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**Marching Towards
Inclusivity:
Bridging the
Gap Between
the Armed
Forces and
Society**

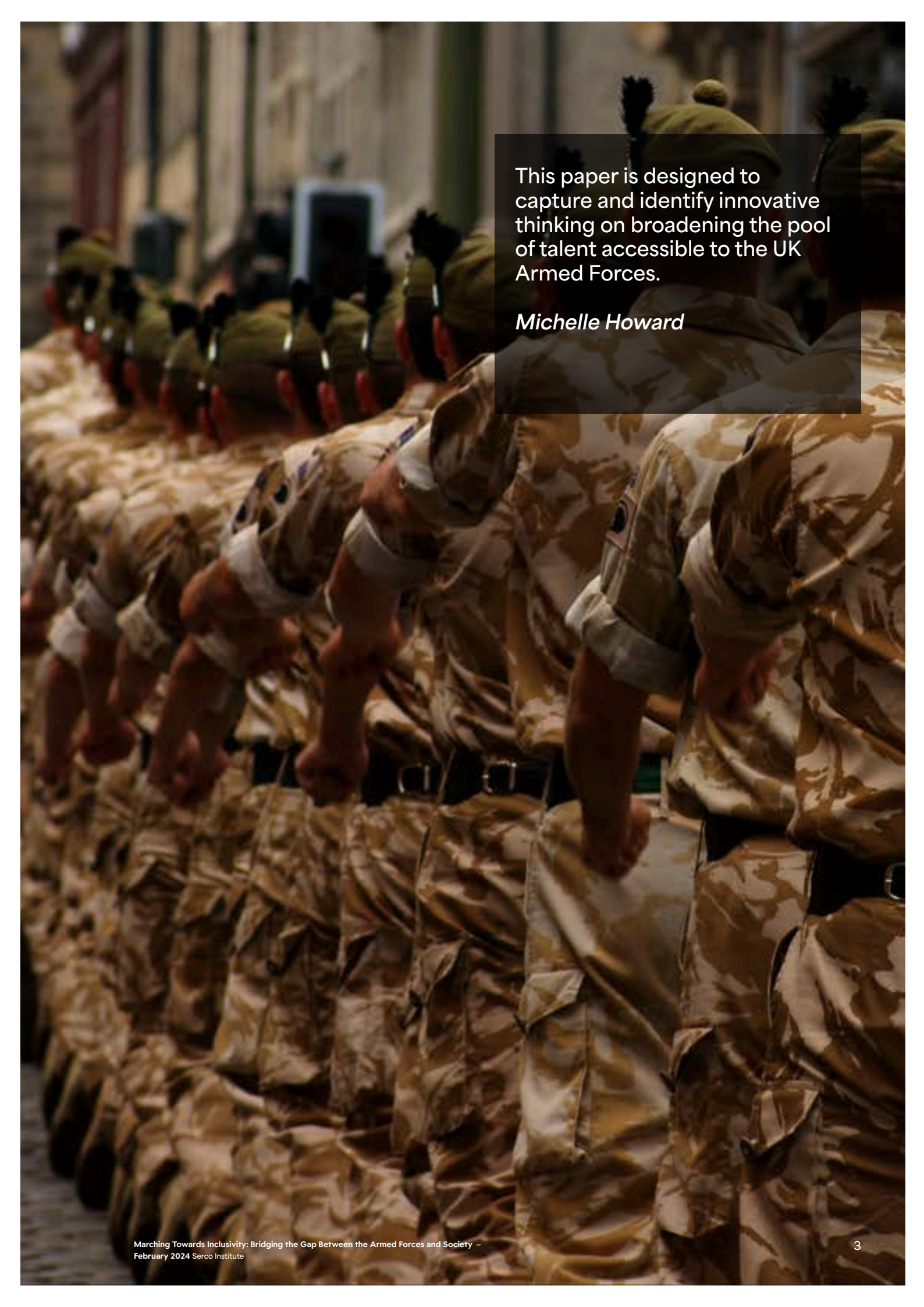
February 2024

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The Serco Institute is a think tank established by Serco, which has been part of the defence enterprise for the UK and its NATO, Five Eyes and AUKUS allies for nearly 60 years. The Institute's mission is to help governments deliver the next generation of public service solutions through research and innovation in service design.

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A photograph showing a line of soldiers in desert camouflage uniforms marching in a parade. The soldiers are wearing tan and brown patterned uniforms and matching berets with black plumes. They are marching in a line, with their arms at their sides. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a city street or a large indoor space.

This paper is designed to capture and identify innovative thinking on broadening the pool of talent accessible to the UK Armed Forces.

Michelle Howard

Marching Towards Inclusivity: Bridging the Gap Between the Armed Forces and Society

Introduction

In recent weeks, the issue of the UK Armed Forces and their size has risen to the fore of British political discourse, after Chief of the General Staff General Sir Patrick Sanders urged authorities to begin a ‘whole-of-nation undertaking’ to ‘mobilise the nation’ and train a citizen army.^[1] Though the UK Government has insisted there are no plans to reintroduce the draft, these calls reignited the question of recruiting and retaining a fighting-fit military to defend Britain – particularly at a time when the West may need defending, as threats rise of future conflict with Russia and a number of other hostile state actors. With the Defence Secretary Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP having warned recently that Britons now are part of a ‘pre-war generation’ rather than a post-war one,^[2] it is right that we consider the issue of Armed Forces recruitment and what can be done to attract and retain young people in a modern military.

Figures published by the UK Government show that, on a net basis, nearly 6,000 people left the Armed Forces in the year to 30 September 2023, with recruitment targets across the services regularly being missed. First Sea Lord (1SL) Admiral Sir Ben Key has described the Armed Forces as being engaged in a “battle for national talent”^[3] and Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), ACM Sir Richard Knighton, has emphasised the highly competitive UK labour market, with 1.3 million vacancies in January 2023,^[4] as a key challenge to the Royal Air Force’s (RAF) recruitment objectives.

However, the recruitment dilemma has plagued the military for decades. In a turbulent security environment and with little sign that the UK’s global commitments will abate in the future, maintaining an operationally effective sized and skilled Armed Force is an issue increasingly pushing its way into national consciousness. Fresh thinking to long-standing challenges is required as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Chief of the General Staff Major General Sharon Nesmith has pointed at a need to “recognise that the expectations of the future workforce are different”, noting that all three services must offer career pathways that are “attractive and a little bit more agile” to encourage young recruits.^[5]

It is this challenge which the Serco Institute brought together senior experts from across defence, academia and the wider defence enterprise to discuss in January 2024. I was proud to host the first of a series of roundtables, with January’s specifically focussing on ‘The Future of Diversity in the Armed Forces’ to examine the challenges and opportunities to attract and retain a modern and more diverse Armed Forces.

Michelle Howard

[1] Nicolas Camut, “British public should be ready to fight Putin, UK army chief says.” Politico, 24 January 2024.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/hold-uk-army-chief-calls-on-government-to-mobilize-the-nation-if-there-is-a-war-with-russia/>

[2] “UK citizen army: Preparing the ‘pre-war generation’ for conflict.” BBC News, 25 January 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68097048>

[3] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023–24, 31.

[4] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023–24, HC 26 (London: The Stationery Office, 4 February 2024) 31.

[5] “Major General Sharon Nesmith on seeing around barriers”, Global Defence Technology, retrieved 12 February 2024. https://defence.nridigital.com/global_defence_technology_may21/british_army_inclusivity_careers

Section 1: The ‘Battle for national talent’

The UK economy as a whole has in recent years suffered from labour and skills shortages. Vacancies remain high and unemployment low, with the public and private sector in greater competition than before. For the Armed Forces, this is compounded by modern defence technology, high levels of pay private sector pay growth and an increasing number of economically inactive people - with over 20% of those between 16 and 64 not in work, education or training. [6] With a shrinking workforce, the Armed Forces need to attract from the widest demographic and retain the necessary skills to maintain the UK’s security.

[6] UK Labour Market Statistics - House of Commons Library (parliament.uk)

Section 1: The ‘Battle for national talent’

Fourth Industrial Revolution

Technological change is transforming the global economy, challenging traditional ways of doing business and revolutionising warfare. As Rick Haythornthwaite’s review of UK Armed Forces Incentivisation demonstrated, “complex webs of services and the gig economy are subverting the employer-employee relationship. 24-hour social media scrutiny demands radical transparency, and a globally networked perspective has heralded a newly demanding and individualistic ethos. The people the Armed Forces need, with the leadership, communication and technical skills that will be critical to winning the next war, must be convinced that joining the Armed Forces is right for them.”^[7] While these issues cut across the economy, private industry is considered to compete for skilled talent more effectively with higher capital.



A shrinking pool of traditional recruits to the military means it will be necessary to explore untapped areas of potential, and looking to further develop a more complex understanding of the strengths and skillsets required for future service personnel.

^[7] Rick Haythornthwaite, Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era - A review of UK Armed Forces incentivisation, Ministry of Defence (London: The Stationery Office, June 2023), 3.

^[8] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, HC 26 (London: The Stationery Office, 4 February 2024), 13.

^[9] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, 31.

^[10] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, 3.

^[11] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, 30-31.

^[12] Ministry of Defence, A Force for Inclusion: Defence Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2018 - 2030 (London: The Stationery Office, 1 October 2018).

The ‘pinch point’ professions

Roundtable participants discussed the increasing calls for a cultural shift in the UK Armed Forces to access a wider pool of talent. The data on ‘pinch point’ professions in the military, or “trades where there are not enough trained regulars to perform operational tasks without taking mitigating action”,^[8] illustrate a possibility to broaden the scope of who the military should look for in a future service member. For example, of the 73 professions

identified within the British Army, only one in five (22%) of the target number of HR and Communications Specialists have been recruited, while professions such as paras, combat med techs, vehicle mechanics, dog handlers and police are within 10% of the target.^[9]

Untrained personnel have also significantly increased as a proportion of the forces over the past 10 years.

Untrained personnel have also significantly increased as a proportion of the forces over the past 10 years. This means that “the rising demand for skills is already not being met in some key areas, including cyber, engineering, nuclear, digital, logistics, aviation and medical”.^[10] A recent report by the House of Commons Defence Committee argues that there are “significant risks to overall capability arising from skills shortages.”^[11] This demonstrates that a more diverse range of skillsets and strengths are required to meet operational requirements than what has traditionally been considered necessary - a point which has been recognised by the MoD.^[12]

Section 1: The ‘Battle for national talent’

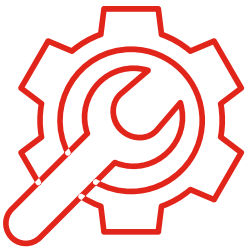
Diversity as strategic advantage

Participants emphasised that discussions about diversity should not be limited to gender: indeed, according to the MoD’s Diversity & Inclusion Strategy, diversity means “the ways in which we all differ including (but not limited to) our race, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, physical attributes, disabilities, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic background, life experiences (including marriage, civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity), skills and the way we think and do things.”^[13] The group also agreed, however, that quotas intended to promote diversity approach the objective in an unhelpful way. Many agreed that this could pit groups against each other, entrenching ‘othering’ behaviours. Roundtable participants felt that diversity should be regarded as a strategic advantage, helping defence to achieve optimal operational capability. In the case of body armour, diversity was observed as central to facilitating improved operational capabilities for serving personnel, such as the update to the Virtus Scalable Tactical Vest in 2022, which improved the experiences of female soldiers and continued the modernisation of the force at large.^[14] Additionally, diversity is understood as central to avoiding ‘groupthink’, and to fostering a culture

of reasonable challenge. Evidence from the roundtable participants and from the data clearly suggests that by reaching out to a more diverse audience, the absolute quantum of potential recruits increases, offering a distinct, presently underexploited, opportunity. This argument must be won and institutionally accepted however, before the requisite cultural shift can take place.

An international lens broadens concepts of effective, innovative approaches.

This labour market challenge is, of course, not just a British problem: our allies in NATO, alongside Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, are also struggling to recruit.^[15] However, these countries are already changing the way they approach recruitment and retention. In 2023, the US Army added 20 per cent more new soldiers than in 2022.^[16] In Australia, the Government has introduced a retention bonus for recruits if they commit to stay beyond their initial period of service.^[17] The Australian Defence Force (ADF) is also encouraging women into leadership roles,^[18] and all Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) jobs are open to women.^[19] The ADF also have a gap year programme in place,^[20] which allows for the type of career flexibility sought by the next generation. In order to widen their appeal, the Canadian Armed Forces are removing certain dress code requirements, such as tattoos, hair length and colour. A new Canadian Navy experience programme allows recruits a ‘try before you buy’ approach, by streamlining enrolment and exposure to life as a sailor, offering access to a range of jobs.^[21] Early results appear positive.^[22]



[13] Ministry of Defence, A Force for Inclusion: Defence Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2018 - 2030, 10.

[14] Ministry of Defence, New body armour improvements for women in the UK Armed Forces (March 2022) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-body-armour-improvements-for-women-in-uk-armed-forces>)

[15] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, HC 26 (London: The Stationery Office, 4 February 2024), 32.

[16] Sam Skoye, “Army recruiting: better than last year, still short of goal, officials say”, Defense One, 15 September 2023, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2023/09/army-recruiting-better-last-year-still-short-goal-officials-say/390357/>

[17] ‘Defence retention bonus proves a big hit’, Defence Connect, 4 January 2024, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/geopolitics-and-policy/13377-defence-retention-bonus-proves-a-big-hit>

[18] Australian Government, Women in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) 2021-2022 Ten Years in Review, DPIR-TR-031/2023, August 2023, retrieved from www.defence.gov.au

[19] Royal Australian Air Force, “Gender Diversity”, accessed 9 February 2024, <https://www.airforce.gov.au/about-us/overview/gender-diversity#:~:text=All%20job%20roles%20in%20the,control%2C%20doctor%20and%20many%20others>

[20] Australian Defence Force, “Discover Your Path in an ADF Gap Year”, accessed 9 February 2024, <https://www.adfcareers.gov.au/students-and-education/gap-year?page=1&perPage=21&query=>

[21] Government of Canada, “Naval Experience Program (NEP)”, accessed 9 February 2024 <https://forces.ca/en/naval-experience-program/>

[22] Common, David (13 September 2023). “Long hair, signing bonuses and ‘try before you buy’: How Canada’s military is responding to a staffing crisis”. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canadian-armed-forces-recruitment-1.6963988>

Section 2: The Talent Pool

Admiral Sir Ben Key told the recent Defence Committee inquiry that he would like to ensure the Armed Forces is “as attractive a place as it possibly can be for young people to come to and commit to.” [23] It is thus crucially important to identify the key drivers and the messages which most resonate with this audience. Several roundtable participants discussed that young people’s impressions will be shaped by a number of influences, from their immediate environment, such as family and friends; to their schools; and their media exposure. There was agreement amongst participants about the role of technology as an asset in the modern recruiting process, and how it should be further harnessed to reach new groups/ communities and to address attrition in the applicant to recruit process. The challenge of keeping applicants engaged throughout a long recruitment process could be effectively addressed using digital tools, including advances made possible by artificial intelligence (AI) applications. However, concerns were raised that capitalising on digital outreach and the role of tech in recruitment faces challenges from high numbers (20%) of prospective recruits from low-income households experiencing digital poverty/deprivation. [24]

[23] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023–24, 31.[23]

[24] Left Out: How to tackle digital exclusion and reduce the poverty premium (centreforsocialjustice.org.uk)

Section 2: The Talent Pool

Expectations of the next generation

As Haythornthwaite demonstrated: “Those who have grown up in this revolution see the world differently. They will expect flexible, remote and hybrid working and to operate in a digital-first world that makes the most of automation and artificial intelligence. They will have more, and more varied, careers, and will focus on how their employers’ goals and values align with their own.”^[25] With young people also likely to prize work culture highly,^[26] perception issues may also be putting a dampener on efforts to attract new recruits. Roundtable participants were concerned that media coverage of life in the military and its mission, from high-profile news stories of harassment to portrayals of soldiers grappling with PTSD on television, will not have helped opinions of their work environment. Public perception of the forces post-Iraq and the withdrawal of Afghanistan was considered a further difficulty.

Finally, While only a fraction of the public is represented in the Armed Forces, YouGov polling conducted last year shows there is clear support for increasing the Armed Forces’ size.^[27]

Identifying the target demographic

Service members and veterans discussed their motivation for, and experience of, joining the military. There was a clear sense of being called to duty, searching for opportunities perhaps in areas which offered few, and a sense of adventure. They also sought out role models who reflected themselves - which traditionally was friends and family who had served but, as of April 2023, the number of full-time UK Armed Forces personnel stood at nearly just 0.2% of the British population.^[28] With the vast majority of British society far removed from the Armed Forces, with fewer people having friends or family members who have served it is important to view senior leadership within the Armed Forces as role models for prospective recruits. Critically, it is those senior members from diverse backgrounds who can spark confidence in new recruits.

^[25] Rick Haythornthwaite, Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era - A review of UK Armed Forces incentivisation, Ministry of Defence (London: The Stationery Office, June 2023), 3.

^[26] Francis, Ali (14 June 2022). “Gen Z: The workers who want it all.” BBC Worklife.<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220613-gen-z-the-workers-who-want-it-all>.

^[27] Allison, George (11 July 2023). “Public favour increasing size of armed forces, reveals poll.” UK Defence Journal. <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/public-favour-increasing-size-of-armed-forces-reveals-poll/>

^[28] Esme Kirk-Wade and Zoe Mansfield, UK defence personnel statistics, Number 7930, House of Commons Library (London: The Stationery Office, 18 July 2023).

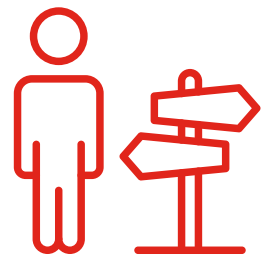


Section 2: The Talent Pool

Engaging creatively

Innovative approaches toward not only the identification of prospective recruits, but also how we engage them, are deeply important. Roundtable participants felt that recruitment practices should broaden in scope, such as in schools. The Cadets programme, for example, seemed to be an untapped group with potential. Young people are keen to understand the skills a career in the Forces could offer to them, and the group noted that this indicates a different focus than traditional appeals to patriotism. The Armed Forces' deployment of strategic communications will be crucial to highlight the benefits of military service more proactively - a meaningful job, the possibility of adventure, camaraderie without parallel in the private sector, opportunities for paid education and qualifications. This would also go some way to countering negative narratives previously addressed. There are promising movements in this direction.

A recent example is the Royal Navy's (RN) effective recruitment campaign, which personalises the lived experience of the Armed Forces through the narrative of 'Lt Raj', a serving officer in the RN's submarine service. ^[29]



^[29] Creative Works | The Royal Navy: Made in the Royal Navy by Engine Creative | The Drum

Section 3: The Workplace

In the drive for recruitment, the ‘power of the story’ should not be easily dismissed. The Haythornthwaite Review describes the next generation as seeing “a meaningful offer as one that works for them – allowing them to develop their skills, to address important challenges and change the world, while providing an environment that recognises their wellbeing and mental health.”^[30] Clearly, an honest assessment of the workplace environment in the Armed Forces and the narratives of their future colleagues is crucial. The Review goes on to identify a growing net outflow, or the differential between the number of people leaving and those joining, from the UK Armed Forces in 2022.^[31] Indeed, the MoD has reported that for every eight departing service personnel, it is able to recruit five.^[32] These numbers are important, as they shed a great deal of light on the holistic approach necessary to strengthen force readiness.

^[30] Rick Haythornthwaite, Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era - A review of UK Armed Forces incentivisation, Ministry of Defence (London: The Stationery Office, June 2023), 3.

^[31] Haythornthwaite, Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era, 15.

^[32] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, HC 26 (London: The Stationery Office, 4 February 2024), 31

Section 3: The Workplace

Retention in the Armed Forces

The Defence Committee reported that in addition to the impact on readiness, force overstretch adversely affects retention.^[33] Chief of the General Staff (CGS), General Sir Patrick Sanders, calculated that the Army is operating at 130% of its capacity and the 1SL admitted that there are “always more tasks for a Navy than there are ships”. The operational tempo continues to increase, and by Spring 2023 the RAF had flown double the operational sorties from the year before.^[34] If serving personnel are demoralised, it further challenges recruitment goals and highly resourced institutional knowledge disappears. At the roundtable, a number of the serving personnel, and those who had served, spoke movingly of decisions made to leave the service, and their feelings of demoralisation, despite a great commitment to their service and to its mission. The wider defence eco-system must be assessed to appropriately understand causation, from accommodation, equipment, infrastructure, and the requirement to ‘do more with less’, to a workplace environment in which some roundtable participants reluctantly admitted they would ‘not want their daughter to serve’.



^[33] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, 35.

^[34] House of Commons Defence Committee, Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24, 35.

^[35] Military Court Service, SJEG Update, (Bulford Court Centre: Court Administration Officer, March 2023).

Workplace culture

Achieving full force strength requires a frank assessment of the workplace culture, and whether this environment is inclusive and supportive of a wide range of backgrounds and skillsets. A theme which emerged in the roundtable, to robust agreement, was this sense of belonging and the intended or unintended ways in which roundtable participants were made to feel that they did not belong. Even for some who described these behaviours as ‘banter’, would be, given these experiences, uncomfortable recommending a career in the forces to young people from their backgrounds. However, positive steps have been taken to change these behaviours. For example, MoD policies now ensure there is at least one woman is on each Court Martial Board. The Victim Witness Care Unit was created 10 months ago, to strengthen support offered when complaints are raised.^[35] However, it was agreed that there is a need to go further. For those around the table, leadership is critical to developing the challenge culture required to enable systemic behavioural change. A particular call to action was made for male allies, who hold power, to lead the cultural change required. Through challenging negative behaviours, they help engender a sense of belonging and facilitate an inclusive environment where people feel able to bring their ‘whole self’ to work. This, offered a number of roundtable participants, could be supported by a diversity infrastructure, inclusive of training in positively engaging with colleagues, addressing poor behaviours through systems and processes, and the role of allies and advocates within organisations.

Section 3: The Workplace

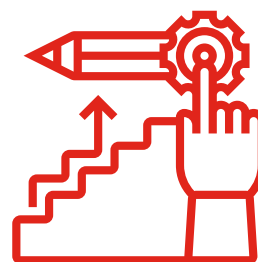
Designing policies and progression paths

In addition to challenging the workplace culture, HR policies to retain a diverse workforce were discussed at the roundtable, such as family-focused approaches to work hours and postings, and flexible career progression paths which encourage service members to develop future skills. Participants believe that improvement of policies and approaches to the lived experience of particular groups is needed, such as parents. For example, in situations where both parents work and would like to be in the same place more often the question should not be ‘which one of you are we going to lose’, as several participants felt was the case, but rather ‘what can we do to retain you’.

Communication of the career progression path could also be important to force recruitment and retention, agreed participants at the roundtable. Ensuring timely interventions using talent markers and understanding the right time to identify opportunities for promotion is critical here. Digital tools could allow the Armed Forces to keep service members engaged throughout their career, allowing for not just the progression from applicant to recruit, but also for zig-zag career trajectories to be easily identifiable and accessible. Indeed, Haythornthwaite points to research by King’s College London which “directly connects service members’ mental health and their family development to meaningful digital face time while deployed”.[36] The role of technology must be an integral asset in a modernised Armed Forces, from applicant to recruit to service professional.



Communication of the career progression path could also be important to force recruitment and retention



[36] Rick Haythornthwaite, Agency and Agility: Incentivising people in a new era - A review of UK Armed Forces Incentivisation, Ministry of Defence (London: The Stationery Office, June 2023), 59.



Conclusion

The future of the UK's security relies on the ability of its Armed Forces to adapt and modernise in line with societal shifts - only by doing so will the UK's Armed Forces stand ready to maintain its essential function of delivering national security. The British Armed Forces are not the only ones facing these transformational challenges, and there are lessons that can be learnt from our global allies. We must also, however, look within our own society and across our own defence enterprise for the answers

Roundtable participants stressed the social influences of family, friends and social media on young people's perceptions of forces careers, and how best to harness the impact of digital and creative outreach to maintain engagement throughout the recruitment process. Once recruited, we have seen that flexible workplace policies allow for retention to remain high among more groups of service members. As societal expectations around work-life balance and career flexibility continue to evolve, so should the Armed Forces.

By embracing these transformational challenges, the Armed Forces can position itself optimally to secure the best future talent within its ranks. In this current era of uncertainty, it is more crucial than ever that we are ready to meet strategic challenges with true strategic advantage, and this roundtable has concluded that this can only be achieved when inclusivity is prioritised.

