

By a special correspondent

The military covenant was a very new phenomenon, the Defence Select Committee were told today.

As part of their inquiry into recruitment and retention in the armed forces, the Committee took evidence from the following witnesses:

- Professor Christopher Dandeker, King's College London
- Professor Hew Strachan, University of Oxford

Followed by:

- Julie McCarthy, Army Families Federation
- Dawn McCafferty, RAF Families Federation
- Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association Forces Help

Chairman of the Committee James Arbuthnot asked whether there was a long term problem with recruitment and retention in the armed forces. Responding, Professor Hew Strachan of the University of Oxford explained that there was nothing new in existing problems. That said, he noted that problems were more evident in general recruitment in the past, as opposed to problems with specialist recruitment at present. He felt that the armed forces were constituted in order to provide capability for fighting a conventional war, as well as existing peacekeeping duties, and he suggested that a choice could be required between these two roles in the near future, as all round capability was increasingly unlikely. Until these strategic questions were addressed, he warned, recruitment would operate in a vacuum.

Asked whether there were any conflicting demands between recruitment and retention, Professor Christopher Dandeker of King's College London stated that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) had explicitly recognised the interaction between these in the past decade and that this was to be welcomed. Disaffected veterans were of huge detriment to recruitment, he acknowledged. Looking after ex-servicemen was part of the same spectrum and maintenance of this was to the MoD's credit.

Pressure on the MoD's means and ends would not disappear soon, he added, and he imagined that there would be a serious commitment to Iraq, and no major UK troop reduction, over the entirety of the next US presidential term.

Mr Arbuthnot asked whether the events at Deepcut and the mistreatment of prisoners had had a negative impact on recruitment. Deepcut had become a 'wider cultural phenomenon', Professor Dandeker argued, and he agreed that straying beyond a tough and robust level of training had presented a problem. A balance needed to be struck on this, he felt, and he added that abuse of prisoners would damage the reputation of the armed forces more generally.

Professor Strachan disagreed, arguing that Deepcut had been a bigger issue for the army than for the public and asserted that the armed forces were still held in very high regard. Adam

Holloway suggested that the main effect of Deepcut was that many trained within the armed forces were now unfit to fight. Professor Dandeker stressed that a balance was important and noted that appropriate training represented a major element of the MoD's duty of care to the armed forces. Polls found that there was 'enormous respect' for the armed services, including their competence, but he added that the same opinion polls also found that some of the armed forces' work and practices was viewed as 'anachronistic'.

Thresholds for recruitment had been cut 'lower and lower', Mike Hancock suggested, and he contended that Deepcut had been an effect of this, with trainers unable to deal with such poorly qualified recruits. In response, Professor Dandeker stated that there were persistent problems with recruitment on both sides of the Atlantic, and he added that adjustments and compromises in terms of quality were made in response to this.

The need for the army to do things differently was also harder to make the case for during times of peacetime training, Professor Strachan explained. That said, he criticised the armed forces for defending even those actions which were indefensible.

Moving on, Robert Key asked whether there was any link between the popularity of any war the UK was engaged in and recruitment or retention levels.

Professor Strachan stated that there was more of a link with employment opportunities in the UK more generally at the time. He noted that support had been greater during wartime generally and even for those which had been unpopular. This latter point was echoed by Professor Dandeker.

On the existence of 24-hour and intrusive media and its effects, he felt that the MoD needed to think more pro-actively in the face of this and consider ways in which it could manage media issues more to its benefit. Soldiers were now under more scrutiny and pressure than before, and ensuring that this was dealt with would prove a telling point for the future, he continued.

Mr Key asked whether an armed forces day would be sensible and whether or not the armed forces should be encouraged to wear their uniforms in public. The latter would be helpful, Professor Strachan suggested, but he felt that an armed forces day would be no more than 'fig-leaf posturing'. Professor Dandeker agreed with this and added that armed servicemen should simply be encouraged to wear their uniform and that greater coercion would be unhelpful.

On the downgrading of visits to schools by members of the armed forces, Professor Strachan explained that this was not a new problem and that the military had problems getting into schools in some areas of the UK already, including the West of Scotland. This was partly a result of the armed forces varied regional presence.

Mike Hancock asked about the importance of the military covenant and whether there would be significant benefits or disadvantages of its formalisation. The 'military covenant' was a very new expression, Professor Strachan explained, which had only entered into common usage within the last couple of years. Prior to this, he added, there was discussion of 'unlimited liability', with

involvement with the armed forces presented as a one-sided contract. The military covenant was therefore the articulation of a guarantee from the other side, but he felt that many of the issues raised in its name were those that should be tackled, and where funds should be in place, without the need for a written guarantee.

Contracts were a call for explicit commitments, Professor Dandeker stated, and he reasoned that there must be a breakdown in MoD provision if the need for a written covenant was being discussed.

Moving on and in response to a question from Bernard Jenkin on observance of harmony guidelines, Professor Strachan contended that little progress could be made on this under the MoD's sustained workload at present. He felt that continued discussion of this was 'extraordinary' at such times and stressed that there should be greater consideration of whether the UK was in a state of war or peace. The USA faced significant pressure on related issues but dealt with these differently, largely because the USA was seen as being in a state of war. Regional reorganisation of defence personnel had not yet delivered as it should, he added.

Professor Dandeker explained that the treatment of the vast majority of personnel fell within the harmony guidelines and that there was no significant mental health problems faced by those who were within the terms of the guidelines, which he reasoned were well constructed as a result. US forces fared much worse in this, he noted, and he felt that this was largely attributable to the increased length of their tours of service.

Responding to a question from David Crausby on the relative benefits of a military career, Professor Strachan stated that the growth of higher education should be viewed as an opportunity for recruitment and not a threat. It was important to reach a scenario where middle-England felt joining the armed forces was as reasonable as any other career, he continued, and he felt that problems in recruiting ethnic minorities would decrease in relation to this. The MoD had not addressed the problem realistically as yet, Professor Strachan argued, and still used their traditional recruitment pools with little emphasis on adapting these. On the high number of such jobs going to public school-educated people, he felt that it was important to change the demographics of those who were applying for these jobs in the first place.

Asked by Kevan Jones about whether there was need for an armed forces federation, providing support similar to that of the police federation, both panellists agreed that this could represent an area for progress. It was important and increasingly expected that people would be engaged in decision-making, Professor Dandeker reasoned.

Moving on, Richard Younger-Ross asked about ethnic minority representation. He noted a previous statement of Professor Dandeker, who had stated that 'internal cultural change' was required within the armed forces, and asked whether this had taken place. Professor Dandeker felt that it had, to a degree. He added that the MoD should focus less on replicating the UK's demography in its recruitment and instead on reflecting the values of British society.

The Government's reliance on its old recruiting pools reflected a more general problem of supply and demand, he felt, and he noted that the military was not high on the list of everyone's priorities. He felt that the change in attitudes of those who worked alongside ethnic minorities

had made a huge difference within the MoD and noted that cultural issues changed quickly once this issue was addressed.

Cultural change would have to come from the very top he concluded, and the committee were also told that training changes could have a big effect on retention issues. The panel then left and were replaced by Julie McCarthy, Elizabeth Sheldon and Dawn McCafferty.

James Arbuthnot asked whether the quality of welfare support continued to be a factor in the decision of people to leave the armed services.

Elizabeth Sheldon, of the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA) Forces Help, agreed that this remained a problem. Support could be difficult to access and was often easier to receive through an external agency. This was echoed by Dawn McCafferty of the RAF Families Federation.

There had been recent improvements, responded Julie McCarthy of the Army Families Federation, including the operational welfare support package, and she expressed her hope that this would be continued for families beyond tours of duty. That said, Ms Sheldon noted that problems could continue once this support package was withdrawn, including mental health problems, and she argued that the scant level of welfare support provided at other times was 'failing families'.

There were often relationship problems for service families, Ms McCarthy continued, especially for families based overseas, who lost many of their traditional support networks as a result. Education for children in service families was also a major issue, Ms McCafferty explained. Asked about solutions to existing welfare problems, Ms McCafferty noted that there were trials of support being provided at unit level and that it would be of greater benefit if such support could be provided as a given.

There was a problem with stability, Ms McCarthy reckoned, but she felt that the creation of super-garrisons might help with this and that, through such garrisons, many welfare problems would solve themselves. The MoD did not have sufficient capacity to handle welfare problems that came to their door, Ms Sheldon declared. Three different armed services operated different welfare support systems, she added, and this lack of continuity, consistency or streamlining could often lead to hardship.

Responding to Robert Key, Ms McCarthy assured that relationships with the army welfare service were good. That said, all agreed that their relationships with each other's organisations were better than relations with the Government. The independence of families' organisations was of huge importance and this was reflected in the value that families themselves placed on them, Ms McCafferty noted. Ms McCarthy explained that families organisations did work that the Government couldn't do, but Ms Sheldon stated that the Government could do more work on mental health support.

SSAFA had set up a base near Headley Court for support and she lamented that the Government could not be forced to provide support. That said, Ms McCafferty assured that

charities were very good at drawing the line and Ms Sheldon explained that SSAFA had refused to provide accommodation support, following an approach from the Government, as this was not their role.

Moving on, Richard Younger-Ross cited a report of the National Audit Office, which found that reservists highlighted various welfare problems as among the reasons why they had left the services. Asked what more should be done for reservists, Ms Sheldon stated that it was difficult to reach reservists where they were based. Sometimes the families of such people simply needed a 'friendly face' and for their anxiety to be quelled during such a difficult period.

This was echoed by Ms McCafferty, who explained that reservists and their families were 'uniquely difficult' to reach and did not know who to turn to for support when necessary. Families faced the dilemma of whether they should stay behind or travel with the service-person, she explained. This had resultant impacts on spouses and their careers and provision for those with special needs, among other general problems with moving regularly. Disruption to a child's schooling could be 'massive', Ms McCarthy added. She called for special dispensation to be provided for such families with regard to school applications, in order that traditional deadlines did not apply.

Moving on to discuss effects on recruitment, she stated that anything bad in the media would have a detrimental impact on gatekeepers, like a child's parents, which in turn would have an effect on future recruitment.

In response to a question from Adam Holloway, she explained that a partner's attitude could have a huge impact on whether people stayed in the armed forces. Family disintegration was not uncommon, she cautioned. This was echoed by Ms Sheldon, who felt that the way in which operational tours were conducted played a part in the increases in marital breakdown.

Remuneration was very rarely cited as a reason for leaving, the panel explained, and Ms McCafferty explained that there was a great deal of training and job satisfaction. On housing and the possibility of a shared equity scheme, Ms McCarthy explained that a very small trial was taking place on this but that families needed choice and the more this could be provided, the better. Previous plans for a 'right to buy' scheme were 'dead in the water', the Committee were told.

Linda Gilroy asked about resentment between different services with regard to their conditions of service. Responding, Ms McCafferty explained that there were still variations in allowances between the different armed forces, despite previous attempts to harmonise these, and that these could sometimes cause niggling resentment, especially when there were operations in joint arenas.

Finally, Mr Arbuthnot asked about 'the patch', whether this still existed and how it could be preserved if so. This was still in existence but much of the MoD's housing stock had been sold off, creating mixed estates which had 'gone downhill so fast', Ms McCafferty explained. The patch must continue to exist, she felt, as there would always be a need amongst service families for the social life or support that it helped to provide. She called on the MoD to protect

what it still had of this.