

Fifty-Fourth Report of Session 2019-2021

Ministry of Defence

Improving single living accommodation for Service Personnel

Introduction from the Committee

The Department has stated that it will provide regular service personnel with high-quality subsidised accommodation as a condition of service. Single Living Accommodation is normally provided in the form of accommodation blocks inside military bases and is available to single and unaccompanied personnel undertaking initial training, or those serving on a regular engagement with the Armed Forces, as well as some full-time reservists. As of 31 October 2020, 79,963 service personnel, around 52% of the total Armed Forces, occupied Single Living Accommodation. For some, it is their only accommodation; for others, it is used alongside periods living in their own home, for example at weekends. Accommodation can be anything from a set of rooms with en-suite facilities to a bed space in a multiple occupancy room. Single Living Accommodation is part of the wider defence estate and, since April 2018, the infrastructure budget, including funding to maintain and upgrade the estate, has been delegated to the Commands and defence organisations.

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee took evidence, on 28 February 2021 from the Ministry of Defence. The Committee published its report on 23 April 2021. This is the Government's response to the Committee's report.

Relevant reports

- NAO report: – [Improving Single Living Accommodation](#) Session 2019-21 (HC 1129)
- PAC report: [Improving single living accommodation for service personnel](#) – Session 2019-21 (HC 940)
- Tri-Service Accommodation Regulations Volume 2: Single Living Accommodation and Substitute Service Single Accommodation; Joint Service Publication 464

Government responses to the Committee

1: PAC conclusion: The Department has neglected Single Living Accommodation for many years and has not given it anything like the priority that it has deserved, despite the clear link between accommodation and delivery of operational capability.

1: PAC recommendation: The Department should report back to the Committee in six months on the changes it is introducing under its Defence Accommodation Strategy to raise the priority given to Single Living Accommodation, including implementation of the National Audit Office recommendations.

1.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: December 2021

1.2 The Defence Accommodation Strategy (DAS) will be published by the end of 2021. The Ministry of Defence (the department) will write to the Committee by December 2021 to outline the changes it will include in relation to Single Living Accommodation (SLA). The department is implementing the National Audit Office (NAO) recommendations, including assigning the Chief of Defence People as the Senior Sponsor for SLA and reviewing SLA governance structures.

1.3 The department already plans to invest £1.5 billion into SLA over the next decade and, beyond that, the DAS will provide clearer strategic direction for the defence accommodation estate to a 25-year planning horizon. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) and single Services will develop clear delivery plans to sit alongside the DAS with regular monitoring and evaluation points to ensure that improvements and progress can be evidenced. The DIO and single services will be held to account for delivery of these plans through the department's quarterly holding to account process and the Strategy itself will be reviewed regularly. The DAS will formalise the department's vision for service personnel accommodation and outline how standards will meet the expectations of service personnel now and in the future. It will identify strategic dependencies across Defence-wide accommodation and infrastructure programmes including the Future Accommodation Model and Defence Estate Optimisation. It will also consider wider initiatives such as Net Zero Carbon and People Transformation, and key dependencies such as the Annington Homes rent renegotiations and DIO void reduction plans.

2: PAC conclusion: Although many service personnel live in poor quality Single Living Accommodation and are dissatisfied with their accommodation and with the maintenance and repairs service, the Department appeared surprisingly complacent about resolving this long-term issue.

2a: PAC recommendation: The Department should set out clearly in its Defence Accommodation Strategy: how and when it will eradicate the poorest quality accommodation.

2.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: December 2021

2.2 The DAS will set the strategic direction for the department's accommodation provision and approach to standards, but separate working groups will set specific standards. This will include a minimum standard for the condition of SLA which will be key to identifying and then eradicating the poorest quality accommodation.

2.3 It is already the department's policy that SLA should not be used if it fails to meet statutory minimum standards of safety and compliance. Furthermore, once the minimum quality standard for SLA has been defined, all SLA will be assessed ahead of incorporating necessary improvements into works programmes from financial year 2023-24.

2b: PAC recommendation: The Department should set out clearly in its Defence Accommodation Strategy: a target level of satisfaction for Single Living Accommodation and the steps it will take to achieve this.

2.4 The government disagrees with the Committee's recommendation.

2.5 Understanding service personnel's views is important for future work and planning around SLA and a minimum standard for the condition of SLA will be determined by the department by the end of 2021. But, whilst the DAS will develop a picture of the needs of service personnel through its Lived Experience work, the first iteration of the strategy will not seek to set a target for satisfaction.

2.6 Unlike Service Families Accommodation, limited data specific to SLA is currently available to inform future planning and investment. Before setting a target level of satisfaction, work must first be conducted to understand service personnel's needs and wants in relation to SLA. The detailed work for this will sit outside of the DAS.

2c: PAC recommendation: The Department should set out clearly in its Defence Accommodation Strategy: how it plans to gather the views of service personnel on Single Living Accommodation.

2.7 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation

Target implementation date: December 2021

2.8 Whilst the department commits to gathering Service personnel views on SLA, the specifics of how this will be conducted are likely to be set outside of the DAS. The DAS will, however, set clear expectations on engagement with Service Personnel to inform decisions.

2.9 The department's SLA Expert Group is currently assessing how best for service personnel views to inform changes to SLA, including using surveys to understand personnel needs and wants. Data collected through these routes will be used to improve management of the estate.

3: PAC conclusion: The lack of a minimum standard for Single Living Accommodation means the Department has no baseline against which to make investment decisions, or to demonstrate progress towards establishing an estate fit for the 21st century.

3: PAC recommendation: The Department should set and publish a clear minimum standard for the condition of its Single Living Accommodation by the end of the year, taking account of best practice in civilian standards and wider thinking on sustainability.

3.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: December 2021

3.2 The department commits to setting and publishing a clear minimum standard for the condition of SLA which goes beyond simple safety and compliance to address issues of basic habitability. The department, through the SLA Expert Group has already developed and socialised many of the core elements of this definition.

3.3 An agreed condition definition will help cohere the single Services to work towards the same standards of condition in the future. It will provide a baseline both to ensure service personnel are not accommodated in poor condition SLA and to inform future investment. The definition will consider the key factors in defining a minimum standard, noting that the defence estate brings with it sometimes significant legacy building challenges associated with the vast spectrum of building types, ages, listings and standards where there will be some challenges regarding sustainability and best practice civilian standards.

3.4 This work will be further refined, in-line with the NAO's recommendations, prior to publication within Tri-Service Accommodation Regulations Volume 2: Single Living Accommodation and Substitute Service Single Accommodation; Joint Service Publication 464.

4: PAC conclusion: The Department's lamentable failure to implement a Single Living Accommodation Management Information System (SLAMIS) over the past eight years means it is unable to manage its Single Living Accommodation efficiently.

4: PAC recommendation: The Department should report back to the committee in six months on progress with delivering the SLAMIS system, including to confirm when in 2022 it will be fully operational.

4.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: October 2021

4.2 The department will report in October 2021 on the progress with delivering Single Living Accommodation Management Information System (SLAMIS) including confirmation of when in 2022 it will be at full operating capability.

5: PAC conclusion: Management of Single Living Accommodation has long suffered from a lack of coordination, ownership and strategic grip.

5: PAC recommendation: The Department should review and simplify the governance structures for Single Living Accommodation, including clarifying overall responsibility, and ensuring that those making decisions have the necessary capability and capacity.

5.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: September 2021

5.2 Management of SLA is delegated to the single Services, therefore the picture across Defence's SLA provision is complex, with management and future investment planning varying to suit the needs of each Service. To cohere activity across the Services, the department has clear governance arrangements through the Single Living Accommodation Expert Group and the Accommodation Coherence Group. In response to the NAO recommendations, the Chief of Defence People has been confirmed as the senior sponsor within the department.

5.3 The department will review and enhance the governance structure for SLA to incorporate the newly appointed senior sponsor and bring together policy, delivery and funding by the end of summer 2021. This will enhance coherence across policy, delivery and single Services stakeholders with robust senior coordination of issues requiring departmental parity whilst maintaining clear demarcation at the single Service level, maintaining the delegated SLA management model.

6: PAC conclusion: We are concerned that, although Commands have plans to improve Single Living Accommodation, this will only address the worst problems, and available funding may be used to meet other demands.

6: PAC recommendation: In the light of the publication of the Integrated Review, the Department should reassess its plans and the funding needed to improve Single Living Accommodation, taking account of the promised minimum standard, and focusing on making as much money available as soon as possible to start addressing years of underinvestment.

6.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: March 2022

6.2 The department agrees that funding SLA improvements is important and needs a higher priority than it has historically been afforded. It is important to note that investment into

SLA remains a delegated matter for the single Services. The department sets policy and standards but does not centrally ringfence funding for accommodation so that it can continue to ensure resources are appropriately balanced across all its priorities and that Top-Level Budget holders are empowered to make appropriate funding decisions.

6.3 However, the need to invest in SLA is recognised and Top-Level Budget holders have already prioritised significant investment into SLA improvement plans over the next decade. Through Annual Budgeting Cycle 2021, SLA investment plans have been updated in line with deliverability considerations and wider Defence investment decisions, including those required by the Integrated Review.

6.4 The department will continue to annually review plans to ensure they remain flexible and able to cope with changes to the minimum standard for SLA and the DAS as both mature. The next review will be in Annual Budgeting Cycle 2022.