



House of Commons
Defence Committee

**Recruiting and
retaining Armed Forces
personnel:
Government response
to the Committee's
Fourteenth Report of
Session 2007–08**

**Eleventh Special Report of Session
2007–08**

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The Defence Committee

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

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The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at: www.parliament.uk/defcom.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Mike Hennessy (Clerk), Richard Ward (Second Clerk), Ian Rogers (Audit Adviser), Lis McCracken (Inquiry Manager), Richard Dawson (Senior Committee Assistant), Christine McGrane (Committee Assistant) and Stewart McIlvenna (Committee Support Assistant).

Contacts

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Eleventh Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Fourteenth Report of Session 2007–08 on *Recruiting and retaining Armed Forces personnel* on 30 July 2008, as House of Commons Paper HC 424. The Government's response to this Report was received on 1 October 2008. This is appended below.

Government response

Introduction

The Government welcomes the Committee's engagement on this issue and their Report. It is a useful vehicle to help us better to understand recruitment and retention challenges. We welcome the fact that the Committee acknowledges the impact that high operational tempo and stretch are having on recruitment and retention issues. The package we present to our potential and serving personnel contains many positive elements, but we keep it under constant review in the light of emerging pressures. The need to recognise and value personnel, their families and veterans was the driver for the undertakings outlined in our Command Paper 'The Nation's Commitment: Cross-Government Support to our Armed Forces, their Families and Veterans' published in July 2008.

We are encouraged that the ideas put forward in the Committee's Report for addressing recruitment and retention issues in the Armed Forces are, for the most part, ones which we have already identified and sought to address. We do not agree with the argument that we are not responding with 'sufficient flexibility and imagination'; we believe our creativity and determination in addressing these challenges is borne out by the evidence we provided to the Committee. We recognise that to improve recruitment and retention will take time and continued concerted effort. We are confident that the flexible and imaginative approach that we have taken in recent years has helped to sustain the supply of sufficient, capable and motivated personnel at a time of high operational tempo.

Current Manning Position

At 1 July 2008 the Armed Forces Trained Strength was 173,370, representing 96.8% of the requirement. There has been an 11.7% increase (2,250) in the number of new recruits who have joined the Armed Forces in the 12 months to 30 June 2008, compared to the previous year and a 12.6 increase (1,830) in the number of recruits who have joined the trained Strength of the Armed forces compared with the same period last year. The number of people leaving the trained strength in the 12 months to 30 June 2008 has decreased by 1.4% compared with the 12 months to 30 June 2007.

The number of people joining the Armed Forces for initial training is at its highest point since March 2004. The number completing training and moving into the deployable strength of the Armed Forces is also at its highest point since March 2005. The number of people leaving the trained strength is at its lowest since March 2006.

Response to Conclusions and Recommendations

Web Forum

1. (Recommendation 1) The use of web fora provide us with an opportunity to hear the experiences of a wide range of current and former Service personnel and their families. We value this interaction. We welcome the Minister's support for our ability to communicate freely with the Service community. However, this is the second time we have had concerns that the MoD has attempted to undermine a web forum that we have hosted. We look to the MoD to demonstrate its support for our interaction with the Service community by actively promoting web fora we set up for future inquiries. (Paragraph 13)

The Ministry of Defence supports the House of Commons Defence Committee's interaction with the Service community and appreciates that the Committee views use of a web based forum as a positive method of engaging the community and obtaining useful input from both Serving personnel and their families.

Ministry of Defence instructions require serving personnel to seek appropriate authorisation before communicating in public on Defence matters in order to ensure that operational security is upheld and standards of political impartiality and public accountability are met. However, these instructions do not apply to contact with the House of Commons Defence Committee. It appears that in the past, some personnel mistakenly thought that they were applicable. The Committee will therefore wish to know that the guidance is currently being updated and the revised instructions will make it clear that separate arrangements apply for contact with the House of Commons Defence committee (and other parliamentary Select Committees).

Pinchpoint trades

2. (Recommendation 2) We are disappointed to note that between 2004 and 2008, the number of pinchpoint trades have increased across all Services. In the Army pinchpoint trades have increased by 15.4%, in the RAF by 63%, and in the Naval Service by 150%, so that there are now 30 pinchpoint trades in the Army, 31 in the RAF and 25 in the Naval Service. (Paragraph 36)

The Ministry of Defence expends considerable resources in addressing Pinch Point communities, which are often small groups of highly skilled personnel. Operational and Manning Pinch Points are reported against subjective criteria which, since 2003, have become progressively more rigorous. This has led, in part, to the increase in the number of trades as Pinch Points. For example, in 2005 Merlin Aircrew were reported as a single trade whereas in 2007–08 the trade has been reported as 3 separate entities: Pilots, Observers and Aircrewmen. Similarly Infantrymen are now reported as Infantrymen Private/Lance Corporal to add clarity. This rigour enables the single-Services to focus onto problem areas and to target resources to better effect.

Critical Manning Groups were included in the original memorandum to the Committee for completeness. They are not Pinch Points; they are trade groups which the single-Services have highlighted as potential areas of concern which, unless checked at an early

stage, could develop into either an Operational Pinch Point or a Manning Pinch Point. Inclusion of the Critical Manning Groups demonstrated that the single-Services are alert to the dynamic nature of manning and are proactive rather than reactive. However, the Committee's inclusion of these Critical Manning Groups alongside the Pinch Points has exaggerated the degree of increase in Pinch Points. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there has been an increase, attributable to high tempo of operations and specific manning issues, which are monitored and managed intensively.

Assessing Armed Forces responsiveness

3. (Recommendation 3) We are concerned that, on the basis of the information presented about PSA Target 3, Armed Forces Responsiveness, the Armed Forces have limited ability to meet future, as yet unknown, obligations. The MoD has said that PSA Target 3 provides an assessment of the level of pressure experienced by the Armed Forces and does not reflect on their ability to sustain current operations. As the MoD cannot predict or control the exact nature and timing of future operational requirements, we believe that its failure to meet this target points to a potentially serious weakness in the future capability of the Armed Forces. Furthermore, we question the purpose of a target which, given recent operational tempo, the MoD has no chance of meeting. (Paragraph 44)

The Ministry of Defence has continued to meet the Government's strategic objectives placed upon it. For the sixth consecutive year, in 2007–08 the Armed Forces have operated above the overall level of concurrent operations which they are resourced and structured to sustain. In operating at this raised level of activity over such a protracted period, Defence has inevitably reduced its capacity to be ready to react to the full range of contingent operations articulated in the planning assumptions. Whilst it is acknowledged that meeting the current operational commitments has impacted on the future capability of the Armed Forces to conduct contingent operations, this will be mitigated as concurrent operational commitments reduce.

Engaging with the public

4. (Recommendation 4) We note that the sometimes negative media coverage about the Armed Forces is detrimental to the public's understanding of the military and places unnecessary pressure on Service personnel and their families. (Paragraph 47)

The Ministry of Defence agrees that negative media coverage is unhelpful and the Department is working hard to ensure that military activity is presented both in context and in a balanced fashion.

Greater effort is being made to ensure that Service personnel and their families are kept informed on important issues with increased use of Defence and single Service internet and intranet sites.

The Ministry of Defence is also in the process of implementing recommendations made by the Report of Inquiry into National Recognition of our Armed Forces which includes suggestions regarding engagement with the media with the aim of increasing balanced reporting. These specifically involve taking a more proactive approach by increasing the

