



House of Commons  
Defence Committee

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**Manpower or mindset:  
Defence's contribution  
to the UK's pandemic  
response: Government  
Response to the  
Committee's Sixth Report  
of Session 2019–21**

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**Second Special Report of  
Session 2021–22**

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
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## The Defence Committee

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

### Current membership

[Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood MP](#) (*Conservative, Bournemouth East*) (Chair)

[Stuart Anderson MP](#) (*Conservative, Wolverhampton South West*)

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### Powers

The committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

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Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at [www.parliament.uk/defcom](http://www.parliament.uk/defcom) and in print by Order of the House.

### Committee staff

Matthew Congreve (Second Clerk), Mark Etherton (Clerk), Lucy Petrie (Committee Specialist), Sascha Sajjad (Committee Operations Officer), Eleanor Scarnell (Committee Specialist), Ian Thomson (Committee Specialist) and Sarah Williams (Committee Operations Manager).

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You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@CommonsDefence](https://twitter.com/CommonsDefence).

## Second Special Report

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On 25 March 2021 the Defence Committee published its Sixth Report of Session 2019–21, *Manpower or mindset: Defence's contribution to the UK's pandemic response* (HC 357). The Government's response was received on 20 May 2021, and is appended to this report.

## Appendix: Government Response

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The Government thanks the House of Commons Defence Committee for its inquiry “Manpower or mindset: Defence's contribution to the UK's pandemic response” set out in the Committee's report (HC 357), published on 25 March 2021. The Ministry of Defence is proud to have contributed to the cross-Government response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. It shall continue to support and enable the vital work of its cross-Government partners for as long as the requirement to do so endures.

Our formal response to the committee's report recommendations and conclusions is set out below. The Committee's findings are highlighted in bold, with the Government's response set out in plain text. For ease of reference, paragraph numbering in brackets refers to the order in which they are presented in the Committee's Report.

### 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 Government notes the Committee's recommendation.

### 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.)

Defence support to other Government departments is channelled through the well-defined Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) process, which allows the most effective solution for the requesting department to be established. Where there are viable non-Defence solutions to a request this will be identified during this process. Defence continues

to utilise its network of liaison officers within other Government departments who enable increased cross-Government communication and allows early input into defining and developing potential requests for assistance.

### 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.)

The Government recognises the vital and effective contribution to the UK’s pandemic response made by uniformed and civilian Defence personnel. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique national challenge, and Defence personnel have supported wherever and however required across the United Kingdom; a testament to their commitment and dedication. Their contribution has been experienced in every region of the UK and across a range of vital tasks, from supporting the NHS to assisting with the vaccine rollout. Support to the COVID-19 pandemic response remains a top priority for Defence, and Defence personnel remain ready to assist where required and will continue to do so for as long as necessary. In addition to Defence’s support to the UK pandemic response, Defence has successfully maintained its core and most important outputs throughout the crisis, reacting with agility and flexibility to mitigate the risks posed by COVID-19. The Government recognises the wider contribution made by all uniformed and civilian Defence personnel throughout this challenging time, in defending the Nation.

Recommendations on the base pay of uniformed and civilian Defence personnel is provided by the Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body, the Senior Salaries Review Body, and public sector pay guidance set by HM Treasury. Defence is bound by the Government’s public sector pay pause and the requirement to be cognisant of the unique challenges facing the economy of the UK and the pressure on the public finances following the unprecedented and world-leading financial support packages that have been established during the pandemic. Where there have been significant civilian individual and team contributions to the pandemic response, these have been and will continue to be recognised through in-year performance pay awards for exceptional performance.

The question of COVID-19 (Operation Rescript) medallic recognition is currently being led by the Cabinet Office and no further details are available at the time of writing.

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.)

The Government notes the Committee's recommendations. The Armed Forces have a culture of 'getting after a problem' and a structure that supports a 'Plan, Refine and then Execute' approach. This helps them bring organisation and composure in times of crisis, harness the most appropriate expertise and capabilities for the task, and assist the subject matter experts and those responsible for the response. But it should be noted that providing National Resilience is not their core responsibility, it is a byproduct of their job and Defence rightly plays a supporting role.

We continue to work very closely with the Cabinet Office, key stakeholders across Whitehall, the Devolved Administrations, local government organisations and their resilience teams, and first responders across the UK, to ensure that the unique capabilities of Defence are understood and used in the most appropriate and effective manner.

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.)

The Government's top priority is to administer the COVID-19 vaccine as quickly as possible across the UK. Defence has worked tirelessly to support this effort, working closely with NHS England, the Devolved Administrations and government's overseas to support the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines. Defence has contributed by way of providing resources and capabilities to national vaccine programmes, both in terms of strategic planning and logistical support, as well as administering the vaccine to the public.

The Armed Forces have also continued to support the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) throughout the pandemic providing a range of assistance to British Overseas Territories and HMG personnel working overseas. Most recently, this support has focussed on the use of Military Air Transport and vessels to transport vaccines overseas to our people. Defence will continue to work closely with the FCDO to ensure our Overseas Territories are supported throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Where surplus vaccine supplies may allow support to other countries' vaccination efforts, Defence will work closely with the FCDO on identifying potential recipients and any logistical support that might be required.

## 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.)

The Government understands the importance of constant evaluation and improvement of its crisis response procedures and regularly identifies lessons to improve arrangements for the future. Only through such activities can we ensure we continually deliver to the highest of our ability and are suitably prepared for future events. The Ministry of Defence is committed to a frank and rigorous review of its response to the pandemic and has begun a formal lessons identification process to evaluate performance and inform future improvements to its crisis response arrangements. Defence will work with its cross-Government partners to ensure key lessons are learned to improve crisis response and resilience activities in future and will support any future Government-led reviews.

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 believe that the Review and the findings 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.)

The Integrated Review has considered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways in which Defence was called upon to support the cross-Government response. We will improve our ability to test and develop our capabilities through contingency planning and regular exercises, working with wider government, the emergency services, the armed forces, other local responders and industry. This will ensure that Defence is in a position to support future crisis of this magnitude. There is also additional work underway into the future use of the Reserve Forces in supporting domestic national security priorities.

The Armed Forces will also continue to provide support to emergency responses, as they have throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, through the MACA process.