key role which the industrial base plays in UK national security;

259 ADS (DES0021)

260 Defence Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2022–23, It is broke — and it's time to fix it The UK's defence procurement system, HC 1099

261 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q51

262 Q463–6

- Time is key—platforms must be accepted at 'good enough' so that they can be deployed at pace.

The MOD therefore committed to forging a new alliance with industry to create an environment that "generates a shared sense of national endeavour".[263]

130. Many of our recommendations were adopted within the DCP23. That document commits Defence to engaging at an earlier stage in strategic conversations with industry about requirements and developing relationships with key Defence Executives. This should allow Defence and industry to work together to address issues such as "availability of critical skills, diversification and resilience within the supply chain and productivity". In addition, industry are being involved earlier in the military capability development processes and have greater visibility of Defence's long-term plan.[264]

131. In December 2023, the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Financial and Military Capability) told us that there had been recognition of the importance of trying "to make sure that our pipeline of munitions is always on, rather than boom and bust" and that the MOD were now working with industry to secure long-term contracts. He explained that the UK Armed Forces have "shifted from what we would say in the military as 'operating' in various parts of the world to now 'deterring', but being prepared to war-fight if necessary [which] means long-term commitment to industry".[265] The Director General Strategic Enablers and Deputy CEO at Defence Equipment & Support explained that those long term commitments allowed industry to invest in skills generation:

> There is scaling of things in the munitions complex, where we need to build long-term pipelines. The surety of contract you talked about allows [industry] to build the skills pipelines and training academies that need to be there.[266]

There is a broader economic argument for investing in the skills being taught through apprenticeships and training in defence industry and the Armed Forces as they are also required in other sectors of the economy that the UK is seeking to grow. For instance, skills required in the Defence Nuclear Enterprise are also needed in the civil nuclear workforce.[267] Similarly, digital skills required for defence are also of benefit to the wider UK economy.[268]

132. As well as earlier engagement on requirements, the acquisition process is moving from one focused on specifying exact requirements to one which focuses on the 'spiral development' of capabilities—this will allow for the iterative development of capabilities to keep pace with innovation on the battlefield whilst also ensuring that these are not closed systems which can only be developed by the original vendor ("vendor lock-in").[269]

133. In order to ensure that Defence can replenish and increase stockpiles of munitions, spares and operational supplies, the DCP23 recognises that industry needs to have robust and resilient supply chains which have assured access to "key materials, components and

263 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 37–8
264 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 39
265 Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q60–2
266 Oral evidence taken on 12 December 2023, HC (2023–24) 54, Q115
267 Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 22 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 451, Q83
268 Q406
269 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 40

critical technologies". A joint assessment of industrial capability, capacity, and sustainment will be undertaken along with communications on sovereign requirements (including what needs to be 'onshore' and what can be 'friendshored') and engagement on how to incentivise industry to prioritise national security needs over commercial ones.[270] In November 2023, we were told that the MOD was launching a supply chain strategy which would identify (as part of the increasing defence outputs programme) where those supply chain pinch points are and ensure that the Department is "being proactive around them".[271]

134. The DCP23 commits Defence to prioritising time within its acquisition system (within the parameters of time, cost and performance) as:

> driving pace is critical–even if it forces us to increase our risk tolerance elsewhere. Our ambition is to reduce radically the average time from the identification of a military need to contract placement, and from contract placement to delivery to the front-line.[272]

135. It also states that Defence intends to set "a maximum five-year commitment for acquisition programmes, with a maximum three-year commitment for digital programmes" although it acknowledges that the MOD procures a wide range of equipment, goods and services and so will need to "tailor our approach to reflect the risk and complexity of each programme, ensuring that we are proportionate in the approach we take. For example, we recognise that some of our more exceptional programmes–those on the Government Major Projects Portfolio–will out of necessity take longer."[273]

136. Both Commander, Strategic Command and the Minister for the Armed Forces were at pains to emphasise that this was a real change in approach. Commander, Strategic Command told us that Defence needed to look at long-term pipelines to supply the munitions and stockpile capabilities which meant moving away from a "just-enough, just-in-time approach [which] has put us in a place that limits our capability, our decision space and our options … We may well need enduring and surge support to be able to execute against particular contingencies".[274] He noted that industry had welcomed the concept of a partnership which spreads risk and provides long-term resilience but that Defence required the "freedoms and ability to enter into those sorts of agreements and structures".[275] The Minister for the Armed Forces acknowledged that the new approach would require "all sides of the equation—the MOD, Government and the Treasury—… to be willing to change policy on how we procure, how we work with industry and how we run competitions" as well as industry changing its approach to the process.[276]

137. The Minister was clear that current procurement processes were no longer viable as a result of the pace of innovation.[277] He acknowledged that this was a complete paradigm shift and a "frankly nascent part of policy making".[278] He warned that no private business has a peacetime obligation to maintain unused production capacity without a contract

270 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 40–41
271 Oral evidence taken on 15 November 2023, HC (2023–24) 52, Q78
272 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 42
273 Ministry of Defence, Defence's response to a more contested and volatile world, Cm 901, July 2023, p 43
274 Q372
275 Q373
276 Q377
277 Q377; 381
278 Q389–391; 472

and so having the resilience in the industrial base to scale is a live issue which neither the MOD nor the Department for Business and Trade (responsible for the mobilisation of the industrial base) have considered for at least a generation. He told us that:

> Whoever is in my office, the Secretary of State's office and MinDP's office for the next integrated review will have to have this stuff in mind, because we have not had to think about it since the '80s.[279]

On 22 January 2024, the Permanent Secretary told our sister Committee, the Public Accounts Committee, that the MOD was hoping to make the announcement of the changes to procurement policy before the House rose for the Easter recess.[280]

Conclusions and recommendations

138. **We welcome the Government's decision to assess what the country would need to do to maintain a warfighting effort. However, it is worrying that this work had not already been undertaken. The national defence plan is still a work in progress but we intend to maintain ongoing scrutiny of the Government's developing plans to ensure warfighting and strategic readiness.**

139. **The Government's approach to procurement reform is not yet finalised and we have heard many promises of change before. The MOD has shown willing to engage with us as it finalises this approach. We welcome this engagement, but are not yet in a position to reach a view on the appropriateness or effectiveness of the likely policy changes—which we very much hope will be announced to the House prior to the Easter recess, in late March 2024.**

140. ***Under a national defence plan, each relevant Government Department would have its own responsibilities. We recommend that these responsibilities are published as far as possible, and—if any responsibilities cannot be published for national security reasons—these should be provided in confidence to the relevant select committee. We also recommend that, for each Department, its role in the national defence plan should be added to the list of responsibilities of a named Minister.***

279 Q472

280 Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 22 January 2024, HC (2023–24) 451, Q33–34

5 Conclusion

141. **Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally changed the threat—demonstrating that Russia has both the capability and intent to prosecute a war in Europe. This requires a wholesale shift in approach towards warfighting resilience both in the UK and Allies.**

142. **It is a matter of national pride that whenever the Armed Forces are asked to carry out a task, they will find a way. It is to the credit of the Armed Forces that they have sustained this effort for so long. But overtasking has both a personal cost for service personnel and an opportunity cost for the UK. The increase in global instability has coincided with a period of decreasing recruitment and reduced industrial capacity, which requires sustained, long-term investment. The Government risks being unable to build true warfighting and strategic readiness because of the sheer pace of operations, which could threaten the security of the UK.**

143. **Personnel need time to recover from operations, and time to train and develop new skills. But the demand of operations makes that harder to achieve. It is unsurprising that more people are leaving the Forces than joining them. All three services have growing capability shortfalls—these have been a feature of our inquiries over the course of this Parliament. As these shortfalls increase, this places greater pressure on those who remain, leading to a vicious cycle.**

144. **The Government must act to break this cycle, and do so swiftly, to ensure that the UK is ready not only to face the challenges of today, but also to face the storm clouds on the horizon.**

Conclusions and recommendations

What is Readiness?

1. The protection of sensitive information plays a vital role in the security of this country. However, the Ministry of Defence has become demonstrably less transparent over the past decade. The fact that the Minister and senior military personnel did not realise that information which is now classified was once widely available suggests that this trend towards greater secrecy has been either clandestine or unconscious. Other nations, facing very similar threats, provide significantly more information about readiness than the UK, both to the public and to relevant parliamentary committees. (Paragraph 31)

2. Readiness is about acceptable risk. The decisions on what risks to take are ultimately political (based partly on military advice) rather than solely military or parliamentary decisions. Ministers will also inevitably need to reach judgments about the availability of information regarding threats and the UK's readiness to respond to those threats, and these judgments may change as the threat landscape changes. However, Parliament's role and our role in particular is to hold Ministers to account for their actions. We cannot fulfil this role without adequate information, along the lines that was available to our predecessors. At present there is no regular mechanism which allows us to scrutinise ministerial decisions on readiness and their impact on risk. (Paragraph 32)

3. The Government's reaction to this specific inquiry has also been unacceptably slow and has impeded our work. Responses to our requests for written evidence have arrived many months late and contained very little useful information. We took up the Government's offer of a meeting in private to review classified information. This was both constructive and informative, but it took place 10 months after our initial request for this data, and there is no guarantee that it will be repeated in the future, which raises the concern about whether there is sufficient ministerial grip on readiness. (Paragraph 33)

4. In the absence of adequate official information, public and parliamentary scrutiny of and debate about UK armed forces readiness currently relies on media reporting and corridor conversations, leading to suspicion that the forces are less ready than in fact they are. It does not need to be like this. The information flow in many of our NATO allies is far franker. Our request is not for very detailed, very highly classified information, but for information that only the most naïve would think was not already in the hands of the UK's potential adversaries and their intelligence apparatus. (Paragraph 34)

5. *In a functioning democracy, the House of Commons Defence Committee needs to be routinely informed about the planning assumptions and readiness of the nation's armed forces. We therefore recommend that—following the Minister's welcome commitment to work with us—the Government propose how we and our successors can receive at least annually a meaningfully detailed update on the readiness of the UK Armed Forces, taking account of our conclusions above.* (Paragraph 35)

6. *We also recommend that the Government explain why previously unclassified information about readiness is no longer published, recognise the reduction in public and parliamentary accountability that this has brought about, and seek to rectify the situation. In future, when a decision is being considered to classify previously available information, we recommend that the Government should consult the relevant House of Commons Select Committee before that decision is made.* (Paragraph 36)

Readiness of the UK Armed Forces

7. *The commitments made to replenish and increase stockpiles made since the 2022 Autumn Budget have all been welcome. The question remains whether this is anywhere near enough to meet the potential threats we face. It is therefore disturbing to hear that the £1.95 billion awarded as part of the Spring 2023 Budget may instead be used to meet budget shortfalls. We recommend that the MOD reconsider further delaying its ability to regenerate warfighting resilience in this manner. We further recommend that the MOD produce a breakdown of the allocation of the awards from the Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023 Budgets to provide clarity as to how much is allocated in practice in support of replenishing and increasing stockpiles.* (Paragraph 107)

8. There are multiple capability shortfalls within the UK Armed Forces. For that reason, we welcome the decision to maintain the Albion-class vessels in operational service until their out of service dates in the 2030s. However, we are also increasingly concerned about the ability of the Armed Forces to attract and retain personnel. Whilst we welcome the Government's recognition that these issues require fresh solutions and look forward to reviewing plans based on recommendations from the Reserve Forces 2030 Review and the Haythornthwaite Review to alleviate the crisis in the recruitment and retention of both Regulars and Reserves, we do not believe it is being carried out at the required pace. We heard no evidence that gives us confidence that the recruitment crisis will be resolved anytime soon. (Paragraph 108)

9. *Efforts to improve the recruitment and retention of both Regulars and Reserves are currently being considered by the MOD. We therefore recommend that once decisions have been made to adopt these recommendations, an implementation timetable with measurable deliverables is produced and shared with us so that we can scrutinise the progress made by the Department.* (Paragraph 109)

10. The UK Armed Forces have sufficient Readiness for operations—they can carry out standing operations and contingent commitments. However, the breadth of their commitments is having an inevitable impact, in terms of budget requirements, subsequent constraints on training and the retention of personnel. It also appears to be delaying the development of warfighting readiness. (Paragraph 110)

11. *Despite the Secretary of State's insistence that the UK Armed Forces still have sufficient capacity to deploy in response to world events, we remain to be convinced. We are concerned that the breadth of ministerial requirements is in danger of pushing the Armed Forces far beyond what is sustainable. We recommend that either a budget uplift or a (strictly adhered to) prioritisation ranking is introduced. Any prioritisation ranking adopted needs to be drawn up within the National Security Council to ensure*

agreement amongst the Prime Minister, Treasury and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, given that all of those Departments play a role in determining and enabling the deployment of UK Armed Forces. (Paragraph 111)

12. *We understand the financial implications of retaining capabilities after they have been retired but we question whether the MOD have considered all the options. We accept that maintaining equipment comes at significant cost but argue that such platforms do not need to be fully maintained—in a war of existence, a platform which is even halfway viable for regeneration is better than none at all. Given the long lead times to build complex platforms (such as warships, tanks or combat aircraft) combined with the importance of mass and resilience on the battlefield (as demonstrated on both sides of the war in Ukraine), we question whether less expensive alternative storage solutions could be sought, for example through access to US desert facilities. In this context it is worth noting that the United States, China and Russia have for many decades had a policy for mothballing warfighting equipment, whereas the UK policy has been to dispose of it—often at a fraction of its original acquisition cost. Russia has been able to draw on these reserves to add to its capacity to fight in Ukraine.* (Paragraph 112)

Strategic Readiness

13. We welcome the Government's decision to assess what the country would need to do to maintain a warfighting effort. However, it is worrying that this work had not already been undertaken. The national defence plan is still a work in progress but we intend to maintain ongoing scrutiny of the Government's developing plans to ensure warfighting and strategic readiness. (Paragraph 138)

14. The Government's approach to procurement reform is not yet finalised and we have heard many promises of change before. The MOD has shown willing to engage with us as it finalises this approach. We welcome this engagement, but are not yet in a position to reach a view on the appropriateness or effectiveness of the likely policy changes—which we very much hope will be announced to the House prior to the Easter recess, in late March 2024. (Paragraph 139)

15. *Under a national defence plan, each relevant Government Department would have its own responsibilities. We recommend that these responsibilities are published as far as possible, and—if any responsibilities cannot be published for national security reasons—these should be provided in confidence to the relevant select committee. We also recommend that, for each Department, its role in the national defence plan should be added to the list of responsibilities of a named Minister.* (Paragraph 140)

Conclusion

16. Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally changed the threat—demonstrating that Russia has both the capability and intent to prosecute a war in Europe. This requires a wholesale shift in approach towards warfighting resilience both in the UK and Allies. (Paragraph 141)

17. It is a matter of national pride that whenever the Armed Forces are asked to carry out a task, they will find a way. It is to the credit of the Armed Forces that they have

sustained this effort for so long. But overtasking has both a personal cost for service personnel and an opportunity cost for the UK. The increase in global instability has coincided with a period of decreasing recruitment and reduced industrial capacity, which requires sustained, long-term investment. The Government risks being unable to build true warfighting and strategic readiness because of the sheer pace of operations, which could threaten the security of the UK. (Paragraph 142)

18. Personnel need time to recover from operations, and time to train and develop new skills. But the demand of operations makes that harder to achieve. It is unsurprising that more people are leaving the Forces than joining them. All three services have growing capability shortfalls—these have been a feature of our inquiries over the course of this Parliament. As these shortfalls increase, this places greater pressure on those who remain, leading to a vicious cycle. (Paragraph 143)

19. The Government must act to break this cycle, and do so swiftly, to ensure that the UK is ready not only to face the challenges of today, but also to face the storm clouds on the horizon. (Paragraph 144)

Annex 1: Table of information previously available to MPs and the public

Please note the following is not exhaustive and is merely a snapshot relating to information sought within the course of this inquiry.

Table 1: Information no longer published by the MOD

Information	Classification	Reason provided	Date last available
Defence Planning Assumptions	SECRET	Information now classified	2010 (not published in 2015 update)
Percentage of Force Elements showing critical or serious weakness against priorities	Unknown	Figure no longer calculated as a consequence of changes under the delegated operating model.	2013 (not published in the 2013–14 annual report)
Operational Pinch Points in each of the Services	Unknown	This information would, or would be likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces	2015 (not published in the 2015–16 annual report)
The expected number of frigates and destroyers in the Fleet	Unknown	Forward availability forecasts would damage the operational security of the Fleet.	This information was previously published piecemeal rather than as part of an annual or quarterly publication. It is therefore difficult to reference the last available date of publication although the information we have referred to was published in November 2021.

Information	Classification	Reason provided	Date last available
The 'days at sea'/'readiness days' broken down by vessel[281]	Unknown	Whilst an explanation was provided for the transition of calculating days at sea to counting readiness days, there was no explanation for the decision to provide the overall readiness days of all of the Frigates, Destroyers and Offshore Patrol combined rather than separating it out by class or vessel.	This information was previously published piecemeal rather than as part of an annual or quarterly publication. It is therefore difficult to reference the last available date of publication although the information we have referred was published in May 2023.

Source: Compiled by Committee Staff

281 PQ 183322 [on Frigates and Destroyers: Deployment] 30 May 2023 ; PQ 51 [on Royal Fleet Auxiliary: Shipping] 15 November 2023

Annex 2: Readiness information provided to other legislatures

Country	Information provided	Classification
Bulgaria	In line with Art. 23 of the Republic of Bulgaria Defence and Armed Forces Act (DAFA), the Council of Ministers annually submits to the National Assembly, by March 31, a report on the state of the defence and the armed forces, on which the Parliament pronounces a decision. The report is prepared in the Ministry of Defence and submitted for approval by the Council of Ministers by the Minister of Defence.	The annual report on the state of defence is prepared in writing, adopted by a decision of the National Assembly and are public. The mentioned reports do not contain detailed information, but only summarized empirical data, general assessments and conclusions. Only unclassified information is used for their development.
Canada	The Department of National Defence (DND) releases annually a Departmental Plan and a Departmental Results Report. Both publications include information regarding the readiness of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) with the Departmental Plan 2023–24 listing "information on the department's planned results and resources for each of its core responsibilities [Operations; Ready Forces; Defence Team; Future Force Design; Procurement of Capabilities ; Sustainable Bases, Information Technology Systems and Infrastructure] It also contains information on key risks related to achieving those results."	The annual Reports are published online.
Croatia	An annual report on the activities of the Ministry Defence and the Armed of Forces of the Republic of Croatia during the previous year, the state and development of defence capabilities, the implementation of defence preparations, the structure of defence resources, and key development projects, priorities and results is submitted to the Parliament. In the event of a need for more detailed reporting on the situation and activities in the defence sector, which may include classified data, the Ministry of Defence submits an oral or written report to the Defence Committee of the Croatian Parliament.	The report is submitted to the Croatian Parliament inwritten form and is publicly available. Any response to requests for more "detailed reporting" are discussed at a "closed committee session" attended only by members of the Defence Committee and MPs who meet the conditions in accordance with the Data Secrecy Act (Official Gazette, no. 79/2007 and 86/2012).

Country	Information provided	Classification
Denmark	The Minister of Defence answers parliamentary questions from members of the Folketing's Defence Committee including about the country's military capacity. The ministry also provides occasional information about, for example, the number of personnel and weapons capabilities.	The information provided to Folketing is in writing and is public however the political parties that are part of the so-called defence policy agreement circle get more detailed and confidential briefings at meetings with the minister in the ministry.
Estonia	The National Defence Committee receives both written and oral reports on military readiness of Estonia. The most recent example is a written overview of the personnel of the Defence Forces, personnel turnover and the reasons for leaving the service.	Reports are delivered in private; they are for the information for the committee only, and document protection ranges from internal official usage to state secret. The level of detail depends on the need for knowledge and committee has the right to request and receive further clarifications. All the members of the committee need to have state secret clearance.
Finland	The Parliament gets an overall picture of the situation in government Defence Reports and the Defence Committee gets regular classified reports including on different readiness- related Issues which are usually delivered orally.	The Government's Defence Reports are publicly available. Readiness-related briefings to the Defence Committee are always confidential, closed sessions in secure facilities.
France	The Ministry of Defence provides a number of reports as part of its budget review and adoption process including: • Force preparation and employment • Forces equipment	Although the budget reports are unclassified, some information is communicated to the Commission de la Defense confidentially.

Country	Information provided	Classification
Germany	The Federal Ministry of Defence annually informs the Defence Committee of the German Bundestag about the military readiness of the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr). The last time the Federal Government briefed the Defence Committee on this issue was in December 2022, when the Ministry of Defence presented its written report on military readiness in a new format covering aspects of equipment status and availability, the personnel situation of the Bundeswehr and the level of training of its servicewomen and men in relative detail. It also forecasts on whether and how Germany will be able to fulfil its Alliance commitments over the next 24 months and beyond. The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces also produces an annual report on the Bundeswehr to the Bundestag's Defence Committee. This Report covers a wide range of issues (the English version of the 2022 Report can be found here) including concerns about Readiness.	The Parliamentary Briefing on the Operational Readiness of the Bundeswehr is classified as RESTRICTED. The Parliamentary Commissioner's Report is publicly available.
Hungary	The Government has a statutory obligation to report annually in writing to the National Assembly on the implementation of defence tasks in the given year, and on the preparation, condition and development of the Hungarian Defence Forces. The report describe in detail the data on defence training, defence policy, multilateral cooperation, operational tasks at strategic level, manpower, training, logistics, military equipment development and procurement, and defence industry development. The Government also has a statutory obligation to report annually in writing to the National Assembly's Committee on Defence and Law Enforcement on the implementation of the Government's overall tasks of defence and security preparedness and tasking, and on the state of preparedness and state of defence and security of the country.	This annual report, which is submitted to the National Assembly, contains national classified information, so it can only be adopted in camera sitting. Pursuant to the provisions of the Act XXXVI of 2012 on the National Assembly, the Minister of Defence shall report on the activities of the Ministry and the Hungarian Defence Forces in open session before the Committee on Defence and Law Enforcement of the National Assembly, in the framework of the annual hearing of ministers before the committee. If a member of the Committee asks a question to which the Minister can only respond by disclosing national classified information, the Committee shall order an in camera committee sitting.

Country	Information provided	Classification
Latvia	The Saeima has 'parliamentary control' over the National Armed Forces, approving the State Defence Concept; determining the basic size and structure of the Armed Forces; and deciding on the utilisation of the National Armed Forces outside of State territory.	Unknown
Lithuania	As well as regular oral and written scrutiny of the work of the Ministry of Defence by the standing Seimas Committee on National Security and Defence, the Government provides information as part of an annual report on national security. The Minister of Defence informs in writing the Seimas Committee on National Security and Defence and the Seimas Committee on Budget and Finance on planned and implemented acquisitions and projects of infrastructure, which value exceeds 20 million euros. In addition, the Minister of Defence provides information on which defence capabilities will be improved and how it will be improved (in percentages), as well as information on amount of acquisitions, value, long-term maintenance costs and on companies participating in these projects.	In private, during the closed meetings of the standing Seimas Committee on National Security and Defence. According to the Statute of the Seimas only MPs who have access to classified information may be members of the Committee on National Security and Defence
Montenegro	An annual report is submitted on the state of the Military to the Committee on Security and Defence.	The written report is confidential and is not discussed in public.

Country	Information provided	Classification
Netherlands	The Government publishes the 'State of Defence' report which assess where the Defence organisation has come from, where it is now and what its ambitions are in areas such as personnel, equipment, readiness and deployment. The State of Defence includes some figures on personnel and materiel readiness. In addition, the House of Representatives does receive a confidential readiness report with the budget and annual report. When discussing the 2020 annual report the minister of Defence has pledged to inform the House from now on about trends and serious bottlenecks in the development of deployability and readiness. Recently, the standing committee for Defence of the Netherlands House of Representatives has been considering a proposal of the ministry of Defence for a new model to report on the effectivity of Defence policy and specifically the progress made with regards to improving the operational readiness of the armed forces. The objective of the new reporting model is to increase the insight of parliament in how defence expenses are contributing to realise the goals set for the ministry of Defence and to improving operational readiness.	The State of Defence Report is public. The readiness briefing accompanying the annual Report is classified.
North Macedonia	Reports on the implementation of the national defence system, as well as the plans for the development of the national defence, the equipment and the combat readiness of the Army are submitted to the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia either at the request of the Assembly or in at least one of every two years.	The written report is classified and not available to the public.
Norway	The military publishes annual reports where they provide feedback on how tasks have been accomplished and how the military has managed its finances. These include references to military readiness but not all detail is included. Although the Government is the constitutional decision maker in military matters, the Government is in practice required to brief and get permission from the Storting before increasing or reducing personnel, equipment etc.	The annual reports are made public. As important questions regarding foreign policy, security and preparedness, are discussed in the Enlarged Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee (which convenes members from both the Government and the Storting) and the consultations are strictly confidential. As the minutes of committee meetings are not disclosed until after 30 years, it is difficult to determine the level of detailed shared.

Country	Information provided	Classification
Poland	The National Defence Committee of the Senate of the Republic of Poland may at any time ask a representative of the Ministry of National Defence to provide information on current issues concerning national defence. Furthermore, the Council of Ministers, consults with the Sejm's committee competent in matters of national defence, every 4 years to determine, by resolution, the detailed directions of reconstruction and technical modernization of the Armed Forces for the next 15-year planning period, in accordance with the principles of defence planning in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on the basis of: 1) the main directions of development of the Armed Forces and their preparations for national defence determined by the President of the Republic of Poland; 2) obligations of the Republic of Poland adopted within the framework of defence planning in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.	The information requested by the National Defence Committee of the Senate, depending on the topic addressed, may be classified.
Portugal	The National Defence Committee holds regular hearings with the Ministry of Defence and the military chiefs. The involvement of troops in missions abroad is regulated by a special law which requires that: The requests for involvement, together with their grounds; Draft decision or proposal of that involvement; The military resources involved or to be involved, the type and level of risks estimated and the foreseen duration of the mission; and Elements, information and official publications deemed useful and necessary must be given to the Defence Committee.	Hearings can take place either in open or closed sessions depending on the level of sensitivity of the issues under discussion.

Country	Information provided	Classification
Slovakia	The Minister of Defence presents the annual Comprehensive Defence Assessment at the Defence and Security Committee. The annual Report contains information on Information on number of personnel (including the number that left and entered the Armed Force, the development of professional soldiers, their benefits and related legislative norms adopted), equipment (including the equipment procured and delivered in the year concerned, delivery plans of the equipment for the coming years, plans to procure the equipment in the foreseeable future, and problems with equipment such as lack of it or obsolescence of equipment), level of training (including the list of military exercises and training completed in the year concerned) and whether a force could be sustained (including supply levels)	The annual assessment is published on the Ministry of Defence's website and is therefore publicly available.
Spain	In Spain, there is no provision for a periodic report by the government to the legislature on the country's military readiness. However, according to Article 4.1 of Organic Law 5/2005, of 17 November, on National Defence, the Cortes Generales have certain powers in defence, such as the debate on the general lines of defence policy (section c) or the control of government action in defence matters (section d). The Minister of Defence appears before the Spanish Parliament to report on matters related to the work of the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces. Likewise, the Chief of Defence Staff can also appear before the Defence Committee of the Congress of Deputies.	The Ministry of Defence publishes official data and statistics on its website. These public statistics contain data on different military personnel, on military education, as well as on other aspects, e.g. statistics on health, culture, economic affairs, research and development, or military justice. They are all related to the military forces and make up the various statistical yearbooks that are produced annually.

Country	Information provided	Classification
United States	The US Department of Defense is legally required to submit to Congress the "Semi-annual Readiness Report (SRRC), which summarizes: any identified readiness deficiencies; mitigation strategies, timelines, costs, and legislative remedies to address deficiencies; combat readiness ratings and trends for key force elements; the readiness of supporting capabilities (e.g., infrastructure, prepositioned materiel); the readiness of combat support agencies; select incidents causing injury or government property damage; the extent of vehicle, vessel, and aircraft 'cannibalization;' and assignments of military personnel to civilian functions."[282] In addition the Government Accountability Office is able to provide evidence to Congress through its Reports and testimony to Committees and sub- Committees (for instance, see Testimony: Military Readiness (youtube.com) and GAO-23–106673, MILITARY READINESS: Improvement in Some Areas, but Sustainment and Other Challenges Persist (documentcloud.org))	The Semi-annual Readiness Report (SRRC) is classified. GAO testimony is public.

Source: Compiled by Committee staff based on information provided by the Libraries of the respective legislatures and documents in the public domain.

282 IF12240 (congress.gov); The Fundamentals of Military Readiness (congress.gov)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 30 January 2024

Members present

Sir Jeremy Quin, in the Chair

Richard Drax

Emma Lewell-Buck

John Spellar

Derek Twigg

Ready for War?

Draft Report (*Ready for War?*), proposed by Sir Jeremy Quin, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 144 read and agreed to.

Annexes and summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That Sir Jeremy Quin make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 20 February 2024 at 10.00am.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 6 June 2023

Dr Simon Anglim, Teaching Fellow, Kings College London; **Professor Justin Bronk**, Senior Research Fellow, RUSI; **Nick Childs**, Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Q1–71

Tuesday 20 June 2023

The Lord Houghton of Richmond GCB CBE DL, Former Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) Q72–111

Wednesday 21 June 2023

General (Retd) Sir Nick Carter, Former Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) Q112–183

Tuesday 7 November 2023

General Sir Patrick Sanders, Chief of the General Staff, Ministry of Defence; **Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton KCB**, Chief of the Air Staff, Ministry of Defence Q184–285

Tuesday 14 November 2023

Admiral Sir Ben Key KCB CBE, First Sea Lord, Ministry of Defence; **Rear Admiral Steve Moorhouse CBE**, Director Force Generation, Ministry of Defence Q286–346

Wednesday 22 November 2023

Rt Hon James Heappey MP, Minister for the Armed Forces, Ministry of Defence; **General Sir Jim Hockenhull**, Commander of Strategic Command, Ministry of Defence Q347–474

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

AFR numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1 Connelly, Professor Vincent (Professor of Psychology, Oxford Brookes University) (AFR0006)

2 Emergent (AFR0003)

3 Human Security Centre (AFR0004)

4 Kolbe, Dr Geoffrey (Director, Border Ballistics Technologies Ltd.) (AFR0001)

5 Kyriakides, Dr Klearchos A. (Senior Visiting Fellow, School of Law, Cyprus Campus, University of Central Lancashire); and Evriviades, Professor Marios L. (Professor, Neapolis University) (AFR0005)

6 MacCartan-Ward DSC AFC, Commander Nigel D (AFR0002)

7 Ministry of Defence (AFR0008)

8 Ministry of Defence (AFR0009)

9 Roberts, Air Vice Marshal Andrew (AFR0007)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

Session 2023–24

Number	Title	Reference
1st Special	Defence and Climate Change: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2022–2023	HC 32
2nd Special	Aviation Procurement: Winging It?: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2022–2023	HC 187
3rd Special	UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific: Government Response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2022–23	HC 465

Session 2022–23

Number	Title	Reference
1st	The Treatment of Contracted Staff for The MoD's Ancillary Services	HC 187
2nd	The Integrated Review, Defence in a Competitive Age and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy	HC 180
3rd	Defence Space: through adversity to the stars?	HC 182
4th	Developments in UK Strategic Export Controls	HC 282
5th	Withdrawal from Afghanistan	HC 725
6th	Special Relationships? US, UK and NATO	HC 184
7th	Defence Diplomacy: A softer side of UK Defence	HC 792
8th	Defence and Climate Change	HC 179
9th	It is broke - and it's time to fix it: The UK's defence procurement system	HC 1099
10th	Aviation Procurement: Winging it?	HC 178
11th	UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific	HC 138
1st Special	Operation Isotrope: the use of the military to counter migrant crossings: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2021–22	HC 267
2nd Special	The Treatment of Contracted Staff for the MOD's Ancillary Services: Government Response to the Committee's First Report	HC 702
3rd Special	The Integrated Review, Defence in a Competitive Age and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report	HC 865
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