

Defence Committee

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# Manpower or mindset: Defence's contribution to the UK's pandemic response

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Sixth Report of Session 2019–21

HC 357



## Defence Committee

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**Sixth Report of Session 2019–21**

**HC 357**

Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report

Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed 9 March 2021

Published on 25 March 2021  
by authority of the House of Commons

## 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

The novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, which emerged from China in late 2019 and evolved into a global pandemic over the following months is the most serious peacetime emergency the UK has faced in a century. While the UK National Risk Register had identified a (flu) pandemic as a serious risk, the preparations which had ostensibly been made for the emergence of an infectious disease were found wanting. This resulted in a range of actions being taken to overcome these shortcomings including changes to decision-making structures and the need to enhance medical capacity. As part of this response, the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces were asked to assist.

The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces have a long history of supporting the civil authorities during a crisis. The longest running military operation in British history - support to the civil authorities in Northern Ireland (Operation Banner) - continuously ran for almost 40 years. While the Ministry of Defence is typically a supporting rather than a lead department in the response to civil emergencies, it, along with the Armed Forces, has a range of capabilities and skills that can be employed in a crisis. Since 2000 the Armed Forces have been called upon to assist with the foot and mouth epidemic, flooding, counter-terrorism, fire brigade strikes and the 2012 Olympics.

There is a well-established policy and set of processes by which civilian bodies can request military help, under the rubric of 'Military Assistance to the Civil Authorities'. Defence can offer specialist skills such as bomb disposal and civil engineering but can also provide a mass of trained and disciplined manpower which can be deployed to meet an emergency at short notice. An emerging lesson from the experience of the pandemic is

that some civil agencies do not understand the capabilities Defence can offer, nor how to request them effectively. Further, Defence should not be used as a means of backfilling for inadequate preparation and resourcing by the civilian bodies which have a statutory responsibility to meet crises.

Since the emergence of the disease in the UK in late January 2020, the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces have made a vital contribution to the UK's response at all levels including the Devolved Administrations and local government. Thus far they have assisted with increasing hospital capacity, procuring protective equipment and ventilators, developing and implementing mobile and mass testing programmes, repatriating UK citizens from abroad, providing aeromedical evacuation aircraft to outlying regions and planning for vaccine distribution and administration. They contributed capacity and personnel but, most significantly, a different mindset which was more focussed on objective rather than process. The experience of this and the Vaccine Taskforce must lead to a fundamental rethink of the effective operation of Government which task should be taken forward by other Select Committees.

In parallel, the Ministry of Defence has continued to deliver its other core objectives, including the maintenance of the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent, the deployment of forces in support of NATO in the Baltic States and the operation of Quick Reaction Aircraft to defend UK airspace. It has continued to do so while ensuring Defence personnel are protected from the coronavirus. In collaboration with the defence industry, the Department has also sought to minimise the impact of the pandemic on its major procurement programmes.

In light of the UK's pandemic response to date, the Government should:

- Explicitly and tangibly recognise the vital contribution made by uniformed and civilian Defence personnel to the UK's pandemic response
- Use Defence capabilities and resources to distribute and administer vaccinations at home and abroad.
- Strengthen civil crisis response capabilities to ensure Defence does not become the 'responder of first resort'.
- Better educate civilian bodies about what Defence can and cannot do, and the unique capabilities it can offer in a crisis;
- Ensure that the implications of the pandemic for Defence and national resilience are fully considered by the Integrated Review
- Undertake a wide-ranging lessons learned exercise into the pandemic and make the process and conclusions of this public.

# Context of the inquiry

## Introduction

- 1.** The emergence of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) in December 2019 and its subsequent development into a world-wide pandemic<sup>1</sup> is perhaps the most significant peacetime crisis faced by the United Kingdom and the wider-world in a century. To date there have been some 100 million recorded cases of the disease worldwide and 2.1 million confirmed deaths.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the pandemic has resulted in global disruption to international trade, national economies and the day-to-day lives of billions of people.
- 2.** In response to the pandemic, national and local governments have been forced to respond urgently to a range of challenges including, increased healthcare capacity, the provision of protective equipment, the development of testing and tracking capabilities, repatriation of citizens, restriction of movement across borders and the introduction and enforcement of public health measures designed to reduce transmission of the virus. These responses have typically seen the employment of the full range of capabilities and resources available to states including, in many cases, their Armed Forces.

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1 The World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus to be a pandemic on 12 March 2020. WHO< WHO announces COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic', 12 March 2020 <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/3/who-announces-covid-19-outbreak-a-pandemic>

2 Figures from the COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering, John Hopkins University, as of 25 January 2021, <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

## Our inquiry

- 3.** In the UK, the Armed Forces form an important component of crisis response planning, being available to assist the civil agencies which hold statutory responsibility for preparation and execution of emergency plans. Many select committees have undertaken work relating to the coronavirus and its impact in the UK. This report focuses primarily on the contribution the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces have made in support of the UK's national response to the crisis and does not consider in detail other aspects of the pandemic.
- 4.** Our inquiry was launched in May 2020, with a request for written evidence, which received seven written submissions. In July 2020 we took oral evidence from three expert witnesses in the field of emergency planning:

  - Professor David Alexander, Professor of Risk and Disaster Reduction at University College London;
  - Dr Jennifer Cole, Research Fellow in Anti-Microbial Resistance at Royal Holloway University; and,
  - Mr Bruce Mann, former Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat at the Cabinet Office and Associate of the Emergency Planning College.
- 5.** We received written evidence from the Ministry of Defence, along with a briefing from the Directorate of Operations and Standing Joint Command (UK) on their role in responding to the crisis. In November 2020 we took evidence from the Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace MP, accompanied by Major General Charles Stickland (Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff Operations and Commitments) and Anthony McGee (Deputy Director for Operational Policy).
- 6.** In this report we examine:

  - The emergence of the coronavirus pandemic, UK preparations for this threat and the government's crisis response (Chapter 2)
  - The Defence role in UK emergency planning and response (Chapter 3)
  - The Ministry of Defence's role in the pandemic response (Chapter 4)
  - The wider impact of the pandemic on Defence and what lessons have been (Chapter 5)

# The coronavirus pandemic and the UK

## The outbreak of the pandemic and emergence in the UK

7. The coronavirus pandemic emerged in late 2019, with the identification of a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, China. It took until 9 January 2020 for the Chinese government to inform the World Health Organisation that it believed these pneumonia cases had been caused by a novel coronavirus.<sup>3</sup> The failure by the Chinese government to more quickly acknowledge and share details of the outbreak hindered wider awareness of the severity of the disease and assessment of its potential impact.<sup>4</sup> Within less than a week of the confirmation of a novel virus outbreak the first cases had been identified outside of China (in Thailand and Japan), and by 24 January the first cases had been identified in Europe (France). On 31 January the first UK cases had been identified in a couple who had recently travelled from China.<sup>5</sup>

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3 World Health Organisation, Covid-19 Timeline, 29 June 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>, accessed 14 January 2021.

4 It has been reported that the first case of novel coronavirus in China was recorded on 17 November 2019. Lester, D. First coronavirus case happened one year ago today, according to China, *The Independent*, 17 November 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-china-first-case-b1724282.html> accessed 14 January 2021

5 First UK coronavirus cases confirmed, *Evening Standard*, 31 January 2020

## UK preparations for a pandemic

8. The United Kingdom's crisis planning had previously identified the significant risk of a flu pandemic outbreak and its potential impact on the UK, which was rated among the highest risks in both impact and likelihood of occurrence. The 2017 published version of the UK National Risk Register noted that the consequences of a pandemic outbreak might include:

- for pandemic flu:
  - up to 50% of the UK population experiencing symptoms, potentially leading to between 20,000 and 750,000 fatalities and high levels of absence from work.
- for emerging infectious diseases:
  - several thousand people experiencing symptoms, potentially leading to up to 100 fatalities.
- disruption to essential services, particularly health and education; and,
- economic disruption, including disruption to business and tourism.<sup>6</sup>
- The risk of an emerging infectious disease was assessed as being lower than that posed by pandemic flu.

9. However, the experience of coronavirus indicates that the planning for any sort of pandemic was inadequate and the government had to rapidly adapt to the new threat posed by coronavirus. The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy concluded in December 2020 that:

“[T]he novel features of covid-19 would have caused difficulties for any government, ...While the Government has been scaling up critical response capabilities, we are not convinced that the unique nature of covid-19 fully explains the difficulties the Government faced... The job of responding to the covid-19 pandemic has been made harder by insufficient attention being paid to establishing necessary capabilities ahead of time... It is difficult to avoid the impression that the Government simply did not believe a novel disease other than influenza could circulate widely within the UK”.<sup>7</sup>

10. This view was supported by two of our witnesses. Dr Jennifer Cole (Research Fellow in anti-microbial resistance at Royal Holloway University) told us:

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6 *National Risk Register Of Civil Emergencies*, 2017, Cabinet Office, p34

7 House of Commons House of Lords Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, Biosecurity and national security, First Report of Session 2019–21, HC 611 HL195, para 61–62.

“Although on paper there were a lot of policies and a lot of preparedness for pandemics, it hit the resources that were available to run exercises at local authority level within different agencies. It was not seen as a sexy, James Bond movie threat anymore, and it took the eye off the ball a little bit. Part of that is because, whatever money and resources have been available for preparedness, it has always been played down on the non-man-made threat side; it has always been the first thing to be cut. We see that with Operation Cygnus, which was massively scaled down from what was originally planned”.<sup>8</sup>

Professor David Alexander (Professor of Risk and Disaster Reduction at University College London) agreed:

“The planning was overshadowed by the need to plan counter-terrorism and, latterly, the need to plan for the risk of a supply-chain failure associated with Brexit, the result of which was that pandemic planning took a back seat”.<sup>9</sup>

11. Mr Bruce Mann (former Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and Associate at the UK Emergency Planning College) qualified this point by noting that the difference between an influenza pandemic and the current situation was that influenza was a largely known quantity, with good global knowledge of its characteristics and with vaccines available. This was not the case with coronavirus, inevitably placing the initial response at a disadvantage.<sup>10</sup> However, Mr Mann did note that the National Security Council had failed to consider threats such as a pandemic adequately:

“I would be very candid about the limited degree to which the National Security Council looked at civil contingencies even in the years before the pandemic happened. That was very disappointing. A point that we might come back to is why civil contingencies drop down people’s radar screens when there are no crises”.<sup>11</sup>

The Secretary of State for Defence also acknowledged that there were questions to be asked about the validity of the assumptions and planning prior to the pandemic:

“The second [lesson] was about the national resilience capability plans owned by the Cabinet Office: how current to the threat they

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8 Defence Committee Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK’s pandemic response, HC 357, Q2

9 Defence Committee Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK’s pandemic response, HC 357, Q2

10 Defence Committee Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK’s pandemic response, HC 357, 14 July 2020, Q2

11 Defence Committee Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK’s pandemic response, HC 357, 14 July 2020, Q14

are and how realistic they are. When all this is over with Covid and there is an inquiry with people looking into it, the question will be about what was missing from those plans.<sup>12</sup>

12. Supporting this conclusion, Penny Mordaunt MP, who, as Paymaster General, supports civil contingency planning in the Cabinet Office, told the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy that, “the Cabinet Office could have a “more robust role in ensuring that the right things are being done”. For her, one of the lessons of covid-19 was “not to allow departments to mark their own homework” but rather for the Cabinet Office to act as a “critical friend” to “ensure the robustness of plans and exercises”.<sup>13</sup>

## The Government's crisis response

13. The UK's initial strategic and operational response to the pandemic was directed primarily through the COBR Committee.<sup>14</sup> The first COBR relating to the pandemic was held on 24 January 2020 and is reported to have been chaired by Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health. Only four meetings were held, before the Prime Minister chaired the meeting on 2 March. From this point forward, the First Ministers from the devolved national administrations also took part. As the pandemic response evolved, the Prime Minister began daily Covid-19 meetings with a small group of senior ministers and officials; in mid-March Covid-19 ministerial implementation groups (MIGs) were set up, covering health and social care, public services, economic response and international aspects. The Institute for Government reported that by May the daily Covid-19 cabinet meeting had become the dominant decision-making body, COBR ceasing to meet from 10 May onwards.<sup>15</sup>
14. By early June, the government moved away from the MIGs and the daily Covid-19 meetings. Instead cabinet committees were created for Covid Strategic response (CS—chaired by the Prime Minister) and Covid operational response (CO—chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office), which were developed to mirror the model used for Brexit no-deal preparation in 2019.<sup>16</sup> In his evidence to the Committee, the Secretary of State for Defence noted that the Ministry of Defence was represented by a Minister:

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12 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357, Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q52

13 House of Commons House of Lords Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, Biosecurity and national security, First Report of Session 2019–21, HC 611 HL195, para 94

14 COBR or COBRA is shorthand for the Civil Contingencies Committee that is convened to handle matters of national emergency or major disruption. Its purpose is to coordinate different departments and agencies in response to such emergencies. COBR is the acronym for Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms, a series of rooms located in the Cabinet Office in 70 Whitehall.

15 Haddon, C. *UK government coronavirus decision making: key phases*, Institute for Government, 29 June 2020

16 Haddon, C. *UK government coronavirus decision making: key phases*, Institute for Government, 29 June 2020

“I have sat on [Covid-O] a number of times, and if I am not on it, the Minister for the Armed Forces attends, depending on what the subject is. That is a key decision-making body... That has been just like a COBRA. Having done 20 or 30 COBRAs in my previous time, I can tell you that this is very similar to COBRA. It is just specifically dedicated to Covid”.<sup>17</sup>

**15.** It is not clear why the government moved away from the existing crisis machinery to a bespoke arrangement specific to the coronavirus pandemic. Mr Bruce Mann suggested that the issue may have been whether those staffing the initial COBRA response had the aptitude or training to deal with a crisis of this magnitude.

**16.** From the evidence it is clear that there was a disconnect between the assessment of the threat of an infectious disease pandemic (flu or otherwise) and the preparations for such an event occurring. Subsequent government actions (such as the re-drawing of crisis machinery and the need to urgently procure large supplies of PPE) suggest that both organisational and practical preparations were not sufficiently mature. It is inexplicable that COBRA should have met only four times between 24 January and 2 March. *This disconnect and its causes should be addressed at any future public enquiry into the UK's response to the pandemic.*

We consider below how the aptitudes, skills and training peculiar to the Armed Forces and MoD can contribute to the government's handling of a crisis like this one.

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<sup>17</sup> Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357, Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q55

# The Defence role in UK emergency planning and response

- 17.** United Kingdom (UK) civil emergency planning (if not its capabilities) has grown since the late 1990s, with the creation of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat within the Cabinet Office to improve Whitehall's coordination of both planning for and managing of crises. Government planning for responses to emergencies and crises at national, regional and local level is underpinned by the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) ('the Act'). This legislation places statutory responsibility on Category 1 (Emergency Services, local authorities and NHS bodies) and Category 2 bodies (Health and Safety Executive, transport and utility companies) to plan and prepare for various types of emergencies. The Act places no statutory responsibilities on the Ministry of Defence to plan and prepare for civil emergencies, however Defence's role in civil crises is focused on two main areas:
- i. Provision of niche capabilities, which Defence maintains for its own purposes and which would be disproportionately costly for civil authorities to develop independently, for example bomb disposal; and,
  - ii. Readiness to support civil authorities when their capacity is overwhelmed. Such support is provided from redirected capacity within the Armed Forces and is subject to availability and the need to meet core Defence objectives. The Ministry of Defence does not maintain forces specifically for this role.

Activity in both these areas falls under Defence Task 1: Defence, security and resilience of the UK and its overseas territories and is usually referred to as 'Military Aid to the Civil Authorities' (MACA).

- 18.** The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review stated that: "The UK's resilience depends on all of us—the emergency services, local and central government, businesses, communities and individual members of the public",<sup>18</sup> and that:

"the response to, and recovery from, an emergency is carried out first and foremost at the local level. As well as the police, fire and rescue and health services, a wide range of organisations could be involved. These include local government, voluntary service organisations, businesses, community groups and individuals. We will therefore continue to develop and improve coordination between local and national levels of response".<sup>19</sup>

- 19.** Despite this commitment to improve civil response capability, recent experience suggests that the civil authorities are frequently unable to deal with certain types of emergency, leading to the Armed Forces being the first rather than last resort. In evidence to the Committee Mr Bruce Mann noted that:

"what we tend to see at the moment is a repetitive cycle of weaknesses in risk assessment, weaknesses in preparedness, meaning short-notice calls to the military, especially, to come in and bail out the civil authorities. So we made it one of our objectives ... that it is not a respectable position for the public authorities not to be sufficiently prepared. You can call that civilianisation of emergency planning if you want. I would say that if civil authorities have a responsibility in the emergency preparedness field, they must fulfil it, and calling in the military in that way—in a way that is not pre-planned—is a sign of failure".<sup>20</sup>

- 20.** The Secretary of State for Defence also noted that there was very wide variation in the preparedness of local emergency planning bodies:

"The LRFs are a reflection of their areas' local authority governance structures. If you had a pretty straightforward area, such as unitary or a unitary with coterminous districts, you tended to find they were more straightforward. If you had LRF areas where you might have a very powerful, big authority—let us say Birmingham City—but that sat alongside the liquorice-allsorts types of local authorities

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18 Her Majesty's Government, *The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (November 2015) para 4.128

19 Her Majesty's Government, *The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (November 2015) para 4.145

20 Defence Committee Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357, Q10

that we all experience as local MPs, sometimes they were not as straightforward or as used to suddenly stepping up and being the driver of that. You could have a completely different experience in one part of the country from another, and one of the lessons from this is, exactly as General Stickland said, about this sense that you have to be more than a paper tiger. You have to practise and sort out in peacetime the lines of responsibility, the leadership and the relationships between the district councils”.<sup>21</sup>

- 21.** Civilian agencies will inevitably require assistance in a crisis of this scale and there should be no stigma in seeking help from the Armed Forces. However, it is clear that preparations for a non-man-made threat such as an infectious disease pandemic were afforded less priority than issues such as terrorism, despite being assessed as having both high likelihood and high impact in the National Risk Register. *The Government must take steps to ensure that the civilian agencies which have statutory responsibilities prepare properly, and that Defence does not become the default ‘first responder’ to make good deficiencies exposed by a developing crisis.*

## Military Aid to the Civil Authorities

- 22.** Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) is a well-established process by which the Ministry of Defence may offer niche resources and capabilities to the civil authorities and other agencies (such as the police) in the event they do not have these capabilities themselves or if they are unable to cope with the scale or duration of a crisis. MACA has been repeatedly used by wider local and devolved government in a range of scenarios in recent years. The Ministry of Defence defines MACA as “military operations conducted in the UK and Crown Dependencies involving the employment of Defence resources as requested by a government department or civil authority”.<sup>22</sup>

### How does MACA work?

- 23.** Within the UK, response to an emergency or crisis falls initially to local emergency services. If required, local services can be augmented through a multi-agency response coordinated by government departments or civil authorities. Military assistance may be requested as part of a multi-agency

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21 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357, Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q67

22 Reference

response, and reinforces national resilience and assists in the planning, response and recovery for a wide range of disruptive events.<sup>23</sup> Requests for military assistance are generated from two main sources:

- i. top-down requests will typically be generated by the lead department or by the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR);
- ii. bottom-up requests will typically originate from Local Resilience Forums and be signed off by a senior police officer or equivalent official. It must be then approved by a minister from the lead government department before being passed to the Ministry of Defence.

**24.** Under existing guidance, once a request for assistance is received it must then be approved by a Defence minister. Treasury rules say that government departments must charge for services that do not form part of their funded tasks and that departments must not profit from activity carried out on behalf of another department, so requesting departments need their own ministers' endorsement and must accept the financial costs of the assistance as calculated by the Ministry of Defence. With a few exceptions,<sup>24</sup> MACA activity is not funded within the Defence budget and is therefore conducted on a repayment basis. In the case of requests for military assistance outside England, the lead government department principle still applies with requests expected to be submitted by the devolved administrations via the Scottish Office, Wales Office or Northern Ireland Office as appropriate.

**25.** Within the Ministry of Defence the Operations Directorate has strategic responsibility for preparing for and responding to civil emergencies. At the operational level the Standing Joint Commander UK (SJC (UK)) is assigned responsibility for MACA operations in a geographic area via a directive from the Chief of the Defence Staff. Naval and Air operations conducted under MACA will generally be under the operational command of the Fleet Commander (Navy Command) and Deputy Commander Operations (Air Command) respectively. At working level, the Ministry of Defence maintains a network of regional points of command (RPOC) based on Army Brigade and Regional Headquarters which, along with regional liaison officers embedded in Local Resilience Forums, provides the main link between Defence and the civil authorities at the devolved administration, sub-nation and local levels.<sup>25</sup>

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23 UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security, Joint Doctrine Publication 02, 3rd Edition, February 2017, Ministry of Defence, para 2.5

24 Such exceptions include provision of bomb disposal units.

25 UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security, Joint Doctrine Publication 02, 3rd Edition, February 2017, Ministry of Defence, para 1.12 (a)-(c).

## What skills and capabilities can MACA provide?

- 26.** Defence can provide a broad range of support to the civil authorities, including some not exclusively military in nature (such as the provision of extra manpower during flooding). Where niche capabilities are requested to support the civil authorities, the MoD's Operations Directorate will assign these from the Service Command best placed to meet the task.
- 27.** Defence contributions may range from the rapid deployment and provision of generic manpower through to niche capabilities not found elsewhere in government. Examples include:
- i. **Planning:** military personnel are trained and experienced in developing and executing plans in the face of uncertainty and limited information, which are key skills in a crisis environment. Defence planners were employed for example in preparations for a no-deal exit from the European Union. When the Ministry of Defence was asked to begin MACA activity in the current pandemic, it focused initially on assistance to the Ministry for Communities and Local Government and the National Health Service in making preparations. This included the placing of planning experts within the Departments in Whitehall, the devolved administrations and in the Local Resilience Forums to augment and enhance the ability of these bodies to prepare for the impact of the pandemic.<sup>26</sup>
  - ii. **Command and control:** the Armed Forces have well established command and control (C2) structures, enabled through both training and communications equipment. In the 2001 Foot and Mouth crisis, military C2 capabilities were an important factor in the successful implementation of the culling and disposal of potentially infected cattle.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the current crisis, Defence has made extensive use of its existing Joint Military Command structure to support civil resilience structures across the four nations of the UK.
  - iii. **Niche capabilities:** Defence can provide a range of specialist capabilities, including: Explosive Ordnance Disposal, Chemical Biological, Radiological and Nuclear assets, Counter Terrorism support (Special Forces, surveillance and reconnaissance), and specialist engineering skills and equipment.

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<sup>26</sup> The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review noted the role the Armed Forces could play in response to civil emergencies and committed to helping local responders to better understand what the types of assistance the Armed Forces could offer. It also committed to placing military planners in key government Departments to give the military a more formal role in national resilience. Her Majesty's Government, *The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (November 2015) paras 4.148.4.149

<sup>27</sup> Inquiry into Foot and Mouth Disease in Scotland, The Royal Society of Edinburgh, July 2002, para 168.

iv. Manpower: where needed, Defence can rapidly deploy trained and disciplined personnel at a large scale and at short notice. An example is the deployment of around 14,000 troops to help secure the 2012 London Olympics following the failure of a commercial supplier to provide the required number of staff.

28. Since 2000, the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces have provided significant assistance to the civil authorities (see Table 1). These examples are in addition to routine, ongoing assistance in area such as bomb disposal where there is an average of around 2,500 calls per year.<sup>28</sup>

**Table 1: Previous examples of MACA operations**

Operation name	Year	Description
Operation Peninsula	2001	Response to the Foot and Mouth crisis, in which the Army's expertise in logistics, co-ordination were important in effectively completing the culling of potentially infected cattle
Operation Fresco	2002–2003	The deployment of personnel to replace striking firefighters
Operation Olympics	2012	Wide-ranging support to delivery of the London Olympic
Operation Pitchpole	2013–2014	Support to local authorities in the wake of flooding in the south of England
Operation Shaku	2015–2016	Use of military manpower in response to flooding across the United Kingdom
Operation Bridled	2016	Provision of specialist engineering support following the collapse of Didcot power station
Operation Temperer	2017	Special Forces support to police following the Manchester Arena bombing
Operation Morlop	2018	The military component of the multi-agency response to the use of nerve agent by Russian operatives in Salisbury in 2018
Operation Redfold	2019–2020	Defence contribution to the government wide preparations for a no-deal Brexit outcome (Operation Yellowhammer)

Source: House of Commons

28 'A busy year for the bomb squad', British Army, 23 December 2020, <https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2020/12/a-busy-year-for-the-bomb-squad/> accessed 14 January 2021

In its written evidence the Ministry of Defence highlighted the value of the lessons drawn from these previous MACA operations for its support to the civil authorities and Devolved Administrations during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, the role of the Standing Joint Command in the pandemic response was based on its experience of coordinating military support to the London Olympics.<sup>29</sup>

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29 Written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Defence 'Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response', DPR0005, 14 July 2020, para 2.5-2.5.3, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/8426/default/>

# The Ministry of Defence's role in the pandemic response

- 29.** Within the UK's civil emergency planning structures, the MoD is a supporting department, and provides help under the terms of Military Assistance to the Civil Authorities (MACA). The Secretary of State for Defence told the Committee:

"I know colleagues often say that the Army could do more. We could always do more, but in this country we do not come along and impose. We wait for the request, for example, from the Scottish Government. If the Scottish Government want more assistance, we have a MACA process and we are absolutely happy to help them, or the Welsh Government or, indeed, the local authorities".<sup>30</sup>

- 30.** During the pandemic response the Ministry of Defence has provided support to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), the National Health Service (NHS), the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCO), the devolved administrations and the Overseas Territories. The ongoing Defence contribution to COVID-19 consists of two distinct operations:

- Operation Rescript is the domestic response to the pandemic;

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<sup>30</sup> Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357, Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q53

- Operation Broadshare is the overseas component, including repatriation of UK citizens and support to the overseas territories.

## The initial phase of MACA activity - March to June 2020

- 31.** On 18 March 2020 the MOD announced the creation of the Covid Support Force (CSF) to assist public services with their response to the pandemic. Initially 20,000 military personnel were placed on standby, with around 4,000 committed on most days. Following the effectiveness of the measures (i.e. the first national lockdown) taken to reduce transmission there was a reduced need for Defence assistance and in late May the MoD reduced the number of personnel on standby to 7,500. By 11 June 2020, there were 3,610 military personnel actively committed to assist with requests for MACA.
- 32.** Early in the crisis the Secretary State for Defence amended the existing policy guidance (see paragraph 17) by delegating approval for MACA requests down to the lowest practicable level, provided they were not novel or contentious. This was effectively a blanket approval to ensure that requests could be met more quickly.<sup>31</sup>
- 33.** During the first wave of the pandemic, Defence personnel were involved in a wide range of activities in support of the civil authorities, including:
  - i. provision of planning support: dozens of military planners were embedded within Local Resilience Forums and Partnerships, alongside the Emergency Coordination Centres in Scotland and Wales. As the Secretary of State for Defence told us:

“From February or March, we had senior officers across Departments, doing C2—command and control—and helping them plan. Very quickly, that went right down to a more regional or devolved level. We had people in the London Ambulance Service really quite early on”.<sup>32</sup>
  - ii. increasing testing capacity: the Armed Forces helped to create a network of Mobile Testing Units, with each Unit capable of testing 500 people per day. By the end of May 2020 1,500 military personnel were involved in providing testing and over 310,000 people had been tested by these mobile units alone.<sup>33</sup> Military personnel also helped to operate Regional Testing Centres and with the delivery of testing equipment and kits.

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31 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357, Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q53

32 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357, Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q53

33 COVID Support Force: the MOD's contribution to the coronavirus response, 12 June 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-support-force-the-mods-contribution-to-the-coronavirus-response> accessed 19 January 2021

- iii. enhancing procurement and distribution: staff from Defence Equipment and Support (DES) assisted with the procurement of Personal Protective Equipment. Military personnel were heavily involved in the distribution of additional PPE to NHS and other public sector staff. DES staff also contributed to the procurement and distribution of ventilators and other critical medical equipment.
- iv. Increasing critical care infrastructure: military personnel worked alongside NHS and contractor staff to create a series of 'Nightingale' hospitals in key locations across England, Scotland and Wales. While these facilities were not in fact needed for the first wave of the pandemic (largely due to public compliance with government guidance) some have been used during the winter months of 2020–2021.<sup>34</sup> In some cases these facilities subsequently were used to provide capacity for other services such as outpatient care and vaccinations.<sup>35</sup>
- v. provision of scientific support: scientists from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL), commonly known as Porton Down, assisted with research on the virus, worked with Public Health England to increase laboratory capacity and have provided advice to decision-makers throughout the response.
- vi. provision of airlift capability: military aircraft from the Covid Aviation Task Force have been used in a number of roles including personnel transportation, aeromedical transport and the distribution of equipment.
- vii. countering disinformation: the Army's 77 Brigade supported the Cabinet Office's Rapid Response Unit to help quash rumours and counter disinformation. Two British Army experts were also deployed to NATO's COVID-19 Communications Hub.

In briefings by Armed Forces personnel involved in the pandemic response, we were told that they had deliberately taken a 'humble' approach, i.e. that they would position themselves in a supporting rather than a directing role. By 1 June 2020, the Ministry of Defence had conducted 163 MACA tasks at the request of the civil authorities and the Devolved Administrations.<sup>36</sup>

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34 "Nightingale site in Exeter will receive first coronavirus patents as local hospital 'very busy'", *The Independent*, 26 November 2020.

35 "Mass vaccine drive at Louisa Jordan as thousands of Scots NHS staff get coronavirus jab today", *Daily Record*, 17 January 2021

36 Written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Defence 'Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response', DPR0005, 14 July 2020, para 1.2, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/8426/default/>

**34.** The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces have made a vital contribution to the UK's management of the coronavirus pandemic. This crisis has served to highlight once again the unique flexibility and versatility of our Armed Forces. We express our gratitude to the men and women of the Armed Forces for the vital role they have played in the national response to the pandemic. *While Defence has deliberately played a 'humble' role throughout, this contribution must be explicitly recognised, perhaps through the creation of a formal award and through the Armed Forces pay settlement.*

**35.** We believe earlier use could have been made of Defence's unique capabilities and skills, notably in the areas of strategic planning and crisis management. We are surprised that lessons from earlier crises were not learnt and that as a result the Armed Forces' unique capabilities were not properly used. It appears that there is more work to be done to fulfil the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review's intent of better educating wider government, the Devolved Administrations and local government about what Defence can do. *The Government must ensure that Defence is consulted as early as possible in future such scenarios and that other government departments and agencies are fully aware of the range of capabilities Defence can offer.*

## Contribution of the defence industry

**36.** Beyond the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces, the UK's defence industry also played an important role in the national response to the emerging crisis. To address the anticipated requirement for thousands of new medical ventilators to treat coronavirus patients a number of defence companies joined the Ventilator Challenge UK consortium, producing 15,000 of these machines.<sup>37</sup> In addition the defence industry has assisted with the procurement, importation or manufacture of millions of items of PPE for the NHS and other keyworkers.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, defence industry suppliers adapted working practices to ensure that their staff were able to continue with the delivery of major defence programmes and services.

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37 The companies included: Airbus, BAE Systems, GKN Aerospace, Meggitt, Rolls-Royce, Smiths Group, Thales and Ultra Electronics. VentilatorChallengeUK Consortium, Media information notice, 30 March 2020, [https://a5428e79-a2b7-4dd1-94b4-3ec6ff706215.filesusr.com/ugd/a34a63\\_80e015c1b7bd42e9be3ce5ea696cd434.pdf](https://a5428e79-a2b7-4dd1-94b4-3ec6ff706215.filesusr.com/ugd/a34a63_80e015c1b7bd42e9be3ce5ea696cd434.pdf), accessed 22 November 2020

38 Written evidence submitted by Airbus Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, DPR0002, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6682/default/>; Written evidence submitted by ADS Defence's contribution to the UK's pandemic response, DPR003, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6758/default/>

## Responding to the second wave - June 2020 to January 2021

- 37.** As the UK learned from its initial response to the pandemic, the Ministry of Defence reconfigured its supporting role, moving from provision of large numbers of personnel to a more targeted employment of subject matter expertise and niche capabilities. This was partly driven by the fact that other government departments moved to more sustainable provision of services through their own delivery agencies or commercial suppliers.<sup>39</sup> During this period, Defence personnel became increasingly involved in the development and implementation of the Government's strategy around increasing testing capacity, and later the roll-out of vaccines. At the same time, the Ministry of Defence worked to maintain its priority operations and tasks (for example, the Continuous At Sea Deterrent) while ensuring the safety of Defence personnel. As of 12 January 2021, the MoD had received some 485 MACA requests, across the UK and beyond, 400 of which related to the domestic response.<sup>40</sup>
- 38.** To ensure that it was prepared for Winter 2020–2021, the Ministry of Defence created a Winter Operations Cell, to plan for a potential concurrency of crises (the pandemic, the possible consequences related to the end of the Brexit transition period on 31 December 2020, and other emergencies such as winter flooding) and to be ready to react to requests for help from the Police or other law enforcement agencies in the event of a terrorist incident. Major General Charles Stickland outlined the rationale for this :

“From an MoD perspective, in September we had already gone through our work to look at what we term the winter concurrency set. We looked at a worst-case scenario that involved floods and fires—I do not think we covered locusts. We looked at Covid activity and we looked at those things that we are being asked potentially to support for EU exit. We layered on top of that a counter-terrorist issue—what we call Op Temperer. We tried to create the most difficult day ... We also built a winter ops centre, augmented by some people such that we are stood up through this period. From an MoD perspective, we then presented that to the Secretary of State and said, “This is what we think we need”.<sup>41</sup>

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39 Written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Defence, ‘Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response’, DPR0007, 13 October 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/12722/pdf/>

40 Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Defence Secretary Oral Statement: Defence's COVID-19 support, Oral Statement to Parliament, 12 January 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-secretary-oral-statement-defences-covid-19-support>, accessed 18 January 2021

41 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q78, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

- 39.** More widely, the Ministry of Defence contributed to UK-wide winter resilience planning through its facilitation of table-top exercises (Project Fairlight) which pulled together senior officials from across government. This was to ensure that those involved in preparing for the winter months had a common understanding of potential issues and how these were linked.<sup>42</sup>
- 40.** Key contributions made by the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces since June 2020 have included:
- i. leading the roll-out of mass testing at locations across England, beginning in Liverpool in early November 2020 which led to a 'remarkable' decline in cases over the following weeks.<sup>43</sup> Hundreds of military personnel were subsequently deployed to Manchester, Kent, Yorkshire and Lancashire as the mass testing programme was widened;<sup>44</sup>
  - ii. in reaction to the emergence of the 'UK' mutated variant of coronavirus and then subsequent closure of the UK/France border in late December 2020, Armed Forces personnel deployed over the Christmas period to conduct testing on freight lorry drivers to facilitate the resumption of cross-channel trade;<sup>45</sup>
  - iii. providing direct support to the NHS through the deployment of military medical personnel in some hospitals because of staff shortages<sup>46</sup> and assisting ambulance services;<sup>47</sup>
  - iv. assisting with vaccine planning, distribution and administration, for example:
    - ten military planners were embedded in the vaccine taskforce, with a further 170 deployed across the UK to support deployment of the vaccine;<sup>48</sup>

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42 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q77, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

43 Covid: Mass testing in Liverpool sees 'remarkable decline' in cases, BBC News, 23 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-55044488>, accessed 5 December 2020

44 Over 5,000 armed forces deployed in support of the COVID-19 response in the biggest homeland operation in peacetime, Ministry of Defence, 4 January 2021 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-5000-armed-forces-deployed-in-support-of-the-covid-response-in-the-biggest-homeland-operation-in-peacetime>, accessed 15 January 2021.

45 Army to take over Covid testing for hauliers trapped near Dover, The Guardian, 24 December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/24/french-firefighters-arrive-in-dover-with-10000-covid-tests-for-lorry-drivers>, accessed 10 January 2021

46 Military medics to help in Shropshire hospitals due to staff shortages, BBC News, 19 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-shropshire-55708994>, accessed 19 January 2021.

47 RAF Odiham Personnel Support NHS By Volunteering As Co-Responders For The South Central Ambulance Service, RAF News, 15 May 2020, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/raf-odiham-personnel-support-nhs-by-volunteering-as-co-responders-for-the-south-central-ambulance-service/>, accessed 12 January 2021.

48 Over 5,000 armed forces deployed in support of the COVID-19 response in the biggest homeland operation in peacetime, Ministry of Defence, 4 January 2021 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-5000-armed-forces-deployed-in-support-of-the-covid-response-in-the-biggest-homeland-operation-in-peacetime>, accessed 15 January 2021.

- a Vaccine Quick Reaction Force was created, comprising 21 teams of six personnel who will be assigned across the seven NHS England regions to provide additional support to the vaccine roll-out;<sup>49</sup>
- The Royal Air Force delivered thousands of doses of vaccine to Gibraltar via military transport aircraft;<sup>50</sup>
- The deployment of military personnel to identify and prepare suitable locations for 80 vaccination centres across Scotland<sup>51</sup> and the setting up of a regional mass vaccination centre in Bristol;<sup>52</sup>

## Defence's continuing role

- 41.** As the UK emerges from the pandemic, and in light of the UN Secretary General's words that "in an interconnected world, none of us is safe until all of us are safe",<sup>53</sup> the Armed Forces may also have an important role to play in ensuring the vaccine reaches those in countries with less-robust healthcare systems or in areas of instability. *We call on the government to ensure it makes best use of the Armed Forces' skills in planning and logistics to assist with the distribution and administration of the coronavirus vaccine(s) within the UK, the Overseas Territories and perhaps further abroad.*

49 Over 5,000 armed forces deployed in support of the COVID-19 response in the biggest homeland operation in peacetime, Ministry of Defence, 4 January 2021 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-5000-armed-forces-deployed-in-support-of-the-covid-response-in-the-biggest-homeland-operation-in-peacetime>, accessed 20 January 2021.

50 Military Delivers Life Saving Vaccine to Gibraltar, Royal Air Force, 11 January 2021, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/our-organisation/stations/raf-brize-norton/news/military-delivers-life-saving-vaccine-to-gibraltar/>, accessed 20 January 2021

51 Army to set up 80 coronavirus vaccine sites in Scotland, STV News, 18 January 2021, <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/army-to-set-up-80-coronavirus-vaccine-sites-in-scotland>, accessed 19 January 2021

52 'Mass coronavirus vaccine programme in Bristol sees army arrive at Ashton Gate Stadium', ITV, 30 November 2020, <https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2020-11-30/mass-coronavirus-vaccine-programme-in-bristol-sees-army-arrive-at-ashton-gate-stadium>, accessed 20 December 2020.

53 'None of us is safe until we all are, says UN chief at EU push to end COVID-19 pandemic', UN News, 4 May 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063132>, accessed 26 January 2021

# Wider impacts and lessons learned

## Mitigating wider impacts on Defence

- 42.** The emergence of the pandemic in early 2020 posed a range of questions for the Ministry of Defence. As General Stickland told the Committee: “Everybody shut down in February, March and April. There was a [moment of], “Crikey, how do we handle this as an organisation?””.<sup>54</sup> Since March 2020 the response to the pandemic became Defence’s highest priority, but the Department has also maintained delivery of key tasks such as the Continuous at Sea Deterrent.<sup>55</sup> Therefore it has had to take a range of actions to ensure essential activities and operations were not compromised while ensuring the safety of defence personnel in the UK and abroad.<sup>56</sup> Some discretionary activities were reduced or suspended (such as the training and mentoring of the Iraqi armed forces<sup>57</sup>) and recruitment and some training were briefly halted.<sup>58</sup>

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54 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK’s pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q92, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

55 Written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Defence, Defence contribution to the UK’s pandemic response, DPR0005, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/8426/default/>

56 As at the beginning of December 2020, 65,460 defence personnel had undertaken a coronavirus test, with 2,807 receiving a positive test. Ministry of Defence, Coronavirus Cases in Defence: Number of COVID-19 tests in Defence & positive cases in the UK armed forces, 4 December 2020, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/944405/20201217\\_-\\_ANNEX\\_A\\_COVID\\_Official\\_Statistic\\_O.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/944405/20201217_-_ANNEX_A_COVID_Official_Statistic_O.pdf)

57 UK personnel to drawdown from Iraq following pause in training mission, British Army, 19 March 2020, <https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2020/03/uk-personnel-to-drawdown-from-iraq/>, accessed

58 Army announcement, British Army, 19 March 2020, <https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2020/03/army-announcement/> accessed 15 September 2020; Royal Welsh Troops Ordered Home From Germany Training Exercise Over COVID-19, Forces Net, 18 March 2020, <https://www.forces.net/news/royal-welsh-troops-ordered-home-germany-training-exercise-over-covid-19> accessed 25 March 2020

- 43.** The Department told us it had faced some issues with ensuring operations could continue in the face of border restrictions on the movement of people and the wider supply chain, but it had not encountered any major obstacles to date.<sup>59</sup> Some operational issues did arise, such as a coronavirus outbreak on the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, resulting in a short delay to its scheduled sailing from Portsmouth in September 2020.<sup>60</sup>
- 44.** We have been told that throughout the pandemic, the Ministry of Defence has maintained vigilance against potential adversaries taking advantage of the crisis. The Defence Secretary said that:
- “the Russians ... continue their naval exercises ... Russia is continually engaging in its misinformation, and Russia and China continue on their sort of day job, which of course relates to the other part of my role in this. That is to maintain our Defence obligations. So it is not like we pause everything. We are maintaining our Defence outputs, whether that is Shader in Syria and Iraq, or patrolling the Strait of Hormuz with the shipping, or the continuation of key and vital training, because our adversaries are maintaining things as well. And the terrorist organisations, while some of them may seek to exploit COVID themselves, have not gone quiet either”.<sup>61</sup>
- 45.** We recognise the ongoing efforts of our Armed Forces personnel in maintaining the safety and security of the UK at home and its interests abroad while also making a vital contribution to the pandemic response. We suggest that the Ministry of Defence finds a way to formally recognise these contributions, and that this is reflected in future pay settlements for Defence personnel.

## The Defence industry

- 46.** Another area of potential impact is the procurement of equipment and services required to deliver defence capability. Restrictions introduced to reduce transmission of coronavirus (such as social distancing) posed a challenge to the defence industry, for example in the submarine and shipbuilding sectors which require work to be carried out in confined spaces). The Association of Defence Industries (ADI) told us that these

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59 Written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Defence, Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, DPR0007, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/12722/pdf/>, para 5.3

60 HMS Queen Elizabeth postpones mission due to Covid-19, BBC News, 7 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-54064886>, accessed 15 October 2020.

61 Oral evidence: Introductory Session with the Secretary of State, HC 295, Wednesday 22 April 2020, Q10 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/294/pdf/>

challenges had been met through the development of innovative adaptations to working practices, such as the addition of air filtration systems and moving to deliver services remotely.<sup>62</sup>

The Defence Secretary told us:

“On the major programmes, the defence manufacturers have done an amazing job. They have lost very few days. On the plus side, they already had quite big spaces. I went to visit David Brown gearboxes in Huddersfield last Friday. These big engineering firms have a large-scale space. Often, if they are operating machinery anyhow, they are doing it away from each other. They have done a fantastic job at maintaining the flow of both defence manufacturing and products. We have not seen a major delay to any programme caused by Covid”.<sup>63</sup>

- 47.** To ensure that the defence industrial supply chain was not adversely affected by the pandemic, the Ministry of Defence decided to bring forward contracts in a number of areas, including the ordering of long-lead parts for the new Type 26 frigate, and £26 million of investment in improvements to military accommodation.<sup>64</sup>

## What Defence has learned from the pandemic response to date

- 48.** The experience of and response to the pandemic should result in lessons being identified both for the Ministry of Defence and wider-government. The Ministry of Defence has a well-established process for identifying lessons from its operations across the spectrum of its activity. While this process will understandably take time to complete, in its evidence to this inquiry the Department highlighted a number of emerging themes. Major General Charles Stickland noted that one lesson was that the MACA process had worked effectively during the crisis:

“Another lesson we have learned is that the MACA process works extremely well, in that we have actually said, “If you can provide this by another means, why are you coming to the military ... As a really good example, we had 150 people from the RAF in Birmingham recently doing drop and collect to start the whole

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62 Written evidence submitted by ADS, Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, DPR0003, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6758/default/> para 4.22

63 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q126, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

64 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q129, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/> ; Letter from the Secretary of State for Defence to the Committee, 11 December 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/21303/default/>

testing process work-through. It seemed very sensible at the time and it also involved the local authority, volunteers and other players in the game. When we looked at it and refined it, we then went to Nottingham and sent six people as a team to train, motivate and mobilise a team of volunteers. That gives you a sense of the way we refine these things as we go forward”.<sup>65</sup>

**49.** Further to this, the Secretary of State for Defence told us that it was clear that the standing arrangements for liaison with and support to the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had proven effective, although they had been enhanced with additional personnel.<sup>66</sup> He also noted that a clear lesson was that emergency response bodies such as Local Resilience Forums had to be “more than a paper tiger. You have to practise and sort out in peacetime the lines of responsibility, the leadership and the relationships between the district councils”.<sup>67</sup>

**50.** An additional lesson the Department has identified is the need to better educate other government departments, the devolved administrations and local government bodies about how the Ministry of Defence can assist them and the process by which this is requested. The Defence Secretary told us:

“One of the lessons from this event is that we need to help other people understand us... the more they understood the MACA process and what we could do for them, the better the requests were, the more refined they became and the more impact we could deliver ... There were Departments we dealt with at the beginning of this that had never seen a MACA request. If you are DEFRA or the Home Office, for example, in England, you have been used to using MACAs forever, because you are in the security area, flood area or whatever. There are other Departments that just were not used to using MACAs. At the end of this, the key is going to be capturing that corporate knowledge, so that we never let go of it again, and building on the relationships ... so that we do not have to relearn that every time something goes wrong”.<sup>68</sup>

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65 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q63, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

66 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q66, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

67 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q67, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

68 Oral evidence: Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response, HC 357 Tuesday 24 November 2020, Q74, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1287/pdf/>

- 51.** We encourage the Department to publish the outcome of its Lessons Summit to enable the learning from this experience to be promulgated as widely as possible. *Defence must ensure that it evaluates its own response to the pandemic, while contributing to the wider cross-government review (and any public inquiry) to ensure that the UK learns from this once-in-a-century event and is better prepared for the future crises which will inevitably follow, and, in particular, understands that the unique military contribution is mindset rather than manpower.*
- 52.** In addition to delaying the publication of the Integrated Review, it seems inevitable that the pandemic must also influence its conclusions. Coronavirus has highlighted serious deficiencies in the UK's domestic resilience in the face of an anticipated threat. *We have agreed this Report before publication of the Integrated Review, but but believe that the Review and the funding of its conclusions must take into account the significance of Defence's role in underpinning the UKs' domestic resilience against future shocks of this magnitude, while enabling the Armed Forces to fulfil their primary role of defending our vital interests at home and abroad.*

# Conclusions and recommendations

## The coronavirus pandemic and the UK

1. From the evidence it is clear that there was a disconnect between the assessment of the threat of an infectious disease pandemic (flu or otherwise) and the preparations for such an event occurring. Subsequent government actions (such as the re-drawing of crisis machinery and the need to urgently procure large supplies of PPE) suggest that both organisational and practical preparations were not sufficiently mature. It is inexplicable that COBRA should have met only four times between 24 January and 2 March. *This disconnect and its causes should be addressed at any future public enquiry into the UK's response to the pandemic.* (Paragraph 17)

## The Defence role in UK emergency planning and response

2. Civilian agencies will inevitably require assistance in a crisis of this scale and there should be no stigma in seeking help from the Armed Forces. However, it is clear that preparations for a non-man-made threat such as an infectious disease pandemic were afforded less priority than issues such as terrorism, despite being assessed as having both high likelihood and high impact in the National Risk Register. *The Government must take steps to ensure that the civilian agencies which have statutory responsibilities prepare properly, and that Defence does not become the default 'first responder' to make good deficiencies exposed by a developing crisis.* (Paragraph 22)

## The Ministry of Defence's role in the pandemic response

3. The Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces have made a vital contribution to the UK's management of the coronavirus pandemic. This crisis has served to highlight once again the unique flexibility and versatility of our Armed Forces. We express our gratitude to the men and women of the Armed Forces for the vital role they have played in the national response to the pandemic. *While Defence has deliberately played a 'humble' role throughout, this contribution must be explicitly recognised, perhaps through the creation of a formal award and through the Armed Forces pay settlement.* (Paragraph 35)
4. We believe earlier use could have been made of Defence's unique capabilities and skills, notably in the areas of strategic planning and crisis management. We are surprised that lessons from earlier crises were not learnt and that as a result the Armed Forces' unique capabilities were not properly used. It appears that there is more work to be done to fulfil the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review's intent of better educating wider government, the Devolved Administrations and local government about what Defence can do. *The Government must ensure that Defence is consulted as early as possible in future such scenarios and that other government departments and agencies are fully aware of the range of capabilities Defence can offer.* (Paragraph 36)
5. As the UK emerges from the pandemic, and in light of the UN Secretary General's words that "in an interconnected world, none of us is safe until all of us are safe", the Armed Forces may also have an important role to play in ensuring the vaccine reaches those in countries with less-robust healthcare systems or in areas of instability. *We call on the government to ensure it makes best use of the Armed Forces' skills in planning and logistics to assist with the distribution and administration of the coronavirus vaccine(s) within the UK, the Overseas Territories and perhaps further abroad.* (Paragraph 42)

## Wider impacts and lessons learned

6. We encourage the Department to publish the outcome of its Lessons Summit to enable the learning from this experience to be promulgated as widely as possible. *Defence must ensure that it evaluates its own response to the pandemic, while contributing to the wider cross-government review (and any public inquiry) to ensure that the UK learns from this once-in-a-century event and is better prepared for the future crises which will inevitably follow, and, in particular, understands that the unique military contribution is mindset rather than manpower.* (Paragraph 52)

7. In addition to delaying the publication of the Integrated Review, it seems inevitable that the pandemic must also influence its conclusions. Coronavirus has highlighted serious deficiencies in the UK's domestic resilience in the face of an anticipated threat. *We have agreed this Report before publication of the Integrated Review, but but believe that the Review and the funding of its conclusions must take into account the significance of Defence's role in underpinning the UKs' domestic resilience against future shocks of this magnitude, while enabling the Armed Forces to fulfil their primary role of defending our vital interests at home and abroad.* (Paragraph 53)

# Witnesses

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

Tuesday 14 July 2020

[Q1-42](#)



**Professor David Alexander**, Professor of Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London (UCL)



**Dr Jennifer Cole**, Research Fellow in Antimicrobial Resistance, Royal Holloway University of London;



**Bruce Mann CB**, Associate, UK Emergency Planning College

Tuesday 24 November 2020

[Q43-132](#)



**Rt Hon Ben Wallace**  
**MP**, Secretary of State  
for Defence, Ministry of  
Defence



**Major General Charles**  
**Stickland CB OBE**,  
Assistant Chief of Defence  
Staff (Operations and  
Commitments), Ministry of  
Defence



**Anthony McGee**, Deputy  
Director for Operational  
Policy (including Counter  
Terrorism, Crisis & UK  
Operations), Ministry of  
Defence

# Formal minutes

Tuesday 9 March 2021

## Members present

Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood, in the Chair

Stuart Anderson

Sarah Atherton

Richard Drax

Rt Hon Mr Mark Francois

Rt Hon Kevan Jones

Gavin Robinson

Rt Hon John Spellar

Derek Twigg

## Minutes

Manpower or mindset: Defence's contribution to the UK's pandemic response

Draft Report (*Manpower or mindset: Defence's contribution to the UK's pandemic response*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 52 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

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

## Next meeting

[Adjourned till Tuesday 16 March at 2.00pm

# Published written evidence

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

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

- 1 Feltham, Ann (Parliamentary Coordinator, Campaign against Arms Trade) ([DPR0001](#))
- 2 King's Centre for Military Health Research; and Academic Department of Military Mental Health ([DPR0004](#))
- 3 Ministry of Defence ([DPR0008](#))
- 4 Ministry of Defence ([DPR0007](#))
- 5 Ministry of Defence ([DPR0005](#))
- 6 Salmon, Joel (Senior Public Affairs Adviser, ADS) ([DPR0003](#))
- 7 Williams, Tom (Public Affairs Manager - Defence, Digital and Security, Airbus) ([DPR0002](#))