



Defence Select Committee

From the Chair:

Tan Dhesi MP

4 March 2025

**Secretary of State
Ministry of Defence
Main Building, Whitehall
London, SW1A 2HB**

Subject: Increased transparency and openness

Dear Secretary of State,

I would like to start by welcoming your letter to us dated 31 January. On behalf of the Committee, we are appreciative of your efforts to increase the Department's transparency and openness, particularly in relation to the MOD's engagement with the Committee. The decision to return to a published summary of the Defence Planning Assumptions is to be applauded. We are also appreciative of your offer to share greater information with us which will aid us in understanding the Government's vision for the Armed Forces.

However, we wish to raise some issues which require clarification, relating to the information provided. These are addressed in the order which they appear in the table in Annex 1 of the previous Committee's 'Ready for War?' Report:

- The letter made no reference to information on force elements showing critical or serious weaknesses (i.e. their "readiness"). Lt Gen Sir Rob Magowan told us in December 2024 that whilst the MOD could not "declare the readiness of our force elements in an open forum" that "there is a process that I run with the deputy chief of defence staff for military strategy and operations" classified at "UK Secret" which "is something that we can share with you". He went on to say that "clearly you know that we have that data in terms of [the readiness of] force elements. We cannot share it today in this Committee, but we can share it." We have a briefing scheduled and have requested that it include: what Force Elements (FE) are committed at readiness to NATO; to which other National Operations these are held at risk to (as stated by Lt Gen Magowan); the deficiencies in these FEs; and the sustainability of these forces (how long could the deployed FEs fight for). This will allow us to judge the UK's Force Elements at Readiness and the Force Elements at Sustainment. However, it appears that this will be a one-off briefing and not covered by your commitment for regular updates. We would therefore request a commitment that a briefing on Readiness be provided to the Committee once a (calendar) year?
- In your letter, you state that "With maximum transparency in mind, I have also asked the Department to provide you and the Committee with some of the



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information de-classified which is attached to this letter. This information can be published if you wish.” Later, the letter states:

“Included with this letter is de-classified information for:

- 1) Expected number of frigates and destroyers in the Fleet
- 2) Readiness days by ship
- 3) Operation Pinch Points in each of the Services”

However, upon receipt of the third item, it is headed as being ‘not for publication’ and only to be shared with members of the Committee. In addition, the information itself is fairly high level and (unlike the information previously made public before 2016) does not refer to the liability or the size (or percentage) of the shortfall. We would like clarity why your letter implies that the information can be published when the text provided to us states it cannot? We would also ask that the next update include greater detail on the specific roles referred to in each ‘pinch point’ area, the requirement for each role and size of the shortfall;

- The information provided does not actually contain any details about the expected numbers of Frigates and Destroyers in the Fleet. Instead, the information refers to the in service and out of service dates for specific ships—to which no reference was made in the table in Annex 1 (although in service/out of service dates were referred to paragraph 27). Whilst the Royal Navy’s policy may remain unchanged on the announcement of in service/out of service dates for specific ships, refusing to publicly declare the expected number of Frigates and Destroyers in the surface fleet (as it did in the PQ UIN 8669, tabled on 9 January 2024) is a change of policy as the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review stated in its depiction of Joint Force 2025 (p28) that the Royal Navy would have “19 Frigates and Destroyers”. We request that the MOD provide us with a response which relates to information on the expected number of Frigates and Destroyers.

Finally, we welcome the decision to break down readiness via ship/class to improve transparency. We are also appreciative of your commitment that we be provided with the three declassified information sets every 6 months as it allows us to retain a watching brief rather than receive a snapshot without context. We also welcome the commitment in the 6 February letter to provide us with the regular updates the previous Committee received on a number of programmes. We understand the timelines for these to be received as:

- F-35 and A400M: Q1 and Q3
- Pilot training: Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
- Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFV): Q1 and Q3
- Shipbuilding and ship availability: Q2 (plus an annual private briefing)

We therefore look forward to receiving updates on F-35 and A400M; Pilot training; and AFV in due course.



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The Committee are well aware (as, of course, are you) of the increasing levels of threat both to the Armed Forces and to our country as a whole. We very much want to ensure that we act as a critical friend, scrutinising decisions and able to support the brave men and women who put their lives on the line to defend us. I hope you will continue to aid us in this endeavour.

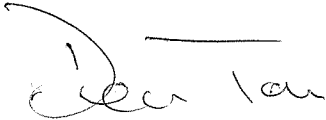
Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T Dhesi', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Tan Dhesi MP

MSU/4/8/1/2

6 February 2025



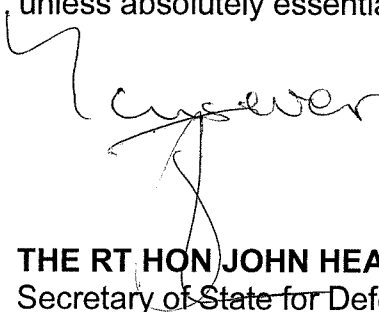
Thank you for your letter of 3 December 2024 regarding transparency and timelines.

As requested, I am content to provide the regular reports to the Committee agreed in the previous Parliament in line with the timings outlined, as well as the additional update on A400M which will be combined with the F35 update. In the spirit of greater transparency, I have also just written to the Committee with previously withheld information as referenced in the Ready for War? The HCDC's fourth Special Report of Session 2023–24.

I am keen to support the Committee's wish for timely and informative responses and respect and understand the importance of such dialogue for the Committee's vital scrutiny work, which includes holding the Department to account. We will always seek to share information at the lowest classification possible, but we may on occasion have to offer classified briefings instead of written returns.

It was unfortunate that there was a delay in the scheduling of your introductory visits to Service HQs, however I am pleased that dates for the Committee to visit all four Commands have been agreed before the end of March. These will follow successful visits to Defence Equipment and Support, Defence Science and Technology Laboratory and RAF Lossiemouth in December. I am also pleased that you have agreement to visit Estonia and Finland which I understand are happening imminently, and the USA which you will visit in the summer.

Finally, I understand the Committee's concern regarding the timing of requests from the department on the organisation of evidence sessions. Both recent requests were intended to support the good conduct of evidence gathering, in particular suggesting revised timings due to developing parliamentary business which may have been pertinent to the Committee's inquiries. As part of a more open dialogue with the Chair and the Committee we will avoid having to make such requests in future unless absolutely essential.



THE RT HON JOHN HEALEY MP
Secretary of State for Defence

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi MP
Chair of House of Commons Defence Committee

MSU/4/8/1/2

31 January 2025



As you know, the Government has been clear that it wants to see a resetting of our relationship with Parliament, encouraging increased transparency and openness.

As Defence Secretary this is a personal priority of mine. You will be aware that previously the MOD faced criticism from the Committee for taking too long to provide information it requested, withholding large amounts of information based on classifications, and being too insular in its approach. This prevented the HCDC from feeling it was able to properly scrutinise the Department's work.

On my arrival in post, I made it clear that this needed to change and that it was our duty to be outward facing and open, especially with Parliament. On your appointment as Chair, I set out a series of engagements for you and the Committee to begin to rebuild this relationship and I have also directed work internally to support this step-change.

In the HCDC 'Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023–24' the Committee highlighted several examples where Defence had previously disclosed information but had subsequently stopped doing so, without a clear justification as to what had changed. In the spirit of openness, I have now directed that the majority of the information highlighted in the report is shared with you and Committee colleagues in full, but on the understanding some of it remains classified at OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE and SECRET and therefore should not be shared more widely. Defence Officials will be in touch shortly to discuss the practicalities of how we can convey this specific information with you securely given its classification.

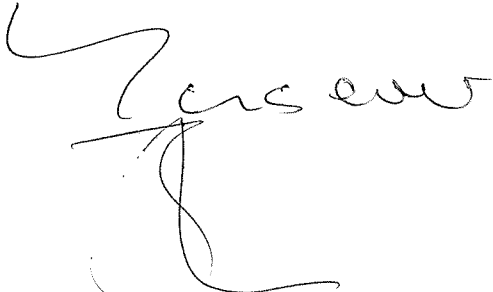
With maximum transparency in mind, I have also asked the Department to provide you and the Committee with some of the information de-classified which is attached to this letter. This information can be published if you wish.

Some of the information referenced in the report, such as the Defence Planning Assumptions (DPA), is due to be refreshed shortly as part of the Strategic Defence Review. On conclusion of the SDR, information will be shared with the HCDC, including an updated set of DPA, but these will be classified and should only be

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi MP
Chair of House of Commons Defence Committee

shared with Committee members. Defence Officials will however also provide an official summary for disclosure in the public domain. I propose that for the duration of this Parliament, Defence provides these specific information sets included and referenced in this letter to the HCDC every 6 months.

I hope this goes some way to rectifying lack of transparency from the previous Government and shows my intent to changing this going forward. I would be grateful for your thoughts on this proposal, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have on this information in the first instance.



THE RT HON JOHN HEALEY MP
Secretary of State for Defence

Included with this letter is de-classified information for:

- 1) Expected number of frigates and destroyers in the Fleet
- 2) Readiness days by ship
- 3) Operation Pinch Points in each of the Services

Information for the House of Commons Defence Committee

Background

The Government has been clear that it wants to see a step change with Parliament, re-setting our relationship with it and encouraging increased transparency and openness.

The information below has therefore been shared to show a commitment to transparency and to rectify past criticisms of the MOD within the **HCDC Ready for War? First Report of session 2023-24**.

This information relates to Annex 1 of that report.

1. Expected number of frigates and destroyers in the Fleet

The Royal Navy (RN) does not, and has not, released the in and out of service dates for specific ships with the exception of the first and last of each class. This serves to maximise the transparency of these major programmes whilst acknowledging that build times will vary as the programme matures. It also seeks to protect information on platform numbers that may be exploited by our adversaries.

There has been no change in policy. The HCDC report cited spoken evidence, where the Chief of Defence Staff asserted that HMS GLASGOW would be in service in the same timeframe as HMS WESTMINSTER leaves service. This evidence was given in 2017 and is no longer correct. WESTMINSTER was retired this year (2024) as her refit was not economically viable. This has been reported to Parliament.

2. Readiness days by ship

Readiness means to have a specific military capability able to deliver an effect within a specified timeframe. In the Royal Navy (RN), readiness is also a way of quantifying **how long** it would take a unit (for example a ship) to be capable of undertaking a **task**. It is therefore important to know **what** something is at readiness for.

If we think about traditional platforms in the RN, the 'ingredients' for readiness are:

- is the ship/platform **available** (crewed and not in maintenance or under refit);
- **capable** (the necessary equipment is onboard and required training completed);
- and **sustainable** (there is a supply of food, stores, fuel, weapons etc, above minimum levels to enable the unit to undertake the task for a defined period).

Previously, the RN responded to ad hoc requests (FOIs and PQs) for the number of days at sea/alongside for specific ships.

In 2023, the RN changed its policy from issuing ad hoc days at sea/alongside data for specific ships, to proactively releasing readiness data for output categories. The reason for this was:

1. **More proactive.** Moving from ad hoc responses to proactive reporting allows for greater shared understanding of the data.

2. **Better metric.** Readiness is what the RN is tasked to produce and is therefore a better measure on which to scrutinise the RN. In contrast, days at sea does not take into account the effect that ships are able to deliver whether alongside or at sea.
3. **Less security risk.** Publication of data at the individual platform level increases operational security risk by revealing information on tactics and operational cycles. Although observation and social media reporting can provide this data, it incurs cost and is not validated.

Revised Readiness Days Categories			
Output	Ships and classes included	2022	2023
Afloat Support	RFA Fort Victoria, Tide Class, Wave Class	1193	1391
Carriers	Queen Elizabeth Class	599	514
Frigates	Type 23 Frigates	2704	2126
Destroyers	Type 45 Destroyers	638	1124
Inshore Patrol	Cutlass Class	368	730
Littoral Strike	Albion Class, Bay Class, RFA Argus	1466	1524
Military Data Gathering	HMS Echo, Magpie, Protector, Scott	1432	1067
Offshore Patrol	River Class (Batch 1 & 2)	2546	2728
Seabed Warfare	RFA Proteus, Stirling Castle, Hunt Class, Sandown Class	3429	3391
Training	Archer Class	5717	3582



Defence Select Committee

From the Chair:

Tan Dhesi MP

Tuesday, 3 December 2024

Rt Hon John Healey MP
Secretary of State for Defence
Main Building, Whitehall
London SW1A 2HB

Subject: Transparency and timeliness

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you again for your introductory evidence session on 21st November and for your welcome commitment on the record to greater transparency.

Regular reporting

In that spirit, I understand that I need to request formally that you continue to provide the Committee with the regular reports that were promised in the last Parliament on:

- shipbuilding and ship availability (annually),¹
- major army programmes² (every six months) and
- the F-35 Lightning Programme, to be combined with an update on the availability of the A-400M fleet (every six months),³ and holding numbers for pilot training (quarterly).⁴

These reports were already overdue when the general election was called.

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmdfence/1160/report.html>, response to conclusions 18 and 24

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7169/documents/75674/default/>

³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/42038/documents/209776/default/>, page 7

⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/42038/documents/209776/default/>, page 8



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Timeliness of information provision

Timeliness is a critical factor in meaningful transparency. With this in mind, we will be monitoring closely the Department's record of responding to our calls for evidence and other information requests. Wherever possible, we allow weeks if not months for the Department to respond. We are always open to early communication if a deadline appears especially challenging to meet. I hope you will support the Committee's wish to see informative and timely responses become the rule rather than the exception.

Timely arrangement of visits and availability of personnel

On the same lines, you know that we were keen to establish an early programme of visits to defence establishments. These visits are invaluable for informing the Committee, as well as for building relations between the Committee and the Armed Forces. In your letter to me of 7 October, you recommended visits to the Single Services as well as a range of other key sites. We immediately requested dates for these visits. Our point of comparison was that in 2020 the Committee were offered dates for visits to the three Service HQs on the days they requested: three successive Thursdays during the first month of their existence. This time, no Service HQ has offered us any dates before 2025; and the dates for RAF Command and Strategic Command have only just arrived.

We appreciate the increased demands on the Services in today's ever more complex strategic environment. But I think you will understand why we have been surprised and disappointed by this response to requests that you had encouraged us to make.

I note that we are currently also awaiting ministerial approval for visits requested nearly a month ago to Finland and Estonia, and to the USA. For budgetary and other reasons, these visits may be at risk if we do not have approval and a likely timeframe within the next few days.

I note finally that there have been surprising requests from within the Department for last-minute adjustments to timings for our two most recent evidence sessions. I hope these can be avoided in future.



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Next steps

I want the relationship between the Committee and the Department to be one of mutual respect. We will do this far more effectively and constructively if the tone you have set of co-operation and transparency is shared by all those who work for you. We suspect that the snags we have encountered stem mainly from process, such as repeated rounds of clearance, and competing priorities. But you will be best placed to understand and to encourage change for the better in the least confrontational way possible.

I hope that we will be able to resolve this situation without publicity.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T Dhesi', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Tan Dhesi MP