**LETTER FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE TO MAJ GEN(RETD.) SIMON LALOR, CHAIR OF THE EST – 2022 REPORT**

Maj Gen(Retd,) Simon Lalor

Council of RFCAs

I was most grateful to receive the External Scrutiny Team’s 2022 report and I would like to thank the Team for their hard work. I have set out comments on the specific recommendations in the report at the Annex to this letter, but I also want to take the opportunity to make some more general observations concerning the Reserves.

This report reflects a year in which Defence was providing continued support to the Government’s efforts against the Covid-19 pandemic. We also witnessed the beginning of the largest conflict in Europe since WWII. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was a key factor behind the decision to refresh the Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper. Both documents have initiated substantial activity in the Front-Line Commands to continue the transformation of the Reserves to meet the requirements of our modern Force.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, Reservists continued to make an invaluable contribution to Defence. They provided critical support to the pandemic response whilst also deploying on other tasks at home and overseas, including UK operations in Cyprus and Gibraltar; working as part of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence in the eastern part of the Alliance and the United Nations Force in Mali; and deploying on global counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations. More than 5000 Reservists also undertook full-time roles throughout 2021/22.

Among its observations, the report suggests that Reserve recruitment is being affected by a lack of effort on the part of the Front-Line Commands. I disagree with this assessment. Despite the challenges mentioned above, we saw more than 4,700 people join the Reserves in the recruiting year 2021/22. However, the UK employment market is not immune to the present global recruitment challenges and competition for key skills remains high. We remain committed to growing the Reserve Forces to help meet our requirements for both mass and specialist skills.

In recognition of this commitment, Mr Rick Haythornthwaite was commissioned by the government, in May 2022, to review the terms and conditions of Service Personnel. Over the coming months, the department will begin the implementation of these recommendations. Alongside this, Reserve Forces 2030 will continue to provide a coherence role for transformation projects across Defence and the Front-Line Commands. Thus, increasing the representation of our Reserve Forces in the Whole Force.

The refreshed Integrated Review, Defence Command Paper, Haythornthwaite Review, and the Reserve Estate Optimisation Programme will enable a period of substantial transformation for our Reserve Forces. I am immensely proud of and thankful to our Reserve Forces and remain committed to removing barriers to Service and improving the Reserve experience.

Thank you once again for the report.

**EST RECOMMENDATIONS 2022**

**22.1 That Reserve recruiting has a consistent and transparent marketing spend, and staff focus.**

A consistent and transparent spend is key to planning and delivering a successful marketing campaign to meet inflow requirements for Reserves. All three Services are committed to ensuring that recruiting spend is both protected and transparent and are working to improve recruiting performance in the Reserves environment.

**22.2 That unit structures should be reviewed and tested against the offer to ensure that they are sufficient for unit cohesion to allow quality training, thus meeting the professional and technical development of all ranks.**

This is being implemented in the Royal Naval Reserve through Project PENFOLD that improves unit administration and Command and Control, and Project THESEUS that is modernising training and improving its assurance. Royal Marines Reserve unit structures are subject to ongoing work being reported to the Navy Executive Committee. All work will cohere Reserves training estate within the broader work for Royal Navy infrastructure.

Within the Army there are four ongoing and developing work strands that will provide the opportunity to review Army Reserve structures: the End-to-End Review of the Army Reserve; the Army’s NATO New Force Model Hypothesis; the Integrated Review Refresh; and Exploratory Land Operating Concept (2025-2035).

The Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF) Squadron Structures Review aims to enable efficient growth of the Part Time Volunteer Reserve (PTVR) component over the coming years by ensuring that the size and composition of RAuxAF squadron HQ establishments are sustainable and driven by clear design principles. It is hoped that by improving consistency across the Squadrons, providing PTVR career pathways to OF7 and by utilising a blend of PTVR and Full Time Reserve Service Personnel in leadership and training positions, the Squadrons will be able to deliver greater levels of output and enhance attraction, recruitment, and training of all RAF Reserves.

The Reserve Estate Optimisation Programme presents an opportunity to enable capability-driven basing and infrastructure solutions which we must endeavour to resource.

**22.3 That further consideration is given to our 2016 recommendation that the Army revisits the decision to withdraw LADs from Reserve units to create REME battalions.**

The Army is not currently planning to revisit this decision; it may do so after the Integrated Review Refresh.

**22.4 That a decentralised system is practised and embedded into the mobilisation process.**

The RN and RAF already operate decentralised mobilisation systems. The Army is taking steps in this area. A series of Army pilots will conclude in early 2023 with a commitment to embed any necessary changes as a result. Increasingly, e-mobilisation is complementing the decentralised systems.

**22.5 That Defence articulates a clear statement of the medical requirement needed of reservists in this era of greater use of the Reserve, and an acceptance that changes to current policies will require resources to implement.**

The Front-Line Commands, in consultation with Defence Medical Services, determine and apply appropriate medical standards for Reservists. They are best placed to identify the medical requirements for operational/kinetic deployments and UK resilience operations. These standards are always likely to vary, depending on the Service and the role being filled. Part of the work being undertaken by the RF30 implementation programme involves examining whether medical processes could be refined, which could be especially beneficial if reservists need to be mobilised at short notice.

**DRAFT LETTER FROM SOFS TO MAJ GEN(RETD.) SIMON LALOR, CHAIR OF THE EST – 2023 REPORT**

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I was most grateful to receive the External Scrutiny Team’s 2023 report and I would like to thank the Team for their hard work. I have set out comments on the specific recommendations in the report at the Annex to this letter, but I also want to take the opportunity to make some more general observations concerning the Reserves.

The past few years have presented numerous unforeseen challenges to the UK, both domestically and internationally, with Defence always present on the first line of response. Consequently, the Government has taken decisive action over the past twelve months with the aim to arrest and address the challenges Defence is facing. In March the then Defence Secretary, the Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, welcomed an additional £5 billion for Defence over the next two years, and announced the publication of the Integrated Review Refresh and the Defence Command Plan Refresh.

The increase in funding will allow the UK to meet the challenges of an increasingly volatile and complex world. The Prime Minister also set out an ambition for Defence spending to reach 2.5% of GDP in the long term. It acknowledges the need for immediate action and long-term funding security to enable Defence to deliver its essential operational outputs whilst committing to the delivery of crucial transformation programmes.

The Integrated Review Refresh, commissioned in response to the unforeseen pace of emerging geopolitical threats, clarified the Government strategy and re-focused our efforts. The Defence Command Paper Refresh, published four months later in July, made a profound statement of intent as to how Defence plans to meet present day challenges whilst modernising for the future; evidenced by a dedicated opening chapter on People. The message is clear, “our People come first. They are our asset which underpins our strategic advantage”.

The Department’s commitment to prioritising our People is evidenced by the decision to take forward all 67 recommendations from the Haythornthwaite Review (June 2023). We will improve Armed Forces terms and conditions and incentivisation, to realise the complex, long-term, systemic change recommended by the Review. This is a mammoth undertaking by the Department and testament to our commitment to our People. The work that will be undertaken will include improving the inclusion of Reserves in Strategic Workforce Plans; working to streamline how Service Personnel transition between different Terms of Service throughout their career to better balance the Service need with individual priorities for personal and family life; overhauling People management processes through the removal of unnecessary bureaucracy by simplifying existing policies and digitalising HR processes; developing a dedicated career path with a realistic total reward package and a more flexible approach to training paths as part of a total reward approach and Spectrum of Service. This will amount to a new, more agile, digitally driven People system that genuinely puts individuals first and the Reserves will continue to be fully integrated at every stage of this process.

Additionally, The Armed Forces Recruitment Programme is contracting for the delivery of an end-to-end recruitment process to come into effect from January 2027. All candidates, Regular and Reserve, will follow the same process and will utilise a common digital solution, representative of our Whole Force Approach. We have placed the candidate experience at the heart of the programme requirement through the establishment of the Reserve Working Group, once again embedding Reservists and Reserve specialists at the centre of the department’s transformational programmes.

It is a great honour for me to lead the department at such an exciting time of dynamic change. This is a team effort, and I am immensely grateful to all Service Personnel, not least Reservists, for their unwavering dedication to improving the Armed Forces. I am confident that the work being delivered by the department is evidence of our commitment to arrest any decline in the health of the Reserve by initiating the start of generationally significant transformation programmes for the benefit of the Whole Force.

Thank you once again for the report.

**EST RECOMMENDATIONS 2023**

**23.1 That the journey for taking an applicant who wishes to join the Reserve through the new AFRP incorporates a clear nexus of the constituent parts, so that they do not become ‘blockages’ that cause applicants to give up or drift away. The requirement of the Reservist should be designed into the new AFRP contract from the outset, alongside the needs of the Regular Service person.**

The Armed Forces Recruitment Programme (AFRP) is contracting for the delivery of an end-to-end recruitment process that is common (as much as appropriate) for Regulars and Reserves (Vol Res, Army and RAF Sponsored Reserves and Royal Fleet Auxiliary) and is a tri-Service programme. The new recruitment service, Armed Forces Recruitment Service (AFRS), comes into effect from January 2027, with Contract Award in May 2025; Reserve recruitment remains the responsibility of the single Services until January 2027.

Within AFRS, all candidates applying for Reserve and Regular roles in any of the single Services (sS) will follow the same process, unless there is a need to deviate, e.g., for specialist assessments related to a particular role. The constituent parts of the process have been set out for the Bidders to incorporate into their planned solutions, as has where any parts need to be completed in a particular sequence. A common digital solution will be utilised to track candidates through the process, enable candidates to access help and guidance at a time that suits them, and enable the creation of data led solutions to maximise recruitment.

Candidate experience, Reserve and Regular, has been placed at the heart of the AFRP requirement. The future suppliers’ ability to retain candidates and convert them to recruits is linked to their remuneration through contractual performance indicators and an incentivisation mechanism. Regular and Reserve Candidates attract the same priority and weighting in this mechanism and will therefore receive the same focus and effort from the future supplier. The design of the e2e process will minimise the number of ‘pain points’ in the recruiting process and encourage/nurture all candidates to remain engaged.

Meeting the requirement of Reserve recruiting and the Reserve candidate experience has been integral to the discussions with bidders. Ongoing delivery of AFRS will be the responsibility of the AFR HQ; within this HQ there are four roles established to represent Reserve interests, act as single Service Reserve and Non-Traditional Entry policy advisors for the HQ and recruitment operation, as well as a conduit into the single Services.

AFRP identifies and addresses Reserve Force requirements, risks and issues through its Reserves Working Group, including representation from sS, Strategic Command and Reserve Forces 30, to support the smooth transition of Reserve Candidates into the future Service. It is envisaged that the Working Group governance will continue to operate under AFRS, albeit with a change in focus to ongoing Reserve Recruitment issues.

**23.2 That the Royal Navy’s capability studies have senior Part Time Volunteer Reservist (PTVR) experienced Reservists attached to each one, thus ensuring Reserve-informed debate and conclusion.**

The range of outcomes of Project PENFOLD, which includes the Waterfront-Inland partnerships varies across the Maritime Reserve (MR) regions and work is ongoing to refine the models, staff laydown and, in some cases, to buy back permanent staff positions.

HMS FLYING FOX and HMS CAMBRIA work together as a regional grouping with staff supporting both Units. Additional activity has been introduced through HMS FLYING FOX with the Information Warfare Capability using the facility as a regional hub to deliver weekend training and enabling Reserves to provide a direct contribution to Operational Capability using Reserve Service Days.

**23.3 That the capability pillars should all have senior Part Time Volunteer Reservist (PTVR) experienced Reservists included in their management teams, rather than having them concentrated in Commander Maritime Reserve’s (COMMARRES) headquarters.**

In accordance with 2SL’s strategic priorities, a consistent and persistent recruiting campaign for the Reserves recommenced in September 2022 with early evidence that Expressions of Interest are now returning to pre-Pandemic levels. Maritime Reserves Orders 23/24 published in March 2023 set out COMMARRES’ priority to support recruitment activity and retain the workforce in support of Navy Command Priorities.

**23.4 We recommend a specific and new TACOS that is appropriate for a new specialism, rather than trying to shoehorn them into current TACOS designed for more general and wider use.**

This recommendation relates specifically to Reservist Cyber specialists.

The Army have engaged with Defence and other Front-Line Commands on the development of appropriate TACOS for Reserve Cyber specialists (including the possible use of the new FTRS Reduced Commitment). Defence's Modernising Terms of Service (MTOS) Working Group is an effective vehicle to facilitate the agreement of ‘TACOS’ under single-Service secondary legislation. Consideration will be given to aligning to the Spectrum of Service work identified in the Haythornthwaite report.

Within the RAF, bespoke specialist Terms of Service (TOS) already exist for this cohort to cover entry standards, recruitment, training and promotion. UKSTRATCOM are currently leading a review of Tri Service Cyber TOS with the intent to harmonize across all three Services. The outcome is expected later this year.

**23.5 We recommend that if Defence is to optimise and improve the Volunteer Estate, a start has to be made, if only the ‘Lite’ option.**

We recognise the crucial role of the Reserves as part of the Whole Force and the need to adequately sustain and modernise the Reserve Estate now and into the future.  The 2021 RFCA Estate Review highlighted the issues and identified options to address them.  Subsequently, the then SofS established the Reserve Estate Optimisation (REO) programme to develop and deliver a programme of works to improve the volunteer estate.  Overall, significant Defence investment (up to c£1.0Bn) is required to deliver and sustain the infrastructure to underpin an agile Reserve, match-fit to play its part in delivering Defence outputs, including force generation, UK resilience, and homeland defence.

REO is in the first phase of delivery (Tranche 1). Through a forecasted investment of £29.070M, it is creating 85 enhanced or new-build Joint Cadet Centres, bringing together both Army Cadet Force (ACF) and Air Training Corps (ATC) detachments to deliver an improved lived experience whilst optimising the Cadet Estate and realising new opportunities for training and collaboration. Whilst achieving this, it is disposing of 121 sites from a total of 1790 individual sites across the Reserve and Cadet Estate, including the disposal of 12 already vacated Reserve Centres.

The approach this year has been to deliver one proof of concept urban Defence Collaboration Hub (DCH) and enhanced facilities at a major Reserve Training site. If successful, the intent is to submit options in future years for further DCH sites in key cities and separate, smaller scale, betterment projects elsewhere. Combined, they will support the increased demand on Defence Reserve capability, against the backdrop of a challenging recruitment and retention environment, while delivering a more effective and efficient estate. DCHs will create military points of presence within key cities to strengthen Defence’s and the Nation’s ability to respond effectively to Protect and Resilience tasks, while providing a focal point for modernised Reserve recruitment, training and Regular and Reserve integration across the Services. There are opportunities for optimisation across all sites to provide a modern, efficient and relevant estate, whilst maintaining a critical dispersed footprint to recruit, engage and deliver capability.

**23.6 To improve medical fitness and readiness, in past reports we recommended that Reservists are vaccinated at the conclusion of their initial training. We would recommend further that consideration is given to: a. Whether this also could be done when attending specialised training and in the preparation for overseas exercises, i.e. when Defence has a captive audience. b. A lever, perhaps the Certificate of Efficiency, is used to encourage compliance with existing policy requirements such as updating medical status and having an audio assessment every two years. c. Certifying reservists as MFD if in date with medical standards in the same manner that aircrew cannot be certified Fit to Fly if out of date with medicals.**

Medical fitness and preparedness is a topical issue and being tracked as part of the AGILE STANCE Campaign Plan Capability Audit. The Annual audit is reviewing those Reservists who were Medically Fit to Deploy (MFD) at their last medical and also the status of vaccination records.  In addition, a number of options are being considered to improve awareness of the medical status of the Reserves.  Options include linkages between Defence Primary Healthcare (DPHC) and NHS GP systems, self-declaration and vaccination during initial training.

The Army continues to work closely with Defence to improve reserve medical assurance. This includes reviewing policies on vaccinations, medical status, audio assessments, and possible linkages to certificate of efficiency.

There is also an ongoing workstrand within the Chief of Defence People (CDP) area considering employability vs deployability for Regular personnel which should also include Reserves personnel, e.g. overseas deployment vs UK Homeland deployment and the Theatre Entry Standard for each.