



House of Commons
Defence Committee

**Decision-making in
Defence Policy:
Government response
to the Committee's
Eleventh Report of
Session 2014–15**

Third Special Report of Session 2015–16

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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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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are James Davies (Clerk), Leoni Kurt (Second Clerk), Megan Edwards (Committee Specialist), Eleanor Scarnell (Committee Specialist), Ian Thomson (Committee Specialist), David Nicholas (Senior Committee Assistant), Alison Pratt and Carolyn Bowes (Committee Assistants).

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Third Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Eleventh Report of Session 2014–15, on *Decision-making in Defence Policy*, HC 682 on 26 March 2015. The Government's response was received on 21 July 2015 and is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government response

The Government notes the House of Commons Defence Committee's inquiry into 'Decision-making in Defence Policy' and the findings set out in the Committee's report published on 26 March.

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the significant improvements made to the organisation of Defence, through the Levene reforms, and the cross-Whitehall decision-making structure, through the introduction of the National Security Council. As the Committee says, these have brought clearer accountability to decision-making and reinforced civilian control. And in some areas, such as the Departmental equipment programme, we are already seeing obvious benefits, such as the planning of new equipment being properly aligned with those responsible for its future employment and closer scrutiny of requirements setting.

The Government also recognises that decision-making in Defence is increasingly challenging and that we need to continue to invest in our people and to improve our processes so that we make the best decisions that we can.

We share the Committee's assessment that we are operating in an increasingly complex strategic environment, in which we face a growing variety of threats, including ISIL and renewed tension with Russia, as well as new unconventional and ambiguous warfare methods stretching from cyber to information operations. This is the strategic environment which forms the background for the ongoing National Security Strategy and the Strategic Security and Defence Review.

We also welcome the Committee's recognition of some of the additional challenges that we face: the increasing complexity (and expense) of the technology required to support the Armed Forces, particularly given resource constraints; the challenges associated with operating within coalitions made up of countries with different traditions and strategies from our own; the difficulties created by the current legal environment surrounding overseas operations; the requirement to maintain public support for the use of the Armed Forces; and the development of new capabilities such as remotely-piloted air systems. These are all themes which are being addressed in the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

We also agree that we are only as good as the people within the organisation and one of the particular focuses in the Review is ensuring that our people are appropriately prepared to meet the challenges we face.

Our specific responses to the committee's conclusions are set out below.

Case Studies

119. We are concerned that the Government does not fully recognise the extent of the flaws in past decision-making practice, and therefore needs to make more fundamental changes than have already been effected. We would therefore welcome the Government's views on the analysis in this report, including our assessment of the Helmand and carrier design cases, and our views of more general problems in the past decision-making process.

Decision making and Helmand

The decision to launch military operations in Afghanistan has been the subject of extensive public debate over the last decade. But it is perhaps the decision to go into northern Helmand which has arguably attracted most scrutiny and been the subject of extensive public discussions, and that which the Committee's report had focused on.

The Government of the day's response to the Committee's report of 2012 on 'Operations in Afghanistan' set out the Government's understanding of the decision-making process; and acknowledged that with hindsight, mistakes were made in the lead up to and during the military deployment to Helmand. This Government shares that view.

The Government believes that the strategy we have pursued since 2010 has been realistic, well-designed and aligned with our national interests. We also believe we have learned from previous mistakes. As the report notes, the National Security Council (NSC) has now been established; it benefits from the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) attending, so that military advice can be provided directly at the highest levels, including when decisions are taken on substantive new tasks outside current areas of operation. This is discussed in further detail in this response.

We have continuously learned tactical lessons throughout our operations in Afghanistan, such as the better detection and defusing of Improvised Explosive Devices. In due course, we will also want to look at broader lessons that can be learned from the campaign. But our focus in recent months has been the effective establishment of Operation Resolute Support. No decisions have been taken yet on any review. In making such a decision, the Government will wish to learn how best any improvements could be made both quickly and practically.

DFID rejects the Committee's assertion [para 24] that discussing their work in Afghanistan with delivery partners, including the Afghan Government and people, somehow dilutes the importance of the UK's NSC strategy. This is a false choice; indeed, it is vital that any cross-Government strategy should be informed by the wishes of the Afghan people and by the work of the wider donor community. The UK's strategy is not weakened or 'relegated to low priority' by taking account of the views and intentions of others—on the contrary, its importance and relevance are greatly enhanced.

Decision making and the carriers

The Department welcomes the carrier case study and its analysis of some of the issues surrounding this highly complex programme. The themes in the carrier case study were covered in the Gray Report in 2009: equipment aspiration outstripping affordability; shifting requirements; entryism and optimism bias; absence of clear ownership; and shortcomings in the delivery organisation. The Department has systematically addressed these issues. From SDSR10 to 2012, we reduced the Equipment Programme to the point where our aspirations matched the budget available, with layers of risk contingency and headroom built in to ensure we are protected against cost growth and time slippage. The result has been an Equipment Programme which has remained stable and properly affordable—an achievement recognised by the National Audit Office in their Equipment Plan and Major Project Review reports, and by the Public Accounts Committee in its oral evidence session on Equipment Plan and Major Projects Report 2014 and Reforming Defence Acquisition in March 2015.

As part of Defence Reform, we have transformed the Department's operating model, delegating the responsibility and budget for equipment acquisition to the Front Line Commands. This ensures that accountability and responsibility for planning new equipment is properly aligned with those responsible for its future employment. It also reduces the likelihood of entryism and optimism bias, as those responsible for sponsoring new programmes will have to bear the financial responsibility for their decisions.

Requirements setting is now subject to much closer scrutiny than in the past. In support of the Department's Investment Approvals Committee, a Joint Requirements Oversight Committee has been established. This group, chaired by the Vice Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS), reviews major project requirements at an early stage, to ensure that the performance, cost, time and risk balance is properly scrutinised and understood at the most senior levels in Defence.

The Department has changed the process for leading and delivering major programmes. The Department uses the processes and principles established by the Major Project Authority in the Cabinet Office. A named Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) is appointed, with a mandate issued by the PUS, to deliver a programme to specified performance criteria, with an approved cost and to a specified time. There is a governance structure established through the mandate which ensures delivery and programme performance is reported within the Department to the Defence Board and Ministers, and to the Government Major Project Portfolio. SROs are required to attend the Cabinet Office Major Project Leadership Academy, which inculcates a professional approach to programme management and decision making.

The Department acknowledges the shortcomings in several aspects of past decision-making in the Carrier programme. Such major programmes are inherently risky, but since 2012, the programme has been stable—requirements have not changed and delivery remains within cost and time parameters—and we have the right governance and processes in place to ensure that we are now firmly on track to deliver the capability as planned to the front-line.

Expertise

120. We believe that there is still a crucial lack of authoritative, expert information which can serve as the basis for strong defence decision-making, in particular on the detailed political situation in conflict areas. We do not believe that the existing information-gathering institutions—including within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence and intelligence agencies—are currently capable of providing information of sufficient quality and quantity. We urge the Government to explain how it plans to remedy this situation.

121. We ask the Government to outline how it will equip military and civilian advisers with better education and training in thinking strategically.

122. We believe that Ministers may not have the necessary capacity or personal support to be able to reach a well-informed judgement on the issues they are asked to decide, nor to challenge constructively the official advice they are receiving. We recommend that they should be more often provided with the opportunity to reach their own conclusions, including through visits to conflict regions during which they should have wider and unfiltered access to local opinion. We recommend that the Ministry of Defence investigate how to improve induction training for new Ministers in their portfolios, and examine what additional advice and support they need.

124. We note the drastic reduction in recent years of domain competence in the Civil Service, reflected in the civilian representatives on the Defence Board and on other high level decision-making bodies. We also note the deplorable loss of defence scientific expertise from the Defence Board. We recommend that the Civil Service should once again be required to possess specialist defence and technical expertise to improve the quality of decision-making. This will also have the benefit of balancing military input with expert civilian input and of reducing the temptation to pursue Single Service agendas.

It is the role of officials to advise Ministers on options and make recommendations to enable Ministers to make effective decisions. MOD has highly skilled and knowledgeable officials. Whilst it is not always necessary or possible for officials to be deep experts themselves, they need to understand the issues, have access to subject matter expertise, and be able to communicate the facts and options available for decision clearly to Ministers. When they start in the Department, new Ministers receive comprehensive written and oral briefings on key issues and subjects they are likely to need to make decisions on in the near future. A series of visits are also organised according to the Minister's portfolio to ensure they are familiar with its subject matter, including to operational theatres.

The Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA) heads science and technology in Defence, and makes sure the main decisions made by ministers, senior officials and the armed services are informed by high quality, expert scientific advice and analysis. While CSA does not sit on the Defence Board, he reports to PUS (who is a permanent member of the Board) and is a member of the Investment Approvals Committee, which is a subcommittee of the Defence Board and responsible for considering major investment proposals.

However, we recognise that there are always improvements that can be made to enhance decision-makers' skills, experience, knowledge, awareness of historical precedents and

strategic imagination. We agree an appropriate degree of subject specialism, as well as management skill is required in the civil service, and we are taking steps to improve these skills. For example, we have reenergised the Defence Academy so that it delivers and develops education and training that meets the demands of the Future Operating Environment—which, as the report recognises, is likely to place a greater premium on human capability. The Defence Academy now forms part of the broader Joint Force Development (JFD) organisation, within Joint Forces Command. This 3 Star-led organisation has brought together the doctrine and concepts, the training and education delivery, and Joint exercise delivery to create more effective organisational relationships and better information repositories to inform and improve decision making.

The Academy is increasingly becoming an “intelligent provider” responsive to the evolving needs of Defence and Security by strengthening its portfolio in certain key areas such as Cyber Security and languages. The Defence School of Languages (DSL) is now the Defence Centre for Languages and Culture (DCLC) based at Shrivenham, while the Defence Centre of Training Support (DCTS) and the Defence Operational Languages Support Unit (DOLSU) have been embedded in the Academy headquarters structure to offer a comprehensive training package.

The Defence Academy also offers places to civilians on the Advanced Command and Staff Course, the Higher Command and Staff Course and the Royal College of Defence Studies International Course. These courses aim to prepare selected military and civilian officers for senior positions by developing their analytical, decision-making, communication and strategic thinking skills through the study of military, defence, political and international affairs. The issue of expertise is not limited to decision-making in defence policy, but is also relevant in the rest of government. The Defence Academy therefore also offers this training to other government departments.

As part of the wider government creation of the Policy Profession, in 2012 the MOD established an introductory Policy, Strategy and Parliamentary course for those entering the profession and likely to be involved with decision-making. This is now being expanded to include a continual learning programme of short courses on specific areas of policy making. Other actions are also being taken that will improve decision making across government. This includes the recent establishment of a trial course for an Executive Masters in Public Policy. The course will provide a thorough understanding of the practical and political environments in which we work and equip participants not only to be adept at leading and commissioning world-class analysis and creative thinking but engender these skills in their departments.

We need to become more effective in exploiting the huge array of open source data now available, use more advanced analytical tools and systems than it has now, and to better use its current assets. Joint Forces Command is pursuing a number of initiatives to improve the quality and quantity of information and analysis provided to decision makers (both in Defence and in the wider national security system). Joint Forces Command, through its Joint Warfare Analysis Branch, also sponsors the lessons process to improve agility and adaptability for future operations. They report on and analyse the capability of the Joint Force in order to inform the direction of training requirements and joint force development.

Government structures and decision making processes

118. The changes that have been introduced, including the introduction of the National Security Council (NSC) and the Levene reforms, have clarified and improved the structures of decision-making. But they have not yet addressed fundamental problems in the process of decision-making.

123. We believe that the Levene reforms have been helpful in giving the Chiefs of Staff greater authority for the management of their services, and in reducing the potential for Single Service institutional rivalries to distort spending plans and operational policy. But these benefits have also come at the expense of severely limiting the ability of the Chiefs to provide expert strategic advice. We feel that the post-Levene Chiefs of Staff Committee is too detached from the central policy-making process in the MoD and also, crucially, from the NSC. We recommend that the roles of the Chief of Staff should be redefined to give greater weight to their function as strategy advisors. We recommend that the Chiefs of Staff Committee should become the official military sub-committee of the NSC, in order to tender to it joint military advice on strategy. We believe that such a sub-committee will be effective only if its military members do not use its deliberations to pursue Single Service institutional agendas.

125. Furthermore we consider that there are major weaknesses in how the NSC operates. This is particularly important given its dominant role in decision-making.

126. We are concerned that discussion in NSC meetings is too tactical and discursive, and does not sufficiently draw on authoritative expert opinion.

127. We believe that the creation of the NSC has failed to eliminate the risk of a personal, private and reactive style of decision-making involving only the Prime Minister and his closest advisers.

128. We are concerned that the increased use of the NSC could have the effect of undercutting the principle of Cabinet government. We seek clarification from the Government on the relationship between the NSC and the Cabinet, and further reassurance on how the Cabinet will be involved with national strategy and the formulation of the next SDSR.

We welcome the Committee's assessment that the Levene reforms have been useful and agree the reforms and the NSC have brought clearer accountability to decision-making and reinforced civilian control.

However, we do not accept the Committee's criticisms of the National Security Council. The NSC is a mechanism to improve collective decision-making. It facilitates the sharing of knowledge and expertise within Government and, by bringing experts from inside and outside Government together with Ministers, ensures that expert advice is given proper weight in decision-making. The Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Heads of the Intelligence Agencies attend NSC. External experts have been invited for discussion on Afghanistan, the Middle East and Nigeria, among other issues.

The focus and timing of NSC meetings are adjusted according to the issues at hand. Ministers receive comprehensive briefings ahead of meetings that are often based on weeks or months of consideration of an issue at Departmental level. The NSC does consider long-term strategic issues, but it is also appropriate for it to have a more operational focus at critical moments. Every NSC meeting is followed rapidly by specific minuted conclusions, and the implementation of actions is monitored by the National Security Secretariat, Cabinet Office.

The Chiefs of Staff Committee is already the UK's senior military committee. The Chief of the Defence Staff sits on the NSC. He is the Prime Minister's senior military adviser and has a remit to represent the views of all three Services collectively. The report acknowledges the views of both the current Permanent Secretary of the MOD, Jon Thompson, and the former CDS, Lord Richards, that the CDS is capable of providing adequate military representation at the NSC.

The Levene reforms brought about a new role for the Chiefs, giving them greater authority in leading their Services, and allowing them more control of their budgets. Although the Chiefs were removed from the Defence Board, the Armed Forces Committee was instituted as a forum for the Chiefs to provide advice to the CDS on the topics that would be discussed at the Defence Board. CDS and/or VCDS represent the views of the Chiefs at the Defence Board. There are a number of other meetings where the Chiefs, the Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Strategy and Operations) and the Director General Security Policy provide advice to CDS on strategic, operational and single Service issues. These meetings, which include the Chiefs of Staff Committee, help prepare CDS for his attendance at NSC meetings, as the individual responsible and accountable for providing military advice to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

Far from the NSC undercutting the principle of Cabinet government, the NSC is a committee of the Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister; it reinforces the principles of collective decision making that underpin Cabinet government. The NSC provides a forum for responsible Ministers to consider and take collective decisions on national security issues. It is overseeing the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

Conclusions

129. We therefore conclude that unless the Government makes better use of its decision-making institutions, and draws on higher quality information and advice, there is a significant risk that future decisions on defence and security issues will be as poor as in the past, with consequences which are just as damaging.

130. We urge the Government to take urgent steps to remedy these weaknesses, and to put in place a genuinely strategic, well-informed and properly balanced decision-making machine.

We operate in an environment with extremely complex threats, under resource constraints, with decisions for major programmes often having to be made many years in advance. This means even the best individuals, provided with the highest quality information, and embedded in the best structures with the best processes, may not always make consistently good decisions. We therefore agree that modern crises require more, not

less, historical and cultural understanding, greater emphasis on strategic expertise, deeper efforts of analysis and lessons learning, more openness to challenge and more imagination in order to continue to meet these demands. We welcome acknowledgement of the improvements made in this area over the past five years. However, we recognise the need for continuing reassessment which is why the forthcoming revision of the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review will be used as an opportunity to consider where we can go further.

21 July 2015.