



Sustaining Future Reserves 2020:

Assessing organisational commitment in the Reserves

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Background: Sustaining FR2020: Sustaining Retention

The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review set out a vision for a future in which the Reserve would be integral in providing the Armed Forces additional capacity and specialist skills in a cost-effective way (MoD 2013). For the Army, the response has been an investment of £1.2 billion over 10 years to support the delivery of a fully manned Army Reserve (AR) and organisational reforms in key areas including training, equipment, personnel and infrastructure. These broadly entail elements of organisational change, a clear offer to Reservists, known as the 'Reservist Proposition', and engagement with, and support from, employers, labelled as the 'Employer Proposition'.

To retain the significant number of Reservists that have joined the AR, it is crucial for the Army to create the conditions in which Reservists are able to balance the multiple commitments and obligations they have towards the Army itself, their employers, and also towards their family. Being able to balance such multiple commitments is a strong factor in determining Reservists' desire to continue serving. Balancing these is not an easy task given the limited "spare" time Reservists have at their disposal and given the nature of the "greedy" time and commitment demands that they are subject to from the Army, employer and family at the same time (Coser 1974). Furthermore, the increased expectations of deploying Reservists in future events and of making up for personnel and capability shortfalls resulting from current and future defence cuts, mean that the Army is likely to become "greedier", that is, more demanding of Reservists' "spare time" (Army 2013).

Key findings

- The increase of activity and opportunities associated with improving the Reservist proposition and the increased expectations of the Reserves' contribution to Army capability are subjecting Reservists and units to significant stress.
- Many of the new full-time/part-time additional roles instituted at regimental and company level to support (sub-)units in fulfilling an increasing number of new tasks have not been sufficient, particularly given the fact that such roles until now have overly focused on recruitment.
- Whilst the quality and quantity of training have increased, integrated collective training events tend to be scheduled on Regular timescales and Mandatory Annual Training Tests training is perceived as repetitive and monotonous. Both are having a dampening effect on Reservists' retention intention.
- Employer engagement has been pitched at the high corporate-level of business, thus, overlooking the fact that middle and lower-management staff enable or hinder Reservists from fulfilling their Reserve obligations.
- A majority of Reservists are in relationships and/or part of families, which compete for their time and commitment. Notwithstanding the sporadic deployment experience, Reservists serve mainly during their "spare" time, which often overlaps with their personal/family time. Family support is key to enabling Reservists to serve during their "spare time", but very little has been done to foster family support.

About the study

This three-year study (ES/L013029/1), co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the UK Ministry of Defence, examined how British Army Reservists experience the multiple roles and duties that they must balance as a result of their Reserve service - family and job commitments, the support that they receive for helping them to manage this, and how these affect their desire to continue serving in the Army Reserve (AR). It entailed conducting individual semi-structured interviews with 40 Reservists, 10 Reservist partners, 12 regimental and company permanent staff members from three different (i.e., combat, combat support and combat service support) regiments, and 15 senior Reserves and Regular officers involved in implementing FR2020 policy objectives, as well as the monitoring of AR policy.

Research Findings

The Reservist's experience of the proposition

FR2020 has promised to deliver "a much better proposition" to Reservists in terms of, among other things, better training, career management, employer support and integration of the Regular and Reserve components (MoD 2011:5). Among the various measures that have been used to support this proposition and meet the 2019 personnel targets is the creation of new full-time, yet temporary, roles to support recruitment and retention, employer engagement and welfare provision. With increasing expectations on Units to recruit and retain larger numbers of Reservists, Regimental Operational Support Warrant Officers have been introduced across the AR regiments to support their efforts. Regimental Sub-Unit Support Officers, have also been appointed on a temporary two year, full-time Reserve service basis. These posts have the shared responsibility for recruiting, retention, welfare and employer support issues.

Notwithstanding this upscale of appointments to increase (sub-)unit capacity, we came across many instances in which these and other posts have been diverted from carrying out other core tasks in order to focus almost solely on recruitment. Obsession with recruitment has diverted units' attention to bolstering retention efforts. Notwithstanding this upscale, the growing number of training commitments, education adventurous training opportunities, defence and community engagement tasks that these units have been required to deliver, has led Reserve commanders to admit that not all tasks can be achieved without negatively affecting morale. For example, Commanding Officer Pete¹ stated:

The thing that always strikes me ... we're manned lightly in terms of our permanent staff. It really does stretch people and the [Regular] military just has this way of saying, "Well, just get on with it and make it happen", and it does have its attrition at times.

¹Names have been changed

Both regiments and personnel have been overwhelmed by the number of opportunities aimed at improving the Reservist proposition. As Commanding Officer Todd highlighted, this could be detrimental to developing core capabilities and, thus, operational readiness:

They're being asked to do too much, and it dilutes what we've actually got for the main things that we need to be doing.

Training

Past Territorial Army Continuous Attitude Survey findings have highlighted the fact that Reserve training has often been repetitive and boring and a major negative retention factor (TACAS 2012). As a result of FR2020, the Army has tackled this issue by offering more exciting, engaging (and overseas) training opportunities. One CO summed up this new emphasis on needing to provide fun training by stating that, "We are in the entertainment business: Bangs, breathlessness and beer". However, the reality of many interviewed Reservists is that the Mandatory Annual Training Tests (MATTs) aimed at maintaining certified Reservists, raised issues about the quality and excitement of their training experiences. Often, MATTs-related training did not live up to Reservists' expectations:

It doesn't always live up to the excitement that you see on the Army Reserve television advertisements when there's tanks and all sorts rolling along... Probably the reality of that, a lot of the time, is that you're in classrooms going through PowerPoint presentations on law of armed conflict or doing chest compressions and first aid stuff Brad, Reservist

Finally, increasing integrated collective training remains a challenge given the limited number of training days Reservists have, and the fact that many collective training exercises are programmed around Regular unit schedules, causing clashes with Reservists' work and personal/family commitments. Last-minute changes and/or cancellations to training events are highly disruptive for Reservists. They can, in turn, reduce the goodwill and support of family members and employers who agreed and/or made provisions to enable the Reservist to attend such events, but may not be able to accommodate such last-minute changes/cancellations or do so at a significant cost.

The Employer Proposition

FR2020's focus on employers suggests that the Army is concerned about employer attitudes towards Reserve service. The primary response to this has been corporate engagement, mainly by providing employers better information about the Reservists they employ, including their annual training commitments and notice of mobilisation. Additionally, Reserve friendly employer policies have been encouraged, via initiatives such as the Employer Recognition Scheme, which

through a tiered (bronze, silver and gold) award structure publicly acknowledges companies that adopt Reservist-friendly policies.

Yet, many Reservists still have been reluctant to disclose their Reserve service to their employers for fear of jeopardising their career prospects. Also, whilst greater efforts have been carried out to engage employers through official correspondence, such correspondence often gets lost within senior management and centralised human resource offices. In reality, these corporate provisions have not necessarily been honoured in everyday managerial practice, as Commanding Officer Peter, has stated:

The employer may well say, "Yeah, I'm more than happy to have Reservists", but the problem always comes further down in the food chain. It's the line manager who is under pressure to deliver a service when he's got a Reservist saying, "Can I have this time off to go and do this?"

Given that civilian employment is crucial to most Reservists in that "it pays the bills", employer support should indeed be garnered. Yet, the focus on employers, though important, has been slightly exaggerated having been heavily influenced by the Afghanistan and Iraq mobilisation experiences during the Global War on Terror. Indeed, because Reserve duties are primarily carried out during a Reservist's 'spare time' (late evenings, weekends and during annual leave), that is, during the Reservist's personal/family time, then family support is a key variable in sustaining Reservist retention.

The Missing Variable: Family Support

"The wider corporate covenant helps a bit with families, but we've got to think more about Reservist families" Julian Brazier, 25 June 2015

Whilst the "greedy" nature of the family may negatively affect Reservists' desire to serve (ResCas² 2013), prior studies have shown that "the more the military services adapt to family needs, the more committed will be both service members and their families" to the military (Segal 1986: 34). FR2020 acknowledges that families "make a vital contribution through supporting the Reservist as he or she takes time to train or to deploy" (MoD 2013: 7) and our data also suggests that family support is a highly significant factor in enabling Reservists to serve.

Among the Reservists interviewed there was broad consensus that the support of family is key to being able to undertake Reserve service. Interviews showed that support for Reserve service from family members takes both material (e.g. childcare, housekeeping, diary planning, kit washing) and moral (e.g. understanding it as a passion, providing emotional support) forms. Whilst the 2017 ResCAS has shown that family support for Reservists is high, we found that maintaining family support for Reserve service often involves Reservists engaging in acts of 'horse-trading' or financial or moral 'bribery' such as using the Army's financial incentives of their service to benefit the family. This is often the case with the annual bounty as Reservist Tanya explains:

I use it to my advantage because what I've always done with the extra money that we get, it always goes into a separate account and it's the holiday fund.

However, the promised benefits to families of the annual bounty and other "perks" were often offset against concerns over the lack of time spent together as a family. Family members also pointed to the ways in which AR service often infringed upon and impacted negatively family life due to the contact that often occurred outside of the man-training days that the Reservist took up to fulfil AR commitments. In our interviews, discontent with the disruptive impact that Reserve service had on family life was clear. The potential for it to manifest as open opposition towards the Reservist's reserve commitments became apparent during our interviews. Thus, family support among Reservist personnel, should not be taken for granted by the Army.

There was a clear sense in our interviews that whilst a lot of work has and is being done to keep employers on-side, little effort has been directed towards Reservists' families, particularly outside of deployment. This is especially the case in terms of welfare support. Several Reservists shared the belief that, "We've got Welfare Officers, but nothing gets generated out of the Welfare Office. If it was on Ops, yeah, brilliant ... but they don't do it for the rest of the Battalion" (Alex, Reservist). It is clear from our data that Units and Army Welfare personnel are keen to support Reservists and their families, but that they are still trying to make sense of what welfare provision can be offered to either of them outside deployment.

²Tri-service Reserves continuous attitude survey

Recommendations

- The Army's expectations of what Reservists can commit to, given the considerable increase in opportunities and activity that have arisen as a result of FR2020 reforms, and what the AR units can deliver need to be grounded in the reality that Reservists can only serve during their limited "spare time". Army policies and service delivery should be less Regular-centric, i.e. more flexible and less demanding, in order to achieve better Regular-Reserve integration and to avoid alienating Reservists.
- The scheduling, quality, and quantity of training on offer still need to be fine-tuned. The scheduling of training has to be more flexible and mindful of Reservists' time and commitment restraints. Training has to keep Reservists engaged, if not entertained, in order to maintain high retention. In particular, the frequency and/or necessity of running certain MATTs serials should be reviewed in order to avoid unnecessary repetition. In light of the fact that Reservists/Reserve units will have a six-month warning prior to deployment, gives them plenty of time to achieve MATTs certification.
- Employer engagement should not be geared only towards securing corporate level buy-in. Rather, it should be "cascaded" and directed towards lower-level line managers, who enable or hinder Reservists' ability to satisfy their reserve obligations.
- Family support is crucial for allowing Reservists to sacrifice their "spare" time to serve. Such support should not be taken for granted. To maintain such support, greater acknowledgement of family support, beyond the odd tokenistic regimental "family day", and the provision of greater welfare support for families, beyond deployment, should become key priorities.

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Authors and Acknowledgements

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