



# Keeping Enough in Reserve:

The employment of hybrid  
citizen-soldiers and the Future  
Reserves 2020 programme

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## The study

The Keeping Enough in Reserve project examined the relationships between Reservists and their civilian employment and wider social lives. Data collection included semi-structured research interviews (n=54), follow up interviews (n=25) and focus groups (n=9) conducted with Volunteer Reservists from British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force Reserves Units in two areas (around Newcastle upon Tyne and Bristol). Some Regular personnel were also involved in the focus groups and a small number of employing organisations were also interviewed.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using established social science conventions for qualitative research. This material was supplemented by analysis of existing secondary data and policy documentation. The research was informed by contemporary theories about civil-military relationships, labour market changes, emergent modes of governance in the public sector and evolutions in UK defence policy (see Edmunds et al, 2016; Higate et al, 2018; Jenkins et al, 2018).

## Research findings

### *Reservists in the civilian workplace*

The demands of transitioning between military and civilian worlds are considerable and under-recognised by defence managers. Reservists move between civilian and military occupations on an ongoing basis. The differences between these 'worlds' can sometimes be stark. Each requires the Reservist to take on a different kind of identity; in terms of how they present themselves to others, the references they make or do not make, and even the language they use. Transitioning in this way is a demanding process and requires considerable resources of time, effort and emotion. Such efforts are not always well-recognised or accommodated by defence managers.

### Key findings

- The costs of maintaining a Reservist identity need full recognition
- There are consequences for the armed forces of Reservists' willingness to contribute above and beyond requirements
- The monitoring and management of routine Reserves participation should be made more rigorous
- Deployed Reservists need integrated, meaningful post-deployment support
- Defence as a whole needs to engage with critical friends and alternative voices around difficult questions, nuanced narratives and contested debates

Many Reservists maintain a stark distinction between their identities as military personnel and as civilian employees. Reservists take great pride in their military participation. However, they can also find the experiences of their military lives difficult to convey and explain to colleagues in their civilian employment. Efforts to do so are often met with bafflement, scepticism or humour. In consequence, many Reservists remain reticent about revealing their military identities in the workplace, playing down or even concealing their membership of the Reserves.

There is little evidence that Reservists positively influence the views of civilian work colleagues about the armed forces. Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) identified reserves expansion as a means of developing greater civilian awareness of the

armed forces. The lived reality of Reserves participation is different, with Reservists frequently choosing to limit information about that participation in the workplace. There is little hard evidence that Reservists positively influence the views of civilian work colleagues about the armed forces and their activities, and this may be important for assumptions about the Reserves' ambassadorial role.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

- The Ministry of Defence and the three Armed Forces would benefit from a more detailed appreciation of how Reservists construct and maintain their identities as simultaneously civilians and military personnel. Understanding the military reserves workforce and the practicalities of their complex lives is critical to ameliorating tensions, and to the future sustainability of FR2020.

#### **Going 'above and beyond'**

Reservists demonstrate high levels of good-will towards their Units and the armed forces. Such good will is apparent in respondents' comments to the research team. However, it also manifests in the frequent willingness of many Reservists to go 'above and beyond' expectations of their expected role in the work performed for Reserves Units. For example, Reservists reported working on Reserves business during quiet periods in civilian working hours.

'Above and beyond' work is not cost-neutral for individuals. It places additional – unpaid – demands of time and energy on individuals, who may feel that their efforts are not properly recognised. Such practices have echoes of patterns in the wider workplace concerning workplace casualization and the increase of un-remunerated work.

Over-reliance on 'above and beyond' work carries morale and retention risks for UK Reserve Forces. Units may become reliant on labour given for free in a manner that is exploitative and may prove to be unsustainable over the long-term. Experience from elsewhere in the labour market suggests such practices can have a cumulatively demoralising effect on individuals and ultimately lead to retention problems.

Although highly motivated to participate in activities, seemingly minor issues such as the location or rescheduling of training opportunities can cause major problems for Reservists. Travel costs (both financial and in terms of time) can vary widely depending on location and (re)scheduling attendance can be difficult to coordinate with the demands of civilian life, including families and employers.

FR2020 has formalised the opportunities for skills transfer between the civilian labour market and the armed forces in a wide range of fields. In practice, respondents noted that there is a high level of skills and experience transfer from the civilian to the military spheres through Reservists. However, there were also concerns that such skills were under-recognised, under-rewarded and potentially under-utilized.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

- The Armed Forces should pay greater attention to the potential vulnerabilities for morale and retention in consequence of Reservists' personal willingness to contribute above stated requirements in a role. Such practices should be carefully monitored and individuals who engage in them appropriately recognised and rewarded.

#### **Comradeship and community**

Reservists value opportunities for interaction and integration with their regular counterparts, and the comradeship and community which they find in their units and the wider armed forces. Contact with regulars is particularly welcome because of the opportunities for military skills transfer this brings. The pairing of Units established under FR2020 helps facilitate these interactions. However, Reservists often noted the limited spaces and opportunities available to them for interaction, not least because of their management of complex working patterns and other commitments alongside Reserves work.

Significant numbers of Reservists have a background in the Regular forces. The expansion of the Reserves under FR2020 coincided with a programme of redundancies and policy mechanisms to encourage regulars to enlist as Reservists, most notably in the British Army. The enlistment of Regulars has led to a transfer of valuable skills and experience to the Reserves, as well as an older demographic profile. It has also helped to facilitate operational integration between Reserves and Regulars and may assist Regulars in transitioning to civilian employment (including accessing new social and employment networks).

#### **Recommendation 3**

- The integration of Reserves units within the Regular armed forces, envisaged in FR2020, needs to be more explicitly facilitated through active and deliberate strategies to create spaces for this to happen. The experience of Reserves participation as more individualised than that of Regulars, not least because of practicalities of participation, needs to be fully recognised. Comradeship and community are retention issues.

#### **The Reserves contract**

Anxieties about target manning levels and recruitment have led to lack of formal oversight and regulation of participation at a Unit level. Some Reservists report that low levels of attendance at drill nights and weekend exercises by some individuals is tacitly accepted by commanding officers, despite the risks this poses to operational readiness. Although regulations and frameworks exist setting out expectations about Reservist commitments, our data suggest that

participation is more flexible than that indicated by statistics on trained strength.

Lack of routine participation is primarily a reflection of the difficulties of managing Reserves participation in conjunction with civilian employment, rather than a lack of enthusiasm for Reserves participation per se. Moreover, there is little evident consequence (beyond lack of pay) for Reservists whose routine participation is low. This is recognised by Reservists as in turn having operational and functional consequences for Units; there may be a significant difference between recorded and operational Unit strength.

Civilian employers often lack knowledge of the demands of Reserve service and can be unsympathetic to Reservists' efforts to balance their military and civilian commitments. While regulations and frameworks exist to guide employer-Reservist relations, Reservists frequently report tensions and difficulties when their military commitments impinge on work time.

Existing frameworks, such as the Employer Recognition Scheme, may speak more to corporate social responsibility rhetoric than to a real-world commitment to Reservist employees. In practice, the provision of tangible support to Reservists is often a line-managerial responsibility rather than a corporate one. The extent to which such measures function adequately can be highly dependent on individual line managers rather than headline policies of the organisation as a whole.

#### **Recommendation 4**

- The monitoring and management of routine Reservist participation should be made more rigorous; defence would benefit from greater formalisation and reduced flexibility around this. Defence interactions with employers, particularly larger employers who seek visibility under the ERS, need to be more meaningful by feeding through at line-managerial (rather than just senior corporate) levels.

### ***The challenges of deployment***

That deployment on active operations brings rewards and challenges for military personnel is widely recognised. The distinctiveness of the Reservist experience in this respect is less well understood. Respondents tended to welcome opportunities for deployment, while recognising that there were likely to be significant individual costs involved.

The operational deployment of Reservists can have complex and unpredictable impacts in their civilian employment. Some respondents reported facing the prospect of job loss due to time away from work, particularly those working in sectors with potential over-supply of workers. More commonly, it was reported that the extended absence required from work necessitated by operational deployment had led to barriers in career progression or professional development

opportunities. Those working in sectors where short-term contracts are the norm were better able to co-ordinate deployment with paid civilian employment.

Respondents noted that reporting deployment as a voluntary choice rather than a statutory obligation could cause difficulties with employers. They frequently drew parallels between deployment and parental, particularly maternity, leave. In contrast to the latter however, many felt that absence caused by deployment tended to be viewed as a disruptive problem rather than a routine issue of human resource management.

Respondents also reported a relative lack of organisational support on return from deployment, and particularly a sense that re-integration was a challenge that had to be faced as an individual, and was often a rather isolating, experience. Such experiences were contrasted with those of Regular service men and women who tend to deploy and return as collectives with the wider Units of which they are part.

#### **Recommendation 5**

- The need for greater support for Reservists on return from deployment, and in preparation for deployment, both from the armed forces and via defence relationship management liaison with employers, cannot be over-emphasised. Crucially, this support has to be integrated and meaningful, resourced as for regulars, and structured to take account of the specifics of the Reservist experience.

### ***Critical friends and difficult debates***

Tensions and problems with policy are not always visible from the top of an organisation. Often, they are most visible to those at the operational level, who are engaged in or affected by implementation on a day-to-day basis. Our research indicated at times a disjuncture between formal or official narratives about FR2020 and the experiences of Reservists themselves. Fundamental to this disjuncture is an information and analysis gap, which this study and the wider FRRP has started to fill. This gap is partly about forms of data, and an over-reliance at MoD and senior armed forces levels on quantitative indicators and metrics at the expense of a fuller and more nuanced understanding informed by qualitative research.

Above all, the utility of ethnographically-informed approaches which allowed Reservists to articulate their experiences, aspirations and concerns, has been evident. Much existing defence-led research, where it draws on social science concepts and approaches, is often limited by a narrow disciplinary focus. The multi-disciplinary social science approach across this project and the FRRP has proven benefit for a more rounded, nuanced and informed understanding of the Reserves.

There is a (perhaps understandable) hesitancy in defence circles towards potentially difficult public debate about the

Reserves. In consequence, there is a risk that message-management concerns may over-ride the need for honest reflection on success and failure in policy, and obscure the prospect of full and frank debate about defence issues. MoD and armed forces statements can often appear defensive about sincerely-held collective opinions, and resistant to analytic approaches that raise difficult political questions.

The Keeping Enough in Reserves project and the wider Future Reserves Research Programme has shown the value of engaging impartial academic researchers as critical friends for the defence community. This is particularly the case with regard to discussions about socially difficult issues which required an informed and nuanced understanding. Examples include the alternative voices brought to discussions of civil-military relationships, the complexities of Reservists' identity work, and politically difficult issues such as the relationship

between reserves expansion and privatization within defence and the public sector (see thematic FRRP findings documentation).

#### **Recommendation 6**

- The MoD and three armed services would benefit from becoming more effectively reflexive practitioners. Reflexivity implies being open and honest in recognising what is known and not known about a policy, as well as what has worked and has not worked, and why. Diverse external voices – critical friends – can be helpful in this respect. Difficult questions, nuanced narratives and contested debates should not be avoided.

### **References**

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### **Authors and Acknowledgements**

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