



CRFCA

Council of Reserve Forces'
and Cadets' Associations

THE UNITED KINGDOM RESERVE FORCES

EXTERNAL SCRUTINY TEAM

ANNUAL STATUTORY REPORT
2025



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Overview

1. This is my first External Scrutiny Team (EST) Report as Chair of EST and President of the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association. I endorse it without reservation and wish to pay tribute to the excellent team of volunteers who work so hard to produce it. A special mention to Major General Simon Lalor, my predecessor as Chair, who has done so much for the UK Reserve over many years.
2. This year's EST Report is framed by both the Strategic Defence Review and the National Security Review. Reviews which make grim reading on the potential, scale and consequence of the threats and risks we face. The UK Armed Forces will need to grow, develop and sustain our Reserve to a level we have not seen since the Cold War. We will need to shift our narrative for defence both through Collective Defence by, with and through NATO, national defence – including through empowerment of the Strategic Reserve – and enhance our national resilience through new structures, higher readiness, better training and exercises. We need to be ready with people, equipment and infrastructure to mobilise our society in support of a wider and larger Defence effort.
3. The muscle memory in our nation of the Cold War has faded, but we used to do this – at scale, in support of NATO, with a strong narrative and quality training and exercises. We can do so again.
4. This is the context for the EST Report 2025. We deliberately have left the recommendations from last year because much still needs to be done. Our people, if outflow exceeds inflow, are in decline; on capability and equipment we have reached the bottom of the barrel; and on infrastructure where we now see (and will see more) site closures because they are unsafe through lack of funding.
5. The detail is all in the Report. Our Alliance is developing – at pace – as are plans for the defence of Europe. And we have a clear aim to mobilise for Exercise STREADFAST DEFENDER in 2027, supported by the RFCAs.
6. Therefore, we should accept the challenge and call to action. As the Report makes clear we can create quick wins: such as to recognise civilian qualifications, rapidly increase the efficiency of our medical inductions to improve the conversion rate in recruitment. We seek more innovation from the single Services to remove barriers between regular and reserve elements, manage rather than avoid risks, create better promotion prospects for reservists and employ our University units as part of our national response to the threats we face.
7. Our legal framework for the use of the Reserve is robust. We have all the policies in place we need. Our Reserve needs more prominence in the new structures in MOD, on overseas postings and in NATO. Our specialist reserves need to be recognised as such across government as a key enabler to improve national resilience.
8. In my first year as Chair, I have been impressed by the reservists. We live in a challenging world and our Reserve Forces have always been and will remain an important part of the solution in the deterrence and defence of our Realm.

Air Chief Marshal Lord Peach
Chair
July 2025

FOREWORD

1. In my first year as Vice Chair of the External Scrutiny Team (EST), I would like to record our appreciation of the MOD and the three Services who, as ever, provided our team with substantial briefings and interacted with us positively throughout the reporting year.
2. The 2024 Report was clear; the health of the Reserve had continued on a downward trajectory, in danger of being 'hollowed out', and graded overall as 'poor'. Recruiting, retention, resourcing and institutional robustness; all a concern. We reported that a balanced equation of factors exist, consisting of a 'clarity of purpose' for all personnel and units, combined with 'demanding training', 'appropriate scales of equipment' and sufficient 'logistical and administrative support', all of which requires a pan Defence coordinated approach.
3. In the work to prepare this year's report, we were conscious of the likelihood of change, a new Government and a new Strategic Defence Review (SDR) due for publication in the Spring. SDR has been published, as has a new Industrial Strategy and National Security Strategy (NSS), the latter, in particular, having wider consequences for the Reserve. Moreover, the implementation of Defence Reform has restructured the management of the Armed Forces, due to be fully operational in July 2025, whilst the nature of warfare and NATO's response is changing at pace.
4. In our 2025 report, we have acknowledged some of the recent work in this area, receiving briefs by successive Service Headquarters around a new approach to integrating Reserve capability, the generation of mass, and use of outputs and skills, whilst we note the initiatives currently ongoing under the auspices of the Minister for Veterans and People. Notwithstanding this, the overall number of trained reservists continues to fall, resources (support and material) remain scarce and/or inconsistent, whilst aspirations within the SDR are currently unfunded.
5. Having considered all of the evidence gathered this year, we are of the view that most, if not all, of our recommendations from last year remain extant; as relevant as before - the equation remains out of balance. This, allied with the unpredictable environment within which we are operating, has led us to deliver a more concise report for 2025 to offer a litmus line for the future.
6. Nevertheless, there is cause for some optimism, given the content of the recent SDR and the NSS, and whilst ambition is admirable, resources, drive, and revitalised policy must follow if the Reserve is to be optimised; 2025 must be the turning point. Meanwhile our visit to units has reaffirmed my faith in the ethos of the Reserve and reservists, whilst concerned around the broader Reserve 'offer' and the inconsistency of resources and personnel.
7. I would wish to thank Major General (Retd) Simon Lalor, who has worked tirelessly over a number of years, both as a member and then as the Chair, to ensure that the EST Report was an accurate barometer of the 'health' of the Reserves; so as to fulfil the aim of the original requirement both for Defence and Parliament more widely. I also welcome our newest member of the team, Brigadier Simon Goldstein, vice Colonel (Retd) Gordon Straughan, the latter whose considerable knowledge and experiences of the Reserve brought much value to our Reports.
8. Finally, I would like to thank the members of the EST, who give freely of their time, energy, experience, and knowledge to ensure that we tease out the real issues and report accordingly. Often travelling long distances, available at weekends and weekdays, and invariably confronted with a packed agenda, I have been impressed by their commitment, passion and engagement.

Stephen J Potter
Major General (Retired)
Vice Chair
July 2025



INTRODUCTION

1. The Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) Independent Commission identified a requirement for an annual report by an External Scrutiny Team (EST) on the overall health of the Reserve Forces. The first two reports were provided at the request of the Secretary of State (SofS) for Defence in 2013 and 2014. On 1 October 2014, the Reserves Forces' and Cadets' Association (RFCA) had a statutory duty placed on them to report annually to Parliament on the state and capabilities of the United Kingdom's Reserve Forces.¹ Terms of Reference for the EST is at Annex A. This will be the eleventh report under these statutory arrangements.
2. We submitted the 2024 Report to the new SofS for Defence on 29 July 2024. The Minister for Veterans and People (MinVP) placed the Report in the Library of the House of Commons on 17 December 2024. On behalf of SofS, we received a response from MinVP to the Report on 17 December 2024, which is at Annex B.
3. We visited Headquarters and Formations with reserve responsibilities as well as a cross-section of reserve units around the country² to understand the situation 'on the ground'. Our visits to Headquarters (HQ) included meeting with the Chief of the General Staff, Chief of the Air Staff, Commanders' Home Command/Standing Joint Command and Field Army, Assistant Chief of the General Staff, Commander Maritime Reserve, Commandant General RAF Reserve, Assistant Chief of Defence Staff (Reserve and Cadets) and senior reservists from all three Services.

CONTEXT

4. Last year's Report was framed by what we considered to be the contribution by the Reserve to UK defence, given the current threats to the UK and her allies, in order to help inform the Strategic Defence Review (SDR). The SDR reported on 2 June 2025 and the single Services (sS) have not had time to formulate fully or deliver their plans that would result. Consequently, this year's Report is shorter and focuses more on the higher-level direction of travel from the SDR and what we learnt when visiting the sS HQs. We have not made any new recommendations because we believe that those we have made in previous years, particularly last year, remain relevant, and can be seen at Annex C.
5. On our visits to units, we found that, in broad terms, little had changed since 2024. Some units were strong in numbers, particularly those with a clearly defined role, who have taken advantage of great opportunities to train, including overseas. There were other units which were significantly understrength and holding little equipment required for their war role, even where one was clearly defined. We also noted, as before, that there are a number of institutional, cultural and societal barriers to successfully implementing changes to the Reserve. Professor Connolly, the EST academic team member, has provided an essay at Annex D, which gives a historical perspective from past reviews and research of why this is so, and offers further thoughts as how this might be overcome.

1. Reserve Forces Act 1996, s113A – recruitment, retention, training and upkeep of the estate.

2. Wales, East Midlands and the South West – 15 units from all three Services as well as Commanding Officers from other units in these regions.

6. The Tri-Service Reserves Continuous Attitude Survey (ResCas) 2024³, reported that, while there are high levels of satisfaction with Service life (70% of reservists), overall, it is at its lowest point since the ResCAS began in 2015. That said, of encouragement for growing the Reserve, the top three areas that show an increase in satisfaction are: civilian employers valuing the Reserve Service; the use of the skills gained through military experience in civilian employment; and the feeling that being a reservist is good for civilian careers.
7. Despite the mixed picture, on our visits we continue to be impressed by the reservists of all three Services by their dedication, sense of duty and the full part they wish to play delivering operational capability in support of today's operations across the globe. As examples, the Royal Navy (RN) have 75 reservists currently deployed on operations with another 54 nominated. As at 1 April 2025, 16% of RN reservists are delivering to immediate Defence outputs. The Army has deployed 983 reservists in 2024/25, while the Royal Air Force (RAF) have 8% of their Part Time Volunteer Reserve (PTVR) deployed, representing 12% of total RAF personnel deployed on operations. Further, 52% of RAF Reserve Service Days (RSD) are in support of current operations.
8. The 2024 Report observed that the health of the Reserve had not improved; remained poor and numbers had continued to decline since 2021. Moreover, given increased threats, we concluded that the current resourcing plan for the Reserve was inadequate. As purpose and numbers are linked, balancing the equation (see paragraph 13e below) would not be achievable until this is also addressed. To achieve the capability required (and the increased mass called for in SDR), resources need to be made available. If not, the Reserve will struggle to recruit and retain the numbers needed to deliver the tasks set by Defence.
9. MinVP welcomed the 2024 Report, noted the importance of enhancing the ability to deter and defend, including through alliances and allies, committed to improving the health of the Reserve through removing recruitment barriers, increasing retention and to fix the foundations of the offer and lived experience. Against the Report's specific recommendations, he reported that work was in hand either through the Army's Project WAVELL or the RAF's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept.
10. In our visit to SS HQs, we were encouraged by the clear focus and recognition by all Services of the importance of the Reserve to providing mass, resilience and specialist capabilities; providing depth and capabilities to reinforce, regenerate and reconstitute. In MOD, MinVP chairs a Reserve Board bringing particular focus to the four areas of:
 - a. Simplify - streamlining process for Reserves to apply, train and contribute.
 - b. Amplify - enhances the Reserve's visibility.
 - c. Scale - enhancing the Reserve's capabilities.
 - d. Mobilise - ensuring that the Reserve can be mobilised swiftly.

The work streams that flow from the high-level focus are captured within the Defence Reserve Campaign Plan (DRCP).⁴ This, combined with the ambition of SDR, if the resources, not merely money, are made available for implementation, bodes well for the future. We need to avoid the flawed zero-sum logic that sees regulars and reserves as in opposition.

4. Reporting to the Chief of Staff Committee the DRCP is the enduring vehicle to cohere, communicate and challenge Defence to deliver the Reserve elements of the SDR.

3. Published on 18 July 2024. ResCas 2025 is due to be published on 10 July 2025 at 0930 hours.

11. However, as we found from our visits for this Report, there was little of substance that had changed in the last year and we conclude that the health of the Reserve thus remains poor – the combined strength of the Reserve is only 890 higher than it was in 2012 and the Army Reserve today is smaller than it was in 2012, despite the threats faced today. While there have been some improvements in the number of applications and enlistments, these improvements are marginal – for the RN the conversion rate has improved from 9.8% to 11% and for the Army the number of applications are forecast to increase, but with a lower conversion rate.
12. Further, given that the bedrock of armed forces' capability is people, the new recruiting contract that does not take effect until early 2027, and the SDR's ambition to grow the Reserve by 20% is conditional on the when funding allows,⁵ rather than being threat based, our prognosis is that the health of the Reserve is unlikely to recover, certainly in the short term. In this, the Army report that its Reserve strength is falling at 4.5% annually and further decline is inevitable without immediate investment and workforce incentives. We have, however, noted energy behind the desire to engage the current untapped Strategic Reserve,⁶ although this will only be capable when plans, training and equipment are in place and practised, as happened during the Cold War.
13. We, therefore, highlight the main points of the 2024 Report because we believe that they are still relevant:
 - a. The Reserve lacks a clear and resourced sense of purpose.
 - b. The current system for recruiting the Reserve is not working.
 - c. The establishments of Army reserve units are inadequate to meet the War Fighting Increment (WFI) to reinforce regular units for warfighting.
 - d. The decline and deterioration of the Army's Reserve Estate continues.
 - e. We described the capability 'equation' that underpins the health of reserve units and the Reserve more generally. A unit "... must have a clear, defined role, a robust establishment with the necessary numbers to achieve a critical mass that is maintained by effective recruiting and good retention, well equipped to conduct a high tempo of quality training with sufficient logistical and administrative support so it is an appropriate and acceptable burden on the part time reservists."⁷
 - f. We found that there was a growing acknowledgement that mass is necessary if we return to major war in Europe, but little definition of what that meant. Indeed, the Defence Command paper 2023 ruled out any increase in the size of the Active Reserve,⁸ and the SDR offers no timetable for the 20% growth it sees as necessary.
 - g. We also recommended that the sS consider the balance between regular forces and the Reserve; what capabilities can be held in the Reserve, particularly those only used in general war; multi-disciplinary RAF units to support the dispersal of aircraft under the ACE concept; and expanding the RN's Maritime Reserve for security tasks in the UK's littoral waters - mine countermeasure (MCM), defence of ports and anchorages, surveying and intelligence.
 - h. The reinvigoration of the Strategic Reserve.

5. SDR, Recommendation 14 – the Reserve "... should have protected access to the necessary funding, time, and equipment for training alongside Regulars."

6. The Strategic Reserve is made up of the Regular Reserve, who are former regular members of the Armed Forces who retain a liability to be called up in times of national crisis; and Recall Reserve, who are former regular members of the Armed Forces, who can be recalled for service, not part of the Regular Reserve, in times of national crisis.

7. EST Report 2022, paragraph 45.

8. All those who are filling an active role, up to and including Full Time Reserve Service (FTRS).

14. We welcome the broad direction of travel and ambition of the SDR as it concerns the Reserve, but, as always, ambition must be matched by resources. We see many of the points that we made last year in this Review and we would highlight with commentary below:

- a. The next conflict is likely to be high-intensity and protracted, and the ‘hollowing out’ of the Armed Forces needs to be reversed.⁹
- b. The Reserve brings valuable and directly relevant knowledge, skills and experience from their civilian jobs. Further, civilian qualifications and standards should be adopted where there is a suitable equivalent.¹⁰

Too often we have reported on the frictions within reserve service where reservists are not allowed to operate military equipment until they have completed a course, even though they operate this equipment in their civilian job. This should be an easy win since it lies within the gift of the SS.
- c. The Active Reserve should grow by 20%. Given today’s strength target of 35,000, this represents 7,000 personnel, which is not significant if mass is required.¹¹
- d. The formation of a new locally recruited and employed force for Home Defence.¹²

Defence has much previous experience forming such as force. For example, the successful Home Service Force of the 1980’s. To be credible this force will need to be resourced, administered and trained.
- e. The reinvigoration of the Strategic Reserve.¹³

To give substance and credibility to the Strategic Reserve, it needs communication, resourcing (stockpiles of uniform and personal equipment), administration, a training structure and a mobilisation plan that is practised, as we reported last year.
- f. The SDR’s identification of the value and importance of securing the UK’s undersea pipelines and cables, and maritime traffic could be placed – in full or part – on the Maritime Reserve.¹⁴
- g. The Army should be a minimum of 100,000, Regular and Reserve personnel, effectively today’s strength.¹⁵

We note that the FR20 report, which was published before the seizure and annexation of the Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the subsequent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, proposed that this should be 120,000, and the requirement to provide more reserves for civil interface and homeland defence.
- h. The support that the Reserve can give in the RAF’s ACE to support the dispersal of aircraft and crews and logistic support (munitions, fuel, spare parts). The recent Ukrainian operation against Russia’s strategic bombers and the civilian protestors’ actions at RAF Brize Norton highlights the dangers of concentration in what were thought to be safe areas.¹⁶

9. SDR, page 19, paragraph 26.

10. SDR, page 68, paragraph 20.

11. SDR, page 70, recommendation 14.

12. SDR, page 90, paragraph 10.

13. SDR, page 91, paragraph 13.

14. SDR, page 19, paragraph 24 and page 107, paragraph 36.

15. SDR, page 110, paragraph 6.

16. SDR, page 114, paragraph 5.

- i. That a significant proportion of the medical reservists working in the NHS and Defence will be required by both employers in the event of major war and mass casualties in the UK as it is the NHS that provides much of the secondary and tertiary care.¹⁷

SDR recommends that MOD and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) work closely together. In this, perhaps the NHS should generate its own 'Strategic Reserve' of recently retired medical professionals in order to free up the military reservists?

15. Separately, we note the establishment of a Military Strategic HQ (MSHQ) under the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), as part of the Defence Reform programme. Given the importance of the Reserve, whether Active or Strategic, we consider that it should be viewed as delivering capability in its own right, rather than primarily as a way of connecting Defence to the population, or as a HR function, in order to maximise the effectiveness of the whole, or Integrated Force. To this end, we believe that MOD should consider locating the Reserve branch under VCDS in the MSHQ, rather than in the people area, where it currently resides.

Workforce

16. We continue to report against the FR20 trained¹⁸ strength targets for the Reserve of the three sS (totalling 35,060) as this is the last politically endorsed number, and against which the Tri-Service Personnel Statistics & Analysis collects the data:
 - a. RN - 3,100.
 - b. Army - 30,100.
 - c. RAF - 1,860

There has been no public announcement of any change since the issue of the FR20 report, although the RN amended the FR20 trained strength target to +/- 20% of 3,100 and the Army has reduced its trained strength requirement by 3,000 from 30,100 to 27,097. The RAF has set itself a more ambitious target to expand to 5,000. In light of the increased threat, and SDR ambition to grow the Reserve forces, it may be time to update the FR20 figures to ones that better match the future need.

¹⁷. SDR, page 130, paragraph 4.

¹⁸. The point at which the Services count trained strength is different: the RN and RAF only count as trained those who have completed initial professional training (Phases 1 and 2), while, since October 2016, the Army includes those who have completed Phase 1 training in the trained strength figure.

Trained Strength/Recruiting

17. The table shows that workforce numbers had continued to decline across all three sS since 2021, whether total or trained strength, and when compared to what we reported last year.¹⁹ The downward trend continues for all three sS.

	2012 1 Apr	2021 1 Apr	2023 1 Apr	2024 1 Apr	2025 1 Apr	Difference Apr 24-25
All Services						
Total Strength	30,070	37,410	33,830	32,490	31,990	-500
Trained Strength	22,960	32,700	30,360	29,570	29,190	-380
Untrained Strength	7,110	4,710	3,480	2,920	2,800	-120
Maritime Reserve						
Total Strength	2,570	4,080	3,460	3,310	3,240	-70
Trained Strength	1,830	2,870	2,730	2,680	2,630	-50
Untrained Strength	740	1,210	720	630	610	-20
Army Reserve						
Total Strength	25,980	30,030	27,240	26,160	25,770	-390
Trained Strength	20,000	26,940	24,810	24,070	23,840	-230
Untrained Strength	5,590	3,090	2,430	2,090	1,930	-160
RAF Reserve						
Total Strength	1,520	3,300	3,140	3,030	2,980	-50
Trained Strength	1,130	2,890	2,810	2,820	2,720	-100
Untrained Strength	390	410	330	210	260	+50

18. The RN reported that the number of applications between 31 December 2023 and 2024 remain broadly the same (2661), but the conversion rate (number of applications to the number that are attested or enlisted) slowly improved, now at 11%, as opposed to 9.8% for 2023, resulting in 290 personnel attested. Of note, the RNR also recruited 234 personnel leaving regular service.

¹⁹. MOD Quarterly service personnel statistics: 1 April 2025.

19. For the Army, its partnership/contract with Capita is now in its 13th year, having been planned for 10 years. The conversion rate remains low; there were 30,000 applications to join the Army Reserve in 2024/25, a considerable improvement on the previous two years – 23,000 and 17,000 respectively. However, while the target for inflow in 2024/25 was 3,150, only 1,332 were attested (albeit a slight increase on 23/24), which represents 42% of the target, and conversion rate of 4%.
20. The Royal Auxiliary Air Force (RAuxAF) remains under-strength - it has a trained strength of 1,950 of Part Time Volunteer Reserve (PTVR) against an overall requirement of 3,150 (this is higher than the RAF's FR20 target and reflects an enhanced ambition for its Reserve). The RAF had 5250 applications for a requirement target of 759 personnel; 323 were attested (43% of its target) with a conversion rate of 6%. It, therefore, has some way to go to realise its internal longer-term ambition, which is to more than double and reach 25% of the regular RAF – this would be a Reserve strength of approximately 7,000.
21. The outflow numbers for the RN, Army and RAF were 18.3%, 12.1% and 16.7% respectively. However, what the outflow figures do not show is positive outflow where a reservist decides to leave the Reserve to become a regular.
22. In his response to last year's report, MinVP highlighted that MOD would look to remove recruitment barriers and aid "... recruitment by ending outdated and unnecessary entry requirements and improving the path into the forces for new recruits."²⁰ He also said that the Army was enacting a wide-ranging package of measures (18 aimed at improving inflow). While we have heard much positive discussion/planning around this issue, there is still little/no tangible evidence of any true progress.
 - a. Director Army Recruiting briefed us on a number of initiatives to improve Army inflow – marketing, nurturing through the recruiting pipeline with Recruit Mentoring Support Officers (ReMSO) and Regimental Operational Support Officers) and the new digital consent for access to Primary Care Healthcare Records (PHCR); the latter will reduce the time taken to retrieve PHCR from 42 days to 12.
 - b. Nevertheless, while the Army inflow demand for 2025/26 is 3,780 and the forecast for the number of applications in the pipeline is healthy due to good marketing (an average of some 4000 per month), Army Recruiting is forecasting an actual inflow of 1,510, or 40% of the above target. While this figure is, perhaps, realistic under the current system, it is nevertheless disappointing.
 - c. Medicals appear still to be an issue. We heard of a potential recruit being Temporarily Medically Unfit (TMU)²¹ because of mild eczema between their fingers; a civilian qualified and current 737 captain failing the uncorrected eyesight test; candidates failing part of the medical test (eyesight colour test for the trade they volunteered, but allowable for other trades), who are not allowed to continue with the rest of the assessment, rather being offered another trade. It does not matter whether these examples are the result of the military standard, or an interpretation by the medics of that standard, but it would seem to be the kind of issue MinVP was highlighting in replying to last year's EST report about barriers to recruitment, and within the gift of Defence to solve.

20. Annex B to this Report.

21. Although not failed per se, the issue with TMU is that potential reservists give up on the recruitment process and are lost.

23. The new Armed Forces Recruiting Service (AFRS) was awarded to Serco in March 2025; it is a 7 +1+1+1 year contract. It goes 'live' in early 2027 – Army officers in January 2027, Army other ranks in March 2027 and all others in April 2027 – and the next 21 months will be used to develop the detailed plan and transition. Serco acts as the prime contractor supported by partners, Optima being the specialist for medical matters. It will be responsible for marketing, contact, process and assessment of potential recruits.
24. We were briefed that the requirements of the Reserve were built into the programme from the outset and the current staff are determined to identify and address the weaknesses and failings in the current systems. The pace of the recruitment process is designed to meet the needs of the applicant but with the aim of a conditional offer from 10 days of application and a date to start training within 30 days if all requirements have been met.
25. Nevertheless, as AFRS does not go live until 2027, we fear that Reserve recruiting over the next 18 month is at risk. **We would assess the continuing failure to meet or achieve recruiting targets as the significant threat to the utility and utilisation of the Reserve.**

ROYAL NAVY

26. As we report below, the health of the Maritime Reserve (MR) is a mixed picture but a trend of definite improvement since our Report last year.
27. The regionalisation model continues to settle where a reservist might join a particular unit local to their area, say HMS PRESIDENT in London, but if they are an Information Warfare specialist, they are administered by that branch (who manage their resources and approve training), which is located elsewhere; in the case of Information Warfare it would be HMS KING ALFRED in Portsmouth. Although esprit de corps is being regained, there is still the challenge for many who no longer see, train or employ, those under their command.
28. The co-location of the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR), Royal Marines Reserve (RMR), University Royal Navy Units (URNU) and even some Cadets is corralling the Maritime communities regionally and all MR units visited in 2025 confirmed these populations' benefit from the amplified sense of common purpose. The importance of the regional RN presence through MR units cannot be underestimated and is what employers and society think is the "Maritime Reserves" and indeed, often, the RN.
29. The positive steps taken to restructure the RMR training continues to make excellent progress with a focus on infrastructure and physical training resources to improve preparation. For Phase 1 training, 123 Troop achieved 46% pass rate (35/56) and with 124 Troop, 67% have passed Phase 1a (it was 50% for 123 Tp). Workplace training is incorporated into annual RMR Exs CAMPBELL HARDY, COMMANDO PHOENIX and HARESPRING to allow full achievement to Commando duties. A corporal leadership course has been franchised from the Commando Training Centre Royal Marine (CTCRM) and proved successful; it is 'reserve friendly' by being completed over a number of drill nights, cumulating in a two-week exercise at CTCRM. A similar sergeants' course is planned for the future.

30. The 'MyReserves' elements of the 'My Navy' App has successfully been rolled out to the RNR and it is expected it will be completed completion by the end of 2025 to the RMR. It has brought significant beneficial change to the maritime reservists' experience allowing them to access their information, understand their commitments, book (and be paid for) courses and events, as well as track their pathway to the Certificate of Efficiency, bounty and promotion; it also has been positive for unit administrators.
31. We saw a clear sense of energy and urgency into developing the RN's mass mobilisation model for its Strategic Reserve through four mobilisation hubs, with the aim to test on Ex STEADFAST DEFENDER 27 and scope through Ex RECALL WARRIOR in late 2025.
32. As the MR Orders are again reviewed, the MR's national specialisations sense of professional purpose, aligned with centre of excellence training, operational tasks, clearer sub-specialisation reporting and promotion is bearing fruit, although still revealing structural issues as a result of past recruiting stoppages and the decision, since reversed, to stop reserve options for Phase 1 training. **The SDR and resulting RN requirement presents an ideal opportunity for the RN to be clear on the capabilities that it needs its MR to provide and not just rely on the MR suggesting how they can best be used from the bottom up; this is vital.**

ARMY

33. We were briefed on how the Army intends to generate mass from its Reserve both Active and Strategic. As part of the NATO requirement to deliver two divisions, the Reserve would be used to:
 - a. Reinforce the 1st Echelon/Division, which would primarily be a regular force, reinforced by regulars, but with reserve specialists.
 - b. Regenerate the 2nd Echelon/Division, with the Active and Strategic Reserve, organised into deployable Brigades which would be capable of relieving or reinforcing the 1st Echelon.
 - c. The Homeland Defence Force (c10,000 TBC) would be found primarily from the Strategic Reserve.
 - d. Reconstitute a 3rd Echelon from the general population.
34. This would see an overall force of 130,000+ (73,00 regular, 30,000 Active Reserve and 27,000 Strategic Reserve). As an ambition, it will give clarity to a sense of purpose to the Reserve, which is the same for the regulars – protect the UK, help prosperity by fighting and winning our battles from the land. **But, given current number and lack of equipment, significant resourcing will be needed for the Reserve to fulfil these ambitions.**
35. Workforce numbers have been highlighted above, but within Field Army, trained strength at 16,506 personnel is 65% of the workforce requirement (notwithstanding other Army Reservists and Strategic Reservists could backfill many gaps). Non-combat arms, where the need is significantly greater than combat units, both for 1st and 2nd Echelon, bear the brunt of this shortfall, in particular the Royal Artillery, Royal Logistic Corps, Royal Army Medical Corps and Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

36. Further, as stated last year unit equipment scales, especially in combat service and combat service support units have shown little improvement, with a resultant negative retention effect. The problem is at least acknowledged e.g. transport units with no trucks, artillery regiments with no guns or ammunition and an intention stated to achieve some remedy but this remains aspirational at present. However, we were informed of some good initiatives such as exercising with the USA using their artillery pieces and ammunition.
37. Our reporting on recruitment and numbers, with little indication of improvement, paints a negative gloomy picture. To add to this, and on which we have reported before as 'frictions', is the reluctance to recognise civilian qualifications for similar military qualifications. We came across a soldier, who has his own tree surgery company with huge experience and qualifications to use power saws, but is unable to use an Army power saw without completing a qualifying course.
38. However, there are areas where the outlook is more positive, which should be highlighted:
 - a. We are pleased to see that for 2025/26 the Army Reserve RSD budget has again been protected, with an adequate settlement, which combined with regarding the Reserve as a capability in its own right will help to ensure that it gets the focus required.
 - b. A separate Field Army budget for reservists being mobilised for operations.
 - c. Many excellent opportunities to train abroad and with allies and to serve alongside regular colleagues on operations.
 - d. The volunteer spirit is alive and well demonstrated by a unit that required immediate support at very short notice to support operations in the Middle East.
 - e. The Multi National Field Artillery Brigade HQ, commanded and staffed largely by reservists proving that doing the same role year in year out results in a real level of expertise as proven on Ex DYNAMIC FRONT, a premier NATO exercise in Europe focused on fires interoperability mainly set at the Corps level.
 - f. Planning to use Ex STEADFAST DEFENDER 27 as a vehicle to practise mobilisation and exercise the Reserve (both the Active and Strategic) at scale.

ROYAL AIR FORCE

39. As we reported last year, the RAF has a strong ambition for its Reserve, but has made slow progress towards that. Recruitment is exceeded by outflow, albeit only slightly, and clarity about the growth to the establishment has not materialised. In part, this is a function of the RAF's difficulty in setting the operational demand signal, partly the need for some of the changes made to the Reserve support structures (Reserve Support Wings - RSW) to build momentum, and partly bureaucratic inertia from individuals and elements of the organisation for whom this is seen as zero-sum. We judge the balance in the Reserves Directorate to be too weighted to policy compliance (brake) with too little resource in the frontline areas that might drive growth, such as strategy or in the operational and planning functions (throttle). Steps are being taken to address the problem of delivering growth, with PTVR personnel embedded in No.1 and No.2 Groups, and there are attempts to do the same in Nos.11 and 22 Groups, and in the management of the career professions. It is encouraging to see moves to support emerging areas such as space, and an experiment with 'X Flights' of qualified reserves flying with operational squadrons, in particular where the Reserve's civilian skills are relevant e.g. the E7 and P8 which are based on the civilian Boeing 737. While we endorse these initiatives, the impact of the changes over the last few years has not been yet fully realised.

40. New initiatives are being developed under the banner of Air Reserves Optimisation and the RAF's Operation Optimise to move things forward. These cover options to improve recruitment, the organisation of the RAF Reserve, and retention. Under recruitment, fast track recruitment events have been run twice, with positive feedback. The RAF is also trialling direct entry as a junior officer – currently the average age of a RAuxAF junior officer is 46 and requires enlisting as an Air Specialist and working through the ranks – and providing a pathway for those completing the University Air Squadron to gain a Reserve Commission. There is also a desire to improve the process for re-joining, which currently is cumbersome. Organisationally, regularising squadron structures and greater use of reserves to release permanent staff for other duties is in train, as well as developing career paths, which the RAF expects to contribute retention.
41. Against this backdrop of ambition and initiative, we see two key risks. The first is the need to view Reserves through a capability lens rather than as a HR activity - see paragraph 13 – and the second is that an over-focus on the Strategic Reserve could detract from the necessary development of the PTVR component. The need to re-establish effective awareness and management of the Strategic Reserve is clear, but it could risk undermining the progress being made on the PTVR element. Ensuring the institutional capacity to deliver an effective RAF Reserve is vital to delivering the ambition we have been briefed on, and for creating an effective Reserve Force that is attractive to those serving and those whose skills the RAF wishes to call on to deliver its outputs.

THE RESERVE ESTATE

42. The Reserve and Cadet Estate (Volunteer Estate (VE)) consists of some 5,000 buildings spread over 2,000 sites across the UK (1,790 of these locations are Cadet sites). Most of the VE consists of relatively basic infrastructure spread over many small, low value land parcels. As with the wider Defence estate, just under 50% of the VE is 50 or more years old. The vast majority of the VE is Army.
43. The VE geographical dispersion is necessary to aid resilience, recruiting and retention (for the Army, the majority of reservists live or work with 8 miles of their Reserve Centre). The reservist is local to their region and serves locally until deployed in war. For the reservist, their Army Reserve Centre (ARC) is at the centre of where they gather, equip, train, form teams and mobilise for war.
44. We regularly report the paucity of funding means that the VE is, at best, in managed decline and that the situation facing the VE directly impacts on the ability of the Reserve to generate capability, and is acute. This continues.
45. Defence's budgetary constraints in Financial Year (FY)24/25 once again meant that there were insufficient funds to arrest ongoing estate degradation; current indications are that there will be no reprieve FY25/26. The recurring impact of the year-on-year underfunding, exacerbated by poor Future Defence Infrastructure Services (FDIS) Supplier performance in some regions (more below), appears to have led to a reduced appetite by reserve unit Commanding Officers to tolerate estate risk.
46. In FY24/25, as was the case in FY23/24, on safety and functionality grounds there have been more enforced temporary and permanent closures of ARCs, or parts of them, where, for example, entire buildings could not be kept water-tight or heated. **The condition of many sites is now negatively affecting the lived experience of the reservist, which is not supportive of recruitment and retention.**

47. This situation will worsen until Defence is able to provide the required additional funding and/or provide more clarity on where it would wish the limited funding to be prioritised. Encouragingly the Army is the process of seeking to create priorities for the elements of the VE which support its capabilities and concurrently the infrastructure branch of MSHQ is drafting a paper to capture VE issues.
48. Despite this gloomy outlook, it has to be reported that money is being invested to improve the VE.
 - a. In Livingstone, Scotland, £3m has been spent on subunit accommodation for 105 Regt RA, which was completed December 2024.
 - b. In Dunfermline, Scotland, £11m has been spent on a consolidation of two locations and new build for an ARC for 154 Regt RLC, with completion due in June 2025.
 - c. In Kingston Park, Newcastle, £2.5m, has been spent to upgrade and re-roof existing technical accommodation/garaging in support of 101 (N) Regt RA's operational output and was completed in March 2025.
49. Tranche 2 of the Reserve Estate Optimisation Programme – the optimisation and modernisation of the Reserve Estate - includes a number of Defence Collaboration Hubs (DCH) in major conurbations and plans to modernise existing regional and small Resilience hubs. The Tranche is still alive, but remains unfunded. Even so, the Army's Director Basing & Infrastructure has found money for:
 - a. An assessment study of the Altcar/Manchester DCH and is due to report July 2025.
 - b. An assessment study to consider the development options to accommodate units affected by lease termination and wider consolidation at Manor Top, Sheffield.
 - c. Approval to seek funding to re-activate the Pantridge ARC to enable consolidation within Belfast.
50. FY24/25 has been a year of significant change for the VE, with the delivery of Hard Facilities Management transferring on 1 August 2024 from RFCA-let contracts to Defence's four FDIS contracts, with management of the contracts vested in enhanced RFCA and CRFCA Estate Teams. Very early post the in-service date, it became apparent that one of the FDIS Suppliers had significantly under-estimated the complexity of delivering services across the numerically large and geographically disparate VE sites. This under-estimation of the task has resulted in marked under-performance, leading to increased instances of estate non-compliance. The Supplier in question is still in a recovery phase, having re-structured and enlarged its management team and replaced some of its sub-contractors to create a more effective delivery model; performance metrics are improving, but slowly.

51. In concluding this section, we, therefore, see no reason not to repeat the assessment we made last year that the net result of this accumulative underfunding and investment, for daily, routine maintenance, sustainment of the VE and forward development of the VE, is that:
- The funding made available is insufficient to enable the VE to be maintained and sustained in a safe, compliant and functional state.
 - Previous warnings that ARCs may have to be closed is now a reality and the incidence of closures is only likely to increase.
 - The cumulative underfunding should be understood, calculated and identified as a financial risk for Defence.

All of which will impact negatively on the ability of Defence to generate and sustain Reserve capability, which is routinely used to augment Regular capability in support of operations, as well as to provide capability for UK resilience operations.

HEALTH

52. Since 2015 Defence Primary Health Care (DPHC) has delivered a range of services to members of the Reserve to support their employability and deployability. Delivery of these services is supported by all DPHC with seven Occupational Health (OH) reserve facing practices across the UK (from the Southwest to Scotland and Northern Ireland) to deliver both appointments and facilitate engagement between reserve units and DPHC. The volume of appointments delivered year on year is increasing, due to both increased demand and increased efficiency.
53. Currently, DPHC delivers a range of occupationally focused primary healthcare services to the Reserve. These focus on ensuring that personnel are fit for their military roles and associated operational and training demands (courses, overseas training, and operational mobilisation). Ensuring access to services for reservists is the responsibility of unit chains of command who must understand their personnel's entitlements and monitor compliance with mandatory surveillance measures via the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system.
54. Since its inception the OH reserve practices have delivered increasing numbers of appointments annually. In 2022/23, 6,436 appointments were delivered by the OH reserve practices. In 2024/25, the total was 14,480, an increase of 125%. This growth reflects an increasing awareness of requirements and entitlements amongst reservists. It also reflects a growing demand falling out of operational and training commitments as well as increased ss compliance with policy requirements such as mandatory audiometry assessment.²²
55. FR20 funding was provided for appointments on weekday evenings and at weekends to meet the requirements of the reservist. In 2022/23, 65% of appointments were delivered out of hours. By contrast in 2024/25, the proportion of out of hours appointments have fallen to 45% of the total with a corresponding increase of in-hours appointments from 2,259 to 7,980.

22. In June 2022, 60% of the Reserve were out of date for mandatory audiometry assessment. As of March 2025, the figure is 36%.

56. Despite growing demand and provision, substantial numbers of reservists are not immediately deployable because of gaps in medical preparation (based on the same standards and risk appetite being to reservist personnel as are applied to regular personnel). Defence directs individual reservists to report injury or health issues that affect their military employability. However, evidence suggests under reporting and there is currently no Defence wide policy to support periodic review of Joint Medical Employment Status (JMES).²³ The medical and dental status of the Reserve is, at best, only partially known. Although three quarters of reservist are graded Medically Fit for Deployment (MFD), it is assessed that they will require medical input before being deployable beyond the UK.²⁴ As examples, half of the Reserve Forces have not received full courses of Hepatitis A and B,²⁵ which requires a 6-month course to provide full protection for current overseas operations deployability standards. A fifth do not have a recorded blood group required for the supply of identity tags.
57. **Currently, substantial medical force preparation would be required if the Reserve were to be mobilised at scale and pace to the same standards as the regular force.** To improve employability and deployability, consideration needs to be given to raising the baseline of medical fitness, not only to meet operational requirements, but also to meet the real moral and legal duty to ensure the health and operational medical care to enable the Integrated Force to fight and endure on operations.
58. Previously, we have recommended that consideration be given to giving routine immunological protection and blood grouping to reservists when 'captured' e.g., for centralised courses at training schools, particularly Phase 1 training, as well as a programme of medical assessment. This would reduce the frictions when mass mobilisation takes place. However, as with everything else, this will have to be resourced.

CONCLUSION

59. The conflict in Ukraine has demonstrated clearly that armed forces without a Reserve and/or an ability to mobilise quickly are vulnerable. We agree that a 'step-change' in defence is required to meet the heightened threat and to end the hollowing out of the Reserve we reported last year. This is essential if the Reserve is able to play its part in moving to warfighting readiness as set out in SDR.
60. In this, a first step is to address recruiting as a priority to meet FR20 numbers, let alone grow the Reserve by SDR's proposed 20%.
61. We agree and support fully the direction of SDR, and look forward to the more detailed SS plans on which to report. Now it is even more important that the EST continues to report on the state of the health of the Reserves and grows to meet the new threats. In this, we return to the capability 'equation' that underpins the health of reserve units.
62. However, while ambition is commendable, unless it is matched by necessary resource, it remains as ambition. It almost does not need to be said, but much investment will be required first, to arrest the current steady decline and, second, to grow the Reserve both in terms of numbers, but also equipment, in order to meet the demand as set out in the SDR.

23. The MR alone requires personnel to have 5 yearly medical reviews in service to qualify for their Certificate of Efficiency. Reviews are carried out at some career points (e.g. commissioning and overage extension) but the majority of personnel are not medically reviewed for long periods during their careers.

24. A Defence Instruction Notice has introduced a process for personnel to mobilise for operations in the UK where NHS provision is present and so certain medical input is not required.

25. The provisions of JSP 950 are that reserve personnel receive vaccinations only when warned for mobilisation or training in environments that require them (e.g. Belize or Kenya).





ANNEXES:

- A. External Scrutiny Team Terms of Reference.
- B. Minister for Veterans and People Response to the 2024 Report.
- C. Previous Report Recommendations – 2013 to 2024.
- D. Driving SDR 2025 Reserve Forces ambition in the face of significant internal barriers to change. Lessons from past reviews and research.
- E. External Scrutiny Team - Membership.

COUNCIL OF RESERVE FORCES' AND CADETS' ASSOCIATIONS EXTERNAL SCRUTINY TEAM: TERMS OF REFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

1. The FR20 Report¹ was commissioned by the Prime Minister in October 2010 in recognition of the relative decline and neglect of Reserve Forces.

PURPOSE

2. The Commission identified² a requirement for an annual report on the overall state of the Reserve Forces. It recommended that the Council of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations (CRFCA) was best placed to meet this requirement, given its existing provision by (non-discretionary) statute to provide independent advice to the Defence Council and Ministers on Reserve Matters. The Defence Reform Act 2014 sets out the duty of the CRFCA to prepare annual reports of the state of the volunteer Reserve Forces. Roles and responsibilities in the production of the reports are set out in the Enabling Agreement.³

ROLE

3. The CRFCA External Scrutiny Team is to report to the Secretary of State for Defence on the state of the volunteer Reserve Forces and provide independent assurance to Parliament.

MEMBERSHIP

4. After consultation with the MOD, the RFCAs will appoint the Chair of the CRFCA External Scrutiny Team. The Chair will be appointed for a maximum of five years.
5. Membership of the External Scrutiny Team should be no greater than eight, to be decided by the Chair after consultation with the MOD through VCDS. It should provide representation from the three single Services, appropriate Regular and Reserve experience and independent expertise. Whilst its composition may change, the External Scrutiny Team must retain the expertise that enables the Chair to perform his duties effectively. The membership should include at least one member who is able to assess the provision made as regards the mental welfare of members and former members of the Reserve Forces.

BASELINE AND METRICS

6. 1 April 12 is to be taken as the baseline date from which progress of the Future Reserves 2020 Programme will be assessed.
7. RF&C will undertake coordinating activity with the single Services to ensure that the External Scrutiny Team has the assistance it requires to enable them to assess trends based on MOD manning and demographic information (such as age). Metrics to be routinely monitored are to be agreed in consultation with the MOD but may include:
 - a. Outflow rate and return of service;
 - b. Fit for Employment; Fit for Role; Fit for Deployment;
 - c. Percentage achieving bounty;
 - d. Gapping levels of Regular, Reserve, FTRS and Civilian Permanent Staff who support the Reserve community.

1. Future Reserves 2020: The Independent Commission to Review the United Kingdom's Reserve Forces. July 2011.

2. Para 104 (p.43).

3. Enabling Agreement dated 7 October 2014.

ASSESSMENT

8. The External Scrutiny Team's report is to be set in the context of the ability of the Reserves to deliver capability required by Defence, and should assess the state of the Reserves including:
 - a. Outflow rate and return of service;
 - b. Fit for Employment; Fit for Role; Fit for Deployment;
 - c. Percentage achieving bounty;
 - d. Gapping levels of Regular, Reserve, FTRS and Civilian Permanent Staff who support the Reserve community.
9. CRFCA will be involved in the development of the Programme through the Reserves Executive Committee.

ACCESS

10. RF&C will assist in facilitating access to serving military personnel, sites and furnishing additional data as required.

COSTS

11. Funding to cover the External Scrutiny Team's total personal expenses in the order of £9-10K pa⁴ has been agreed. RF&C will provide advice on the submission of claims and recovery of expenses.

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

12. Media engagement, if necessary, is to be conducted through MOD DOC in conjunction with RF&C.

DATE AND FREQUENCY OF REPORTS

13. The External Scrutiny Team shall present a report to the Secretary of State for Defence annually, reflecting the requirements of the Defence Reform Act 2014.
14. The Secretary of State for Defence will deliver the report to Parliament.

4. This is recognised as an early estimation and reflecting steady-state costs beyond Yr1. CRFCA can bid for further funding as required as part of GIA.





Ministry
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LETTER FROM MINISTER FOR VETERANS AND PEOPLE TO MAJ GEN(RETD.) SIMON LALOR, CHAIR OF THE EST – 2024 REPORT

Maj Gen(Retd.) Simon Lalor
Council of RFCAs, Holderness House, 51 Clifton Street, London EC2A 4EY

17 December 2024

I was most grateful to receive the External Scrutiny Team's (EST) 2024 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 and respond to some of the issues raised in the EST report.

The EST report reflects a year in which Defence has provided continued support to Ukraine following Russia's illegal invasion. In the face of ongoing challenges, Reservists continue to make an invaluable contribution to Defence. The Russia-Ukraine war has reminded NATO how Reserves, industry and society provide the Armed Forces with depth capability and resilience. NATO's new Reserves policy recognises how 'the utilisation of Reserves is gaining an increasingly prominent position to enhance the Alliance's and Allies' ability to deter and defend, while strengthening individual and collective resilience and technological edge'.

The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) has been launched to take a new approach to determining the requirements for the UK's Defence in the short and longer terms. We have embarked on a programme of initiatives and improvements to increase recruitment and retention. These will focus on three main goals initially: removing recruitment barriers, increasing retention, and supporting our personnel and their loved ones. We will tackle the crisis in Armed Forces recruitment by ending outdated and unnecessary entry requirements and improving the path into the forces for new recruits. Early retention measures include one of the best pay awards in recent times, recognising the demands of service and the value of our people's experience. The Government accepted the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body's and Senior Salaries Review Body's (SSRB) recommendations in full for the 2024/25 Pay Round, which was backdated to 1 April 2024 and paid in September salaries. Most personnel up to and including 1* rank received an overall 6% increase. The SSRB's headline recommendation for senior officers (two-stars and above) was a 5% consolidated increase to base pay. This year's pay award aligned our initial offer with the National Living Wage for the first time, making a military career more attractive to potential recruits and helping to address recruitment

challenges. Our aim is to fix the foundations of our offer and of the lived experience. At the same time, by focussing on skills and using emerging technology, we are developing a systems approach to how we attract and retain the best people possible to create a sustainable and flexible workforce, meeting the challenges of a rapidly evolving labour market.

Turning to some of the specific issues raised in the EST report which states at paragraph 16 that ‘the health of the Reserve has not improved; it is still poor, and worse, and continues to decline’. This Government is committed to our Reserves, and I have set out my intent to review and enhance the role of reserves. It is imperative that we recognise and leverage the importance and unique contributions of our reserve forces, particularly in light of recent global events.

The Army is currently enacting a wide-ranging package of measures aimed at improving the Army Reserves. There are eighteen proposed measures aimed at improving inflow (improving the attract for Soldiers, recognise the commitment through the enlistment and training process, as well as rewarding service and commitment in the light of the cost-of-living crisis, noting the disparity in the cost vs benefit of service) and to date eleven have been delivered and seven continue to be developed. There are nine measures aimed at improving retention of which five have been implemented and are now complete, with the others in progress. The current rate of decline has reduced and returned to that of pre-COVID lockdown levels. Project WAVELL will review the requirement to re-set the demand on the Army Reserve and re-organise around attracting, recruiting and retaining the people with the skills we need, to deliver Defence outputs.

The report acknowledges and agrees at paragraph 26 that the Strategic Reserve should be brought out of abeyance but does not understand why timing/funds have not been explored. This is a known issue and work to support the Home Defence Plan is currently researching these options.

Among its observations, the EST report provides a description of the Active and the Strategic Reserve. The Reserves Policy Team has been working with the Front Line Commands to agree the meaning of the descriptors *Active* and *Strategic* and these have recently been set out in the Defence Instruction Notice 2024DIN01-100-UK Armed Forces Reserve Definitions – Active and Strategic Reserve.

In broad terms, the Active Reserve is likely to comprise all those who are filling an active role, up to and including full time reserve service, while the Strategic Reserve will include people with a residual call out liability as a result of previous Regular service and also individuals liable for recall. The terms Active and Strategic align with the Commitment Types set out in RFA96, which is, of course, the legal authority under which the Reserves are constituted and utilised.

Paragraph 14 of the EST report states that ‘the paucity of funding means that the VE, at best, is in managed decline’. However, paragraph 15 of the report does acknowledge

that the incorporation of the Volunteer Estate (VE) on 1 August 2024 into MOD Built Estates contracts, which already provide Hard Facilities Management services to Defence facilities across the UK, should help mitigate many of these issues and deliver a higher standard of service for users. My officials are confident that the incorporation of the Volunteer Estate into MOD Built Estates contracts will bring about positive changes, resulting in an improved level of service and enhanced maintenance standards.

A total of £36.6M is being made available for 'maintain and sustain' on the Reserve Estate this FY as included in DIO's AP05 forecast. Of course, the financial situation remains extremely difficult and the needs of the Reserves estate feature heavily in our discussions, including in the forthcoming spending review.

In terms of the wider financial position, The Army is piloting a new Reserve funding model which will ringfence a core budget for Army Reserve training for warfighting. This will ensure adequate resourcing for the Reserve, enabling it to continue to deliver key outputs on behalf of the Army and Defence.

This Government's priority will always be to ensure that this country is well defended. Having a strong Reserve Forces presence is fundamental to ensuring that in the face of growing threats we continue to do more to make Britain secure at home and strong abroad. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the Army has improved readiness through Op MOBILISE and re-organised to better meet its NATO Force Model commitments.

Work continues at pace across Defence. The Agile Stance Campaign Plan (ASCP) and Home Defence Plan (HDP) have set the direction of travel for warfighting and homeland protection. We intend to expand our Reserve Forces through reinvigorating the Strategic Reserve and creating a Contingent National Defence Force to meet Home Defence Plan taskings.

Thank you once again for the report.



ALISTAIR CARNS OBE MC MP

EST RECOMMENDATIONS 2024

24.1 We would recommend that the Defence Review Team should ensure that it engages with those who have a sufficiency the knowledge, experience and radical perspective of what a volunteer part time reserve is capable of, if it is given a clear role, is properly structured, equipped and resourced.

The Defence Review Team are currently engaging with personnel who have the knowledge and experience of what a volunteer part-time reserve is capable of and will ensure that future reserve forces are appropriately structured, equipped and resourced.

24.2 We would recommend to Project Wavell that units of the Army Reserve should be structured to deploy and fight as units, as they were during the Cold War, to deliver collective capabilities as opposed to a WFI to regular units.

Project WAVELL is considering how best to utilise our Reserve forces and will put Reservists (and Reservist units) at the very heart of the Operational Design Framework. In doing so Project WAVELL recognises and will support the essential role the Reserves will play in the regeneration of echelon forces.

24.3 We would recommend that in this Defence Review, all three Services consider what warfighting capabilities and/or weapon systems can be held predominately in the Reserve.

The Army is considering warfighting capabilities and weapon systems within Project WAVELL. They will be working with the other single Services and the Defence Capability Strategic team to understand which capabilities might best sit within the Reserve, whilst considering the need for Technical and Specialist accommodation.

24.4 We recommend that the Army build on the success of 19 Infantry Brigade and create other functional brigades, or all arms Reserve brigades. The latter would allow more easily for all arms training.

An additional Army Reserve Brigade is one option being considered within Project WAVELL's Force Design.

24.5 We recommend that the RAF should consider creating multi-discipline units that deploy to provide the support to the aircraft and crews that have been dispersed from their Main Operating Bases to other airfields and landing strips across the UK.

This recommendation relates to Air's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) activity and the Reserves role therein. This concept is developing but in principle the Royal Auxiliary Air

Force (RAuxAF) squadrons could hold a secondary/homeland protect function of either backfilling Main Operating Bases which have had their personnel dispersed or, supporting those dispersed locations which are near to them. The ongoing ACE Evaluation will help inform this model.

Aligned to this is the RAuxAF Squadron Structures review, starting soon, which will assess whether the squadrons are organised in a way which best meets the RAF strategy of ‘always ready to fly and fight’.

24.6 We would recommend that the Royal Navy consider expanding its Reserve component for UK maritime security (UK waters and abroad) to augment the delivery of a range of capabilities being introduced by the new platforms and technologies such as the SEA-Class workboats.

The Maritime Reserve already augments the capabilities of the Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) fleet. The statement ‘in recent years, the Maritime Reserve mobilised teams of sailors and marines at short notice to enable Border Force Cutters to regenerate and operate in UK waters’ is not technically correct – either in the Maritime Reserve mobilising ‘teams’ or that the Maritime Reserve enabled Border Force cutters to operate; The Maritime Reserve provided Immediate Action personnel to crew Rigid-Hulled inflatable Boats to support RN border protection operations under Op ISOTROPE.



PREVIOUS REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY OF 2013 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 13.1 ([Link to the Commission's recommendations 3, 4 & 8](#))

As a matter of priority the Department should issue a plain-English narrative which sets out the Reserves proposition: a narrative which is commonly adopted across all the Services and, as a minimum, covers the purposes of the Reserves; the manner in which they are likely to be used; and individual levels of obligation.

Recommendation 13.2 ([Link to the Commission's recommendations 6 & 12](#))

FR20 manpower metrics should be more granular for the period to 2018 to demonstrate changes within the recruit inflow pipeline and should not concentrate solely on the achievement of Phase-2-trained Reservists.

Recommendation 13.3 ([Link to the Commission's recommendation 26](#))

Priority must be given to fund and introduce quickly an effective management information system which accurately captures Reservists numbers; states of training, preparedness; availability; attendance; and skill sets.

Recommendation 13.4

More analysis is undertaken to determine the causes of 'manning churn', to better inform how retention measures could be better targeted.

Recommendation 13.5 ([Link to the Commission's recommendations 2 & 21](#))

In parallel to development of pairing/parenting responsibilities, further analysis is needed for scaling of equipment and vehicle holdings at Reserve unit level, including the provision of low-tech simulation alternatives.

Recommendation 13.6 ([Link to the Commission's recommendations 5, 6, 17, 18 & 23](#))

FR20 Army basing should take account of regional capacity to recruit, not just to facilitate proximity, and should also be phased to initially preserve current TA manpower until such time as alternative inflow is more fully developed.

Recommendation 13.7 ([Link to the Commission's recommendations 8, 22 & 23](#))

That work is initiated to look at the potential to employ Reserves with critical skills, where their employment was best served in a reach-back rather than deployed role; and that their TACOS be examined for appropriate adjustment.

Recommendation 13.8 ([Link to the Commission's report, Annex C, paragraph 8](#))

That senior military and political leadership initiate a comprehensive information campaign with the Services' middle management to address the cultural change necessary to secure FR20, drawing on the narrative we recommend above.

SUMMARY OF 2014 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 14.1 Further work on Whole Force and the New Employment Model, coupled with the desirability of easier transfers between Regular and Reserve service, suggest that the necessity of merging the Armed Forces' Act and the Reserve Forces' Act should be kept under review.

Recommendation 14.2 The narrative developed for the White Paper should be updated to take account of FR20 delivery to date and used more extensively to market the value of Reserve service and the recruiting offer. It should also be used more extensively cross-Government.

Recommendation 14.3 FR20 measures which seek to bring down the average age of Reservists should be phased to follow those measures which will rely heavily on Reservist knowledge and experience for their introduction.

Recommendation 14.4 The single Services should examine the scope to apply a 'special measures approach' to turning round those units and sub-units most in need of assistance in reaching FR20 targets.

Recommendation 14.5 The single Services should examine a range of measures which better preserve the corporate memory of their Reserve components, including procedures for recording whether and how savings measures are planned to be restored during programming.

Recommendation 14.6 Recruiting processes should be subject to continuous improvement measures, with recognition that central marketing and advertising campaigns must be complemented by appropriately funded local/unit activity to nurture and retain applicants through the process.

Recommendation 14.7 Final decisions on Reserve Centre laydown and unit/sub-unit closures should be re-tested against local recruiting capacity and retention factors.

Recommendation 14.8 In order to ensure that necessary differences between Regular and Reserve service are appropriately managed, the single Services should consider the reintroduction of a dedicated Reserve career management staff branch (predominantly manned and led by Reservists) within their Personnel Headquarters.

Recommendation 14.9 Command appointments of Reserve units should continue to provide opportunity for part-time volunteer officers. When part-time volunteers are appointed, command team manning of the unit should be reviewed to ensure that the commanding officer is fully supported with no gapping in key headquarters posts.

Recommendation 14.10 The MOD should consider the option to restore the FR20 Commission's proposal that a contingency reserve fund should be established to be available for short duration domestic operations making use of Reserves.

SUMMARY OF 2015 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 15.1 The MOD give further consideration to how it will safeguard the ability of Reserves to play a proportionate part in resilience operations, especially once the Reserves are at full Manning and would otherwise have to dilute funds for annual training to offset costs.

Recommendation 15.2 Working within the existing governance system, build more inter-Service cooperation on experimentation and best practice on recruiting and retention, whether or not initiatives are universally adopted.

Recommendation 15.3 The three Services should review the separate roles played by the national call centres, the Armed Forces Careers Offices, the recruiting field forces and Reserve units to ensure that they are clearly optimised for Reserve recruiting.

Recommendation 15.4 The MOD and the Services should review the medical entry standards required of recruits and ensure that the screening contracts are appropriately incentivised and assured to achieve success.

Recommendation 15.5 The Services should initiate work to determine the recruiting resources necessary to ensure steady state Manning of the Reserve beyond the FR20 period.

Recommendation 15.6 The Services should examine what more could be done to enhance Manning through retention-positive measures, at least in the short term, including bespoke extra-mural activities targeted at the Reserve.

Recommendation 15.7 FR20 planning and risk mitigation should increasingly turn more attention to the growth of capability within the Reserve component, rather than a slavish pursuit of numerical growth.

Recommendation 15.8 Army Reserve basing requirements should be revisited as a consequence of availability of funds to deliver the original basing concept and on the evidence of other FR20 achievement; link to Recommendation 15.10.

Recommendation 15.9 DIO and the Services should review their multi activity and support contracts and, where relevant, explore ways in which they can be amended to ensure that they are Reserve-friendly.

Recommendation 15.10 The Services should conduct a command-led stock-take on all aspects of FR20 implementation by the end of FY 2015/16 and share lessons learned; link with recommendation 15.8.

SUMMARY OF 2016 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 16.1 An urgent contract review of the Army Recruiting Partnership.

Recommendation 16.2 The Services undertake more granular analysis within their data gathering, to reduce the risk of specialist manning gaps in the final years of FR20 and beyond.

Recommendation 16.3 The high incidence of medical deferrals and time to resolution remain under close scrutiny in order to reduce both.

Recommendation 16.4 The Royal Navy and Army absorb recent innovations in officer Phase 1 training into their core officer development activity, as the issue will require sustained attention well beyond the timeframe of FR20.

Recommendation 16.5 Consideration be given to greater cross-pollination, shared practice and coordination between the three Services in the officer recruiting environment, particularly in the area of achieving greater penetration of the Higher and Further Education recruiting hinterland.

Recommendation 16.6 The Services keep under review the impact of losing Op FORTIFY enhancements (or Service equivalents) and, where appropriate to sustain recruiting beyond 2019, bring relevant elements into their core activity.

Recommendation 16.7 The Services examine units which have a significant young officer deficit to determine whether a poor proposition might be the cause and, if so, to assess whether it can be legitimately improved.

Recommendation 16.8 The Army consider how the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force use their Reserves in order to develop a better understanding of potential use of Auxiliaries in the Army Reserve; and that such analysis helps shape policies for the future employment system.

Recommendation 16.9 The Army revisits the decision to withdraw LADs from Reserve units to create REME battalions.

Recommendation 16.10 The manner in which Reserves can be routinely employed on national operations or for back-fill be revisited.

Recommendation 16.11 The Reserve narrative be reviewed to ensure it cannot be interpreted as intent to prevent use of Reservists for routine mobilisation and on national operations.

Recommendation 16.12 Work on defining the Army Reserve officer career pathway be re-invigorated.

Recommendation 16.13 Defence reviews whether a more flexible range of employment terms should be considered, to better incentivise recruitment and to provide more agility within a whole force approach to employment.

Recommendation 16.14 As options are considered for disposal of Regular estate, decisions are not taken before current or potential usefulness to Reserve capability-building has also been taken into account.

Recommendation 16.15 MOD and the Services recognise incomplete cultural change will be the main impediment to FR20 delivery and long-term Reserve sustainability, and introduce specific measures to inculcate cultural change.

Recommendation 16.16 The importance of localism for effective sub-unit command be addressed by simplifying systems where possible; providing adequate permanent staff support; and keeping training requirements at practical levels.

SUMMARY OF 2017 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 17.1 A repeat recommendation that a formal contract review of the Recruiting Partnership be undertaken. (Paragraph 19)

Recommendation 17.2 That the continued employment of RSUSOs is revisited. (Paragraph 20)

Recommendation 17.3 That the use of medical waivers during recruiting should be better advertised to RN and Army units, and other relevant participants in the recruiting chain. (Paragraph 21)

Recommendation 17.4 That the Army should examine where the medical waiver authority is best lodged. (Paragraph 21)

Recommendation 17.5 That the single Services should review their recruiting medical contracts to ensure assessments are carried out with a greater degree of consistency and common sense. (Paragraph 23)

Recommendation 17.6 That the Services identify which units have experienced the most successful officer recruitment and explore the best means by which their successes can then be exported to less successful units. (Paragraph 24)

Recommendation 17.7 The Army should revitalise work to create a Reserve officer career pathway. (Paragraph 28)

Recommendation 17.8 That the Army develop and implement a policy to support appropriately Reserve unit commanding officers when the incumbent is a part time volunteer. (Paragraph 30)

Recommendation 17.9 That the MOD, Joint Forces Command and the single Services review the terms under which Reserves are included on or in support of operations, in order to develop protocols which make their inclusion easier. (Paragraph 35)

Recommendation 17.10 That the Services resist short-term in-year budgetary palliatives which directly or indirectly reduce routine Reserve activity. (Paragraph 37)

Recommendation 17.11 That the Services now initiate work to determine optimum return-of-service/retention rate(s) for their Reserves and put in place measures to achieve them, with the same vigour that they have applied in their recruiting effort. (Paragraph 39)

Recommendation 17.12 That work on the Reserves Estate Strategy be re-invigorated and accelerated, continuing to draw on local and regional expertise. We further recommend that priority is given to ensuring adequate funding is made available to sustain the existing VE until a new strategy can be implemented. (Paragraph 48)

Recommendation 17.13 That the MOD update the work on mental health in the Services that it has undertaken with King's College and commission fresh work to look specifically at the current situation for Reserves. (Paragraph 51)

SUMMARY OF 2018 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 18.1 Given the challenging recruiting environment encountered by the three Services and the failure of the DRS, we recommend that the MOD and Services do not take further savings measures from the FR20 £1.8bn funding to manage FY18 in-year financial pressures. (Paragraph 15)

Recommendation 18.2 We would welcome an update on the proposed revisions to JSP 950 when these actions are completed. (Paragraph 22)

Recommendation 18.3 Given the criticality of DRS to the inflow of applicants to recruits, we recommend that 'Hypercare' is continued until all three services are confident that DRS works as intended reducing the 'time of flight' between application and being loaded on a Phase 1 recruit training course. (Paragraph 26)

Recommendation 18.4 Linked to paragraphs 16-26 above, until the frictions in the recruiting system are ironed out, whether induced by DRS or Service policies, we recommend that Op FORTIFY measures, such as the RSUSO, are continued beyond FR20 until the Services hit their trained strength FR20 targets and they are confident that manning is on an even plateau. (Paragraph 27)

Recommendation 18.5 We recommend that the three Services continue to examine that their courses – particularly those run by Training Schools – policies and processes and are adapted to take account of the needs of the reservist. (Paragraph 32)

Recommendation 18.6 We recommend that MOD produce an agreed costing method to compare the cost of regulars and reservists, drawing on the above work and that done by the Land Environment Military Capability Output Costs (LEMCOC), and examine the opportunities to further increase their utility and value to Defence. (Paragraph 36)

Recommendation 18.7 We continue to recommend that MOD should consider the option to restore the FR20 Commission's proposal to establish a contingency reserve fund to be available for short notice and duration operations. (Paragraph 37)

Recommendation 18.8 That the Reserves Estate Strategy be re-invigorated and accelerated, continuing to draw on local and regional expertise. We further recommend that priority is given to ensuring adequate funding is made available to sustain the existing Reserve estate until the new strategy is implemented. (Paragraph 49)

SUMMARY OF 2019 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 19.1 The MOD and the Services do not take further savings measures from the FR20 £1.8bn funding, given the FR20 programme trained strength targets have been missed and ask MOD and all Services to clarify what funding remains, and plans to spend it over the next four years. (Paragraph 7)

Recommendation 19.2 That: the Services determine what is the optimum percentage of Reservists within a deployed force (between 5-8%), which meets the requirement to mobilise Reservists to sustain the Whole Force Model, while being sustainable in the long-term, and fund this accordingly in their annual spending programme. (Paragraph 12)

Recommendation 19.3 That they [initiatives to allow for mobilisation on training tasks and a tiered mobilisation package for DAOTO] are developed further as a matter of priority, particularly the tiered mobilisation package as it would broaden the range of manning levers available to Commander, and thus enhance the utility of the Reserve, and answer the requirements to modernise, exploit and use the Reserve more efficiently as identified by the Commission. (Paragraph 16)

Recommendation 19.4 That:

- The three Services review their ongoing support arrangements for Reserve recruiting, to ensure the successful lessons of FR20 are not discarded; and
- RSUSOs are taken onto units' permanent strengths now in recognition of the vital role they play. (Paragraph 18b)

Recommendation 19.5 That similar work being done by the Australians and Canadians to minimise the steps in the [recruiting] process (including introducing a one-stop shop) is studied closely before the contract is re-let. We further recommend that ambitious targets should be set – one month if there are no issues, and six months if there are, and success or failure should be judged on these targets. (Paragraph 19)

Recommendation 19.6 That the Services continue the drive to adapt their Service policies and practices to take account of the needs of the Reservist. (Paragraph 21)

Recommendation 19.7 We recommend that the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force consider adopting such a system in order to ensure reservist knowledge and input is considered during policy formulation and operational planning, and be able to grow a Reservist (part-time) two star officer. (Paragraph 22)

Recommendation 19.8 Identified and approved FR20 [infrastructure] projects are not subject to the 'exceptions, suspension' regime in order that agreed

funding for the estate is spent as intended and not delayed. (Paragraph 25)

Recommendation 19.9 That the three Services further promulgate the OH, rehabilitation, dental and mental health services in order to make Reservists fully aware of the medical services available to them. (Paragraph 27)

Recommendation 19.10 That consideration is given to a means whereby Reservists submit some form of annual health declaration and/or have routine medicals linked to birthdays. (Paragraph 29)

SUMMARY OF 2020 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 20.1 That all three Services develop and maintain Financial Incentives to recruit ex regulars, particularly for those trades and skills that are expensive to train and develop, acknowledging this is a cost effective method for manning the Reserve. (Paragraph 15)

Recommendation 20.2 That the Reserve, through embedded part-time reserve staff posts should be involved in all aspects of the Whole Force:

- Across all Defence Lines of Development (DLOD) – particularly force design, and capability development.
- In the MOD (Secretariat Policy Operations (SPO)) – the MOD's operations cell – Standing Joint Command (SJC) Headquarter (HQ) and Land Operations Centre (LOC).
- As operational staff of higher HQs. (Paragraph 19)

Recommendation 20.3 That an assessment is made on the requirement for an uplift of personnel to meet the workload of managing a mobilisation and that additional personnel are mobilised to reinforce the RHQ of the mobilising unit, as enablers, before and throughout deployment. (Paragraph 21b(1))

Recommendation 20.4 That the issue of the provision of REME support to equipment heavy units, whether for training or operations, is revisited as the current process does not appear to be working. (Paragraph 21b(2))

Recommendation 20.5 That:

- The Services and the MOD review their plans for mobilisation so that it accommodates individuals as well as mobilising large numbers/units at short notice and rapidly.
- Reserve mobilisation expertise (staff posts with experience and expertise) is integrated into such areas as the SPO, SJC and LOC by creating embedded part-time reservist posts within those organisations.
- The process for pre-mobilisation medicals is reviewed and appropriate standards adopted for overseas and homeland operations.
- Revised processes are exercised routinely not only in units, but also the SPO, SJC and LOC. (Paragraph 25)

Recommendation 20.6 That MOD considers reviewing the capacity of the RF&C staff branch in the MOD in order that it is manned adequately to meet the demands it is set. (Paragraph 28)

Recommendation 20.7 That there is scope to consider developing a mobilisation package in support of those reservists deploying on shorter DAOTO, which is different to one that supports those on longer specific named

operations or those that are more akin to warfighting. (Paragraph 29)

Recommendation 20.8 That the requisite training courses are adapted through modularisation, distribution, concentration and remote/virtual learning, and are assessed and measured on this basis. (Paragraph 32)

Recommendation 20.9 That the MOD urgently produces a transparent and agreed costing method across all three Services to compare the cost of regulars and reservists drawing on the Land Military Capability Output Costs (LEMCO). (Paragraph 36)

Recommendation 20.10 That:

- Any receipts raised through optimisation/rationalisation of the Volunteer Estate should be reinvested back into new estate or maintenance for the Volunteer Estate.
- When the Volunteer Estate Review reports, and if a programme of work is proposed or required, funding is identified and ring-fenced so that it is not subject to subsequent in-year budgetary pressures. (Paragraph 44)

Recommendation 20.11 That Reservists submit an annual health declaration. (Paragraph 48)

Recommendation 20.12 That, like the Royal Navy, the Army and Royal Air Force undertake periodic medicals for its reservists, linked to age/birthdays. (Paragraph 48)

Recommendation 20.13 That such innovations [medical] required to facilitate the rapid mobilisation of the Reserve for Operation RESCRIPT are developed further, codified and adopted by all three Services. (Paragraph 50)

SUMMARY OF 2021 REPORT MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 21.1 That the same intensity of focus and consistency that led to the success of Army regular recruiting is applied to the Reserve, particularly given that the reductions to regular strength increase the importance of having a fully manned Reserve.

Recommendation 21.2 That the Reserve, through embedded part-time reserve staff posts, should be involved in all aspects of the Whole Force across all Defence Lines of Development (DLOD) – particularly force design and capability development.

Recommendation 21.3 That the MOD produces a transparent and agreed costing method across all three Services and, in addition, a contingency fund is identified and ring fenced to allow that use so that this almost perennial debate, or friction, does not arise.

Recommendation 21.4 If reservists are to be deployed on operations using RSDs more frequently and as a matter of policy, we recommend that the MOD reinvigorate the work to develop an appropriate package of support.

Recommendation 21.5 That RF30 takes forward work to simplify the TACOS available and guidelines, or policy (rules) for the appropriate TACOS to meet a given situation; i.e. RSDs for routine training; enhanced RSDs for short operational deployments (maximum 28 days) whether homeland resilience or DAOTO; and full mobilisation for longer deployments and more kinetic operations.

Recommendation 21.6 That Defence should be more forward leaning in making use of appropriate civilian courses and the recognition and accreditation of civilian qualifications, in lieu of military courses.

SUMMARY OF 2022 REPORT MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 22.1 That reserve recruiting has a consistent and transparent marketing spend, and staff focus.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

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

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

SUMMARY OF 2023 REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 23.1 We, therefore, would recommend that:

a. The journey for taking an applicant who wishes to join the Reserve through the new AFRP incorporates a clear nexus of the constituents parts, identified in paragraph 19 above, so that they do not become ‘blockages’ that cause applicants to give up or drift away.

b. The requirement of the reservist should be designed into the new AFRP contract from the outset, alongside the needs of the regular service person. (Paragraph 20)

Recommendation 23.2 We would recommend 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.

Recommendation 23.3 We would recommend 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. (Paragraph 23)

Recommendation 23.4 We would 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. (Paragraph 26d)

Recommendation 23.5 We would recommend that if Defence is to optimise and improve the VE, a start has to be made, if only the ‘Lite’ option. (Paragraph 30)

Recommendation 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. (Paragraph 34)

SUMMARY OF 2024 REPORT MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 24.1 We would recommend that the Defence Review Team should ensure that it engages with those who have a sufficiency the knowledge, experience and radical perspective of what a volunteer part time reserve is capable of, if it is given a clear role, is properly structured, equipped and resourced. (Paragraph 34)

Recommendation 24.2 We would recommend to Project Wavell that units of the Army Reserve should be structured to deploy and fight as units, as they were during the Cold War, to deliver collective capabilities as opposed to a WFI to regular units. (Paragraph 35c)

Recommendation 24.3 We would recommend that in this Defence Review, all three Services consider what warfighting capabilities and/or weapon systems can be held predominately in the Reserve. (Paragraphs 36a and b)

Recommendation 24.4 We recommend that the Army build on the success of 19 Infantry Brigade and create other functional brigades, or all arms Reserve brigades. The latter would allow more easily for all arms training. (Paragraph 36d)

Recommendation 24.5 We recommend that the RAF should consider creating multi-discipline units that deploy to provide the support to the aircraft and crews that have been dispersed from their Main Operating Bases to other airfields and landing strips across the UK. (Paragraph 36e)

Recommendation 24.6 We would recommend that the Royal Navy consider expanding its Reserve component for UK maritime security (UK waters and abroad) to augment the delivery of a range of capabilities being introduced by the new platforms and technologies such as the SEA-Class workboats. (Paragraph 36f)¹

1. The Vahana vessels vary in size from 11-118 metres in length and are designed with interchangeable capability modules.



Driving SDR 2025 Reserve Forces ambition in the face of significant internal barriers to change. Lessons from past reviews and research.

The 2025 UK Strategic Defence Review (SDR 2025) has an aspiration to grow the UK Armed Forces, including the reserve component across all three services. This includes a statement to deliver an Army with a mix of regulars and reserves, with a minimum of 100,000 soldiers. Yet, the Army today, according to public official statistics, currently consists of 130,436 personnel including regular reservists.¹ There is also a further circa 55,000 individuals legally liable for recall² in more restricted circumstances under the Reserve Forces Act 1996.³ This makes for a maximum Army of 185,436 including all reservists liable for call out or recall.⁴ Why would a Strategic Defence Review make a statement about the minimum size of an Army that is far less than the maximum legally liable figure available?

I would contend that this is because the consistent narrative in the UK has tended to assume the Armed Forces refer solely to the size of the Regular Forces (across all services) and the contention about the size of the Army, in particular, has focused on those regular numbers. Stating the requirement for an Army of a minimum of 100,000 sets a political SDR 2025 aspiration to include the Volunteer Reserves in the totality of the Army numbers.⁵ However, such is the rundown of the structure of the UK Reserve Forces that the 100,000 figure misses out entirely the pool of circa 78,000 ex-regular reservists legally liable for service and that SDR 2025 wishes to re-invigorate. To note this is not just about the Army, the ambiguities around Reserve Forces numbers also equally apply to the other services.

How and why have we arrived at a situation where we cannot account for a large portion of the UK Reserve Forces? Why is this year's EST report repeating the same recommendations about the Volunteer Reserves from last year and that are similar to most of the last ten years? How will SDR 2025 ensure that its aim of growing the Reserve Forces is successful? What are the actual barriers to growing the Reserve Forces? This short essay seeks to provide some answers and provide suggestions as to ways to move forward SDR2025 ambitions for the Reserve Forces.

This essay will argue that the strongest barrier to integrating Reserve Forces is from the internal institutional culture that has been fundamentally shaped by our historical need for frequent small expeditionary force operations across the world based upon our Regular Forces. The solution to developing a healthy and integrated Reserve Forces lies through challenging this internal culture with strong political leadership, ring fenced funding, long-term equipment plans, proportional senior reservist representation, removing equivalence demands for Reserve Forces, challenging centralization, embracing flexibility and delivering more Professional Military Education on Reserve Forces.

This essay is based on a large number of published sources in the wider research literature and on my own published research in this area. Rather than cite sources in the essay, to save space a brief bibliography is provided at the end.

1. According to Defence Statistics Army Service Personnel comprises the UK Regular Forces, Gurkhas, Locally Engaged Personnel (LEP), Military Provost Guard Service (MPGS), the Army Volunteer Reserve, Serving Army Regular Reserve, the Army Sponsored Reserve, and FTRS of unknown origin. This misses those legally part of the Reserve Forces – the Regular Reserve, even though they are reported in other tables in the same report. From 1 Apr 25 figures there are 74,396 Regulars, 4,399 Gurkhas, 25,770 Volunteer Reservists, 1,832 serving Regular Reservists, 168 Sponsored Reservists, 2595 MPGS, 145 LEP = 109,305 plus 21,131 "non-active" Regular Reservists. See 1 April 2025 Quarterly Personnel Statistics.

2. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-04-16/21948/>

3. More restricted means only in wartime or in the event of an attack on the UK. Reserve Forces Act 1996 Pt VII.

4. This does include some untrained personnel but this is a very small proportion of the total (4008 untrained regulars, 1931 untrained volunteer reservists plus a very small fraction of the regular reserve) and the untrained could be expected to complete training within a compressed timescale in time of war.

5. Even though curiously this is a lesser total than the previous government endorsed Army size of 125,00 in previous Defence Reviews.

The reliance on Regular Forces for the here and now

The UK's geographical position separate from the European continent has meant that for the majority of its modern history the UK has been able to avoid the necessity of large standing armies for defence. Rather it had a large Royal Navy (now reduced) and the British Army and Royal Air Force were structured for small scale conflicts and colonial policing. The world wars and a short era of conscription (that we ended decades before our NATO allies) were exceptions to this history. Even at the height of the Cold War our UK Armed Forces were relatively small when compared to our continental allies.

The UK Armed Forces may have been small but were expeditionary in nature, were consistently deployed worldwide and so were routinely in action in small scale conflicts. This necessitated a reliance on a body of full time regular personnel able to live abroad for months, even years, at a time and willing to devote themselves to a life of service. Quite rightly, to recruit and retain regular personnel, accommodation had to be built worldwide families looked after, pensions for long service awarded and the Armed Forces had to be self-sustaining in logistics and supply worldwide. Thus, while the UK Armed Forces were highly effective, they were small, and, in comparison to European Armies, expensive for the mass generated. European Armies built for defence were, and are, able to rely on cheaper personnel and internal infrastructure for logistics. While they can only deploy overseas at great effort they can spend a lot more on equipment and personnel to generate mass.

Since the UK Armed Forces as so small and highly busy then small increases in regular personnel and equipment are highly sought after to allay day to day pressures.⁶ The UK Government approach to funding with relatively short-term spending reviews, yearly budgets and optimistic settlements with little leeway, produces a scramble to protect tight funds for regular and reserve personnel and activity across the UK Armed Forces. Defence, like most UK Government departments, prioritises the day to day running over longer-term planning. Therefore, Strategic Defence Reviews that try to look to the future and determine priorities for spending face inherent challenges. SDR 2025 attempts to increase Reserve Forces numbers may face even more difficult cultural challenges, however.

Persistent Intra-service rivalries

The UK Armed Forces have had a full time regular and a volunteer reservist element for over three hundred years and there have been many attempts to more closely integrate the two. Despite working together well in wartime and on operations there have always been "peacetime" tensions between the regular and the volunteer reservist components in the UK. Similar tensions are also reported in many expeditionary forces including Canada, the USA and Australia. Part of this tension can be explained by the scramble for precious peacetime funds but much of the tensions are more explainable by the institutional culture generated within full time Regular Forces operating under day to day pressures described above.

Today we rely on an even smaller core of full-time regular personnel who are expected to do more. This, it is argued by Anthony King, has led to a tighter and more bounded culture around the expectations of the commitment and time required from full time personnel. The regular forces have evolved a more homogenous, tightly defined, strongly held culture, based on a set of dominant "full time institutional" values. However, in order to deliver mass and specialist skills that the smaller regular forces can no longer deliver there has been the necessity to integrate Reserve Forces more. Yet, the decreasing size of the Regular Forces and the resultant "concentration" of their workplace culture ironically makes this more difficult to achieve.

6. Not necessarily helped by a "can do" culture in the Armed Forces that in turn makes prioritisation very difficult. See The Report of the Iraq Inquiry 2016. Executive Summary.

In fact, the UK Armed Forces have been notable for having a smaller reserve component than many other NATO nations. The leadership of the Armed Forces have proposed significant cuts on a number of occasions to the Reserve Forces in order to maintain more of the regular component. Sometimes these proposals for cuts to Reserve Forces have been successful (e.g, in 1968) but at other times they have resulted in internal conflict and a lack of integration.

Future Reserves 2020: A case study in intra-service rivalry in peacetime.

Research by Patrick Bury and Sergio Catignani on the internal politics of Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) provides a case study in intraservice rivalry between regular and reserve components. Between 2008 and 2011 the UK Government was looking to cut back, reform and modernise the UK Armed Forces. The leadership of the British Army at the time made the choice to keep as much investment as possible in the full time forces and severely reduce the size of their volunteer reserve forces. This decision culminated in a bitter intra-service rivalry with senior reservists that saw the British Prime Minister intervene and set up an independent commission to examine the UK Reserve Forces at a deliberate distance from the Regular Forces. This led to the FR20 review and a White Paper on the Reserve Forces that concluded that the greatest challenge to integration was the internal culture of the Regular Forces, in particular within the Army, and this was a key strategic risk to the £1.8 billion programme. It also led to the formation of the External Scrutiny Team (EST).

There was initially a huge level of political interest in making a success of the FR20 programme. This settled into a deep interest in numbers. The Regular Forces had been cut and to make a success of the programme the Government needed to ensure the Reserve Forces increased in numbers. Similar to SDR 2025, the FR20 review confused the issue of numbers. It asked Defence to produce an Army Reserve with a trained strength of 30,100. The way that the Army Reserve was structured at that point was with 38,000 personnel positions organised into units that held both trained and untrained strength. The Army Reserve unit structure was therefore reduced to only accommodate 30,100 positions. This led to an outflow of Army Reserve personnel on the closure of sub-units. A concurrent changing of many unit roles also contributed to outflow in senior ranks over the next few years. According to Bury and Catignani political interest waned when success was not forthcoming.

The analysis of FR20 exposed “how the regular army’s leadership was able, towards the end of Cameron’s tenure, to extricate itself from these efforts... in order to maintain its pre-eminence..., reasserting its primacy once the political will for implementing FR2020 had diminished” (Bury & Catignani, 2019, p. 2). The need for closer regular reserve integration was tellingly again emphasised in the UK 2021 defence response to the Integrated Review. Defence reviews in other countries have led to similar intra service rivalry between regulars and reserves and demonstrates that this is not just an issue for the UK Armed Forces and is enduring in nature. Research in Australia concluded that the relationship between regulars and reserves was historically characterised by tensions and that it was “a law of nature that regular forces will tend to be dismissive of reserve forces or at least downplay their value” [Smith, 1991, p.11].

Explaining Intra-Service rivalry and workplace tensions

In fact, these tensions and rivalries should not be unexpected. Many studies, including my own, have found such tensions in the civil professions and the military. Many full-time professions, with their institutionalized power dynamics and boundaries to entry, tend to marginalize their part time professionals, especially in times of fiscal austerity. The Armed Forces as total institutions make this risk of marginalization more likely. The strong vocational identity of full-time armed forces personnel can tend towards viewing the reservist as someone not to be trusted and, in extremis, as not needed. Often the legitimacy of part-time workers will be challenged since they do not conform to the typical template of the full time workplace and the idea of the profession. There will also be a drive to assimilate individuals into the full time culture and a move to reject or marginalise sub-cultures formed by groups who may be seen as a threat to the status or resources for the profession. This view of reservists is sometimes reinforced in societal discourse, (for example, the “Dad’s Army” trope), especially if the full time and part time components are in competition for resources. This tendency to marginalise reservists includes negativity towards the ex-Regular Reserves.⁷

Many part time reservists are often seen as civilians first, and thus outside the Armed Forces. The boundary is strongest around the combat arms, including high status roles.⁸ Those reservists who have some previous regular service are seen as possible exceptions and those with a civil profession such as a doctor, lawyer, nurse etc. However, these civil exemptions are specifically about where civilian skills assist the military and these reservists are defined against their civilian profession first and not from having a shared military identity. Generally, civilian experience is not seen as relevant for Armed Forces service even though many reservists have leadership, commercial, teamwork, management and sometimes technical and equipment-experience⁹ that could cross domains. This also means it will be much harder for part time reservist officers and NCO’s to prove themselves and gain trust from their regular colleagues when working together.

Commitment to a profession is key to many professional practitioner identities. Professionals use time and perceptions of time served as markers of commitment to a profession. How the Regular Forces understands “commitment” is complex and multi-faceted but is structured so that ‘ever-availability’ is not merely symbolic but a solid part of professional identity. Time spent committed to being a regular and the 24/7 nature of the commitment is a key criterion for being perceived as a committed professional. Full time professionals tend to dismiss the professionalism of members who violate the norms of long hours and the blurred boundaries between work and home. Those who have chosen to be part time, will be seen as less committed and subsequently as less professional, regardless of their actual competence.

Groups that are perceived to be a threat to a civil profession are often subject to negative stereotypes since they fail to conform to the values of the profession. A key professional value is to subordinate the individual needs to the needs of the organisation. Reservists were not perceived as reliably subordinating their needs by choosing to be part time and having control over attendance. Regulars tended to doubt the commitment of reservists to the Armed Forces and so they could neither be trusted or relied upon. This is reflected in a common belief that reservists will not turn up when required for operations.¹⁰

There was strong resistance from regulars reported to formed reservist units or sub-units being operationally deployed. There is a lack of trust in reservist collective training capability, especially from the combat arms. There was an acceptance of the need for individual reinforcements from reservists but little appetite for formed units. Charles Kirke also noted this and “unless they could trust them well they would indeed dismantle the {Reservist} groups to form individual reinforcements” [Kirke, 2008, p.185]. Positively, many regulars can think of a reservist they know who was as professional as them while simultaneously stereotyping groups of reservists.

9. This helps explain why lateral entry and recognition of civilian qualifications are so difficult to introduce to the Armed Forces.

10. This ignores the 2003 evidence that compulsory mobilisation saw almost all reservists reported for duty and research showing organisational commitment can be higher in reservists.

The UK does seem an outlier in their reluctance to use formed bodies of reservists unlike the USA, Australia and even, more recently, Canada. Even those nations that do routinely use collective groups of reservists, such as the USA, have reported cultural difficulties between units of reservists and regulars on operations even though two major reports concluded that their reserve units carried out the operational tasks assigned to them and, with adequate preparation and readiness, performed “without sizeable differences in performance from that of their AC [regular force] counterparts” [Adams, et al, 2016. p.71].

Currently, the “individualised” nature of UK voluntary mobilisations allows for more successful negotiations regarding mobilisation timing and the fulfilment of reservist needs. On the regular side, the individualized nature of reservist service with choice over mobilisation and training confirms the view that reservists have to be negotiated with and cannot be fully trusted or relied upon in a crisis.

Given the continuing regular forces gaps in personnel, individual or small groups of reservists are certainly considered as useful, provide diversity of thought and experience in units and make a contribution that is welcomed and sustained. This positivity at unit level reduces the intra-service rivalry and so the system of mobilising small groups of reservists is self-sustaining. The downside is that this justifies cuts to reserve collective capability and numbers, more centralization, poor investment in reserve collective training and reduces the opportunity for reservists to properly exercise command of units. In the long run the Armed Forces are less well prepared for mass mobilisation and regeneration of collective capability.

This is not to argue that differences between regulars and reserves are all based on perceptions and do not reflect some reality. There is always a trade-off between risk and cost in the balance between regulars and reserves. However, many Regular personnel believe reservist training simply lacks the time to produce anything comparable to their idea of a professional standard. However, perceptions, rather than reality, are also important in how reservists are judged. The reservist represents a challenge to the professional identity of the full time regular, and this in turn impacts on perceptions of the value of the reserve forces. The tendency to marginalize reserve forces is not necessarily drawn from a conscious bias against reservists but is the consequence of the strong military social identity held within an encompassing vocational military culture. This will make it difficult to change.

10. Unless it was a specific profession such as medicine.

11. In a similar way Antony King (2006) points out some regulars feel devalued by females in service.

Consequences of Intra-service rivalry

These integration issues are all perfectly typical of an institution with a strong individual identity, bounded workplace culture and centralized policy and practices. The consequences for the integration of Reserve Forces can be summarized as follows:

- The Armed Forces as an institution will have a tendency to not value difference and diversity of labour types (reservists, contractors, civil servants)
- A tendency against Reserves filling core military roles and a distrust of Reserve collective units (collective combat roles, aircrew, crewed vessels, leadership positions, SF etc)
- A tendency to control and reduce perceived risk from part time reservists – often through extended education/courses
- A tendency to demand “equivalence” with Regular process and standards
- A tendency to “atomise” any Reserve collective groupings and emphasise individuals
- A tendency against Reserve senior ranks – officers and SNCO’s
- A tendency to believe stereotypes and myths about reserves

These are biases in the system and very possible to overcome but take time, effort and a commitment to recognising difference and valuing diversity and the need for the other. This is not something that comes easily to the Armed Forces. A quick glance through the past ten years of EST reports will see examples of all these biases at work.

How can these tendencies be overcome?

It is difficult to overcome an entrenched culture. Individual efforts are important, but it is the institution that shapes enduring behaviour, for rationale reasons in the main, but with potentially negative outcomes for Reserve Forces. There are pointers in history and social science to how they can be averted.

Strong Political leadership. The Territorial Force of 1908 was successfully formed under strong political leadership against large scale regular force opposition. Another time the UK Reserve Forces most successfully grew in capability and numbers was during the 1980’s.¹¹ This succeeded because there was clear political direction given to the services to expand their Reserves, a long term equipment programme was created and money for personnel, recruitment and training were ring-fenced. The Armed Forces were required to provide frequent updates on progress. FR20 did provide extra money and there was some growth in the RN and RAF but political direction wavered and the Army Reserve temporarily grew but has since shrunk back. SDR 2025 provides clear direction and ambition, but Ministers must provide explicit support, direction over funding and holding to account for progress.

Ring fenced funding and long term equipment. This is where political interest should be focused. Without ring fenced money any growth will fail and Defence is as cash strapped, day to day, as any other government department. Reserve Forces funding is long term investment and so tends towards being low priority. The Reserve Forces 2030 review provided excellent recommendations but no money and so very little impact. The Reserve Forces equipment for collective unit roles required for a second echelon are urgently required and Reserve Forces infrastructure funding has fallen by the wayside.

¹¹. See my essay in Annex C of the 2024 External Scrutiny Team report.

Proportional Senior Reservist Representation. Senior representation for marginalised minorities in hierarchal organisations helps accelerate acceptance and need for organisational change. The number of senior UK reservists is small compared to the proportion of reservists in the Armed Forces. The UK Reserve Forces often lack the institutional power of senior reservist numbers in comparison to other expeditionary Armed Forces like the USA and Australia who have many more. Being in the room when decisions are made at board level about funding and equipment is key to institutional power. This is over and above the cost-effective diverse thinking and outside experience senior reservists bring to Defence.

Removing equivalence demands for Reserve Forces, challenging centralization and embracing flexibility. There will be a tendency for reservists to be asked to be like regulars. While this intuitively makes some sense this demand comes more from not recognizing difference and not accommodating it. Reservist units do not have to be equivalent to regular units in all round capability. They have to be good enough to provide focused military utility through narrow but deep peacetime training in consistent long-term roles supported by risk tolerant flexible policies that are underpinned by decentralization and regionalization. Post mobilisation training will top up what is required within a rapid period. This almost entirely goes against the way most UK Armed Forces training schools, workforce policies and centralized administration is currently organized so that the Regular Forces can be most cost efficient.

More Professional Military Education (PME) on Reserve Forces. There is very little time in the large amounts of PME regular staff receive on the structure, roles and different culture of the Reserve Forces. The most senior Defence leaders will have received little exposure and little education on their Reserve Forces. Junior staff even less so. Only 46% of Regulars have had working contact with Reservists in the last two years and this figure is fairly static year on year.¹²

Conclusion

The strongest barriers to integrating Reserve Forces and SDR 2025 success for Reserve Forces are from the institutional culture of the Regular Forces that have been shaped by our historical need for frequent small expeditionary force operations across the world. The solutions to developing a healthy and integrated Reserve Forces lies through strong political leadership, ring fenced funding, long term equipment plans, proportional senior reservist representation, removing equivalence demands, challenging centralization, embracing flexibility and more PME.

Without this there will be unconscious institutional resistance to change characterized by a reluctance to ring fence funds, low levels of funding for Reserve Forces collective capability, demands to equivalence in education and training, risk aversion, low trust and slow change to centralised and inflexible policies that impact negatively on Reserve Forces development and growth. There are examples of all of these in the EST reports from the last ten years.

12. See Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey: 2025

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