



The Reserves and wider civil-military relationships

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Background

The purpose of this policy brief is to communicate key findings and policy recommendations about civil-military relationships which have emerged from across the Future Reserves Research Programme (FRRP) and its four constituent projects. FRRP aimed to identify and understand the range of issues affecting Reservist personnel in relation to different parts of their lives – family life, civilian jobs and military life. It was funded by the UK Ministry of Defence and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Findings

The FRRP research reveals a tension around the Future Reserves 2020 objective of using the reformed Volunteer Reserve to make more visible the links between the UK armed forces and wider civil society.

The expansion in the Volunteer Reserve set out in the Future Reserves 2020 (FR20) plans included steps to address a perceived and increasing disconnect between the UK armed forces and wider civil society. The FR20 plans were guided by a desire ‘that the Armed Forces would become better integrated with and understood by the society from which they draw their people’, and urged the development of a strategic narrative to re-establish popular understanding of defence and the rationale for the Reserves, which in turn should play a key role in delivering this narrative through its ‘community, base, wide footprint and local influence’.¹ Anxieties about the military/civilian disconnect have informed a number of policy interventions around civil-military relationships in the UK over the past decade, and not least around recruitment to the armed forces as a whole, as the armed forces have continued to contract. Although the primary focus in FR20 may have been the development of organisational structures

Key findings

- The role of the Volunteer Reserve in integrating the armed forces with wider UK civil society is less significant than is often assumed.
- Gender should be recognised as a significant issue for the Reserves because of individual Reservists’ reliance on (usually female) spousal support.
- A nuanced and informed understanding of long-term shifts in UK employment trends and practices would benefit those seeking to sustain a Volunteer Reserve comprising individuals employed primarily beyond the armed forces.

to facilitate social integration, the potential ambassadorial role of the Reserves as an interface between the Regular armed forces and civilian society is also significant.

The term ‘civil-military relations’ has had long-standing utility in defence and military studies as a means of describing and understanding issues of state control, democratic oversight and accountability for governance of armed forces. More recent academic interventions have stressed the wide range of social, cultural and economic processes which work to both mesh together and separate armed forces and their wider civil societies. For some, the idea of civil-military relations carries an implicit understanding of a binary relationship between ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ spheres, which may or may not intersect, and the idea of a ‘civil-military gap’ consolidates this way of thinking. For others, there is greater utility of talking about civil-military relationships as an entanglement of different

¹Ministry of Defence (2011) *Future Reserves 2020: The Independent Commission to Review the United Kingdom’s Reserve Forces*. London: Ministry of Defence, p.4, p.10.

interests, practices and experiences. These entanglements are complex, dynamic and driven by multiple factors. They speak directly to defence policy and government concerns about the perceived disconnect between armed forces and civil society.

Empirical evidence from the FRRP projects showed the extent to which Reservists as individuals tend to compartmentalise their military lives, and the work that they do to keep this quite separate and distinct from their working, family and social lives. The precise reasons for this are individual, but collectively reflect a combination of necessity, pragmatism and expectations within an internally-focused military culture. The idea of the Reserves as a tool for wider public engagement with the UK armed forces may be well-intentioned, but is limited. There may be scope for defence to think through the causes and consequences of compartmentalisation as a means of addressing a perceived lack of social integration and public engagement.

Geography is significant to the ambassadorial role of the Reserves; the location of units within centres of residential population highlights the visibility of the Reserves. Current strategies of defence estate rationalisation may work against the embeddedness of Reserves units within communities; interviewees reported the closure of units as an issue mitigating against their Reserves participation in some cases.² The gradual erosion of strong regimental associations with specific localities is also relevant to the entanglements of civilian and military worlds.

The process of qualitative data collection from across the FRRP projects confirmed that there is a wealth of understanding, amongst Reservists, about the nature of civil-military relationships and the potential and limits of the Reserves in consolidating social integration and enhanced public understanding.

There is a rich resource of multi-disciplinary social science research available in the UK and internationally which would help inform understanding within defence circles about civil-military relationships, and particularly the social and cultural expressions of this.

Recommendation 1

- A more informed assessment of the limits of the ambassadorial role of the Volunteer Reserve would be beneficial to on-going defence efforts to better understand civil-military relationships and entanglements.

The FRRP research suggests that understanding gender relations and issues across the Reserves and Reservists' lives should be a defence priority, for recruitment and retention reasons.

Gender and gendered dynamics are a vitally important aspect of civil-military relationships. Military phenomena, including military participation and relationships with civil society, are shaped in multiple ways by complex gender dynamics.³ The gendered dynamics of the Volunteer Reserve, although not necessarily a core focus, became evident through FRRP research and data analysis.⁴ At 14.1%, the Volunteer Reserves have a higher proportion of women than the Regular armed forces at 10.3%, but because of the differences in roles open to women in each and the use of a Reserves rather than Regulars route to military participation by many women for military, civilian employment and family reasons, women's participation in the Reserves is more complex than this direct statistical comparison implies.⁵

Women Reservists reported positively on their experiences of and contributions to the Reserves. There were indications, from the narratives of women Reservists during research interviews, that the Reserves provide a resource for the wider armed forces in terms of a fuller understanding of gender issues relating to women's military participation. Above all else, the normality of mixed gender employment contexts experienced by most Reservists in their civilian workplaces is transferred to military contexts. Individually, women Reservists talked of the opportunities that the Reserves gave them beyond those available to them in their civilian lives, in terms of skills and personal development.

The FRRP projects which explored family life as a dynamic in Reservists' experiences revealed considerable negotiation with between spouses (usually wives) over childcare and other domestic work by Reservists who were parents. MoD data suggests that 23.5% of male Reservists and 17.6% of women Reservists have dependent children.⁶

A significant FRRP finding overall was the extent to which the function of the Volunteer Reserve, and individual Reservists, relies on unpaid, unrecognised female domestic labour.⁷ The work of female spouses of Reservists in domestic reproduction through domestic labour and childcare, facilitates the attendance of Reservists for training and deployment. It was also noted by a small number of Reservists that other family members (usually parents) facilitated Reserves participation through similar acts of domestic support.

The labour provided by (primarily) women to facilitate the participation of Reservists needs greater recognition through

²Ministry of Defence (2016) *A Better Defence Estate*. London: Ministry of Defence.

³For an overview, see Woodward, R. and Duncanson, D. (2017) (Eds.) *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*. London: Palgrave.

⁴Neither did any of the FRRP projects seek out women who had left the Reserves for reasons related to gender-based discrimination or harassment.

⁵Ministry of Defence (2017) *UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics 1st October 2017*. Ministry of Defence.

⁶Bowyer, S., Lee, P. & Twigg, L. (2015). *TIN 2.049 Reserves Mental Health and Support Service Provision Final Report*. BAE Systems. JSP personal data, 2015.

⁷For a full discussion, see Basham, V. and Catignani, S. (2018) War is where the hearth is: gendered labour and the everyday reproduction of the geopolitical in the Army reserves. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. On-line first at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616742.2018.1442736>.

fuller comprehension of the contribution of (primarily) spouses to the maintenance of the Reserves. There is a danger to the sustainability of the Reserves when Reservist participation is contingent on labour which can be withdrawn at any time. Although celebratory recognition of this unpaid work is evident in, for example, family events and family days where Reservists' families are invited to participate in fun activities hosted by units, this is time-limited and incidental.

The compartmentalisation work done by many individual Reservists in keeping their military and domestic lives quite separate, had knock-on effects in the FRRP research, with many Reservists reluctant to enrol their spouses and wider families to participate in research interviews. Outreach to this group was further limited by research ethics protocols required by the Ministry of Defence. Although the FRRP projects exploring family issues did undertake some research with Reservists' spouses, the difficulties of family-related research contribute to the continued absence of spouses and families' voices from defence policy debates, beyond the use of personal experience and anecdote by Reservists participating in these debates.

Recommendation 2

- Because of issues of recruitment and retention, defence and armed forces policy makers with responsibility for the Reserves should keep a watching brief on gender as a Reserves issue, over and above monitoring gender in terms of diversity statistics. Defence support for childcare for Reservists would merit investigation, for example, as would the application of new models of employment flexibility in the armed forces.

There are wider labour market issues and processes which shape how Reservists are able to engage with the Volunteer Reserve, and which in turn bring benefits and vulnerabilities for an armed forces increasingly reliant on Reservists.

The majority of members of the Volunteer Reserve work in civilian employment whilst also committing to the Reserves, and are thus participants in the civilian labour market. The FRRP projects revealed that there are benefits and vulnerabilities that flow from the close connections between civilian labour markets and the armed forces through individual Reservists.

Thinking through civil-military relationships and the role of the Reserves in those necessarily includes consideration of the entanglements that exist between the armed forces and with patterns and practices of employment, workplace practices and workplace organisation. These can be considered at the

scale of the individual, but also relevant are the ways broader trends towards flexibilisation and precarity within labour markets have potential knock-on effects on the recruitment and retention of Reservists. Labour markets are complex and geographically variable, and the sheer variety of interactions between Reservists and labour markets was notable across the FRRP projects. This in turn suggested that a one-size-fits-all approach to the management of civilian employment issues is challenging for defence.

Evidence from FRRP projects showed the utility of a more focused attempt to draw into the Reserves, and thus the wider UK armed forces, high-value skills and knowledge present in the civilian labour market. The labour market connections within the FR20 reforms were understood primarily with reference to specific skills and capabilities related to medicine, information and communications technologies. Furthermore, it was understood that the costs of maintaining and developing capacities in these areas in-house for military purposes could be reduced for defence budgets by drawing on existing capacity developed and sustained in the civilian labour market.

There is evidence from the Reserves Continuous Attitude Survey (RESCAS) that a higher proportion of Reservists (33%) work in the public sector, relative to the civilian workforce overall (16%).⁸ Although respondents to the FRRP projects were not sampled on their basis of their civilian occupation, it was evident that some public sector services, particularly policing, probation and other emergency services figure significantly in employment terms. There may be a shared public service ethos significant to Reservists in such occupations. Given the effects of recent, current and projected public sector budget restrictions as an effect of UK government austerity programmes, defence planners may wish to keep a watching brief on public sector employment trends because of the potential consequences for Reserves recruitment and retention.

Reserves participation is facilitated by employment which provides regular hours and patterns, and employment within a defined location or area keeping travel time to a minimum. The FRRP projects indicated the extent to which Reservists undertake complex and detailed personal management of time and space in order to facilitate participation with the Reserves alongside meeting their commitments as employees. At the macro level, there are notable trends towards requirements for employee flexibility as a feature of UK labour markets over the past two decades and more, which renders Reservists' personal management of their movements through time and space ever more complex. There would be benefits to defence from a more nuanced and detailed understanding of long-term shifts in UK employment trends.

⁸Ministry of Defence (2017) *Tri-Service Reserves Continuous Attitude Survey 2017*. London: Defence Statistics (Surveys). Office for National Statistics (2017) *Public Sector Employment, UK: December 2017*. London: ONS.

The UK armed forces reap unrecognised benefits from Reservists' engagements with civilian labour markets and sectors. These include the extension of business, communications and management practices into military units by individual Reservists with skills in these areas, and the use (sometimes quite covertly) of civilian workplace infrastructure and facilities for the completion of military tasks. There are also cultural and attitudinal benefits for the armed forces. There was a sense that as volunteers and civilians, Reservists when working in their units expected to be treated by commanding officers in ways which replicated the courtesies usually afforded employees in civilian contexts, and this in turn was of benefit to unit operational cultures.

Recommendation 3

- The defence community would benefit from a nuanced and informed understanding of long-term shifts in UK employment trends and practices, how they impact on recruitment and retention, and how they might shape workplace cultures within the armed forces (thereby assisting with the current recruitment problem).

Authors and Acknowledgements

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All views expressed in this research briefing are those of the research programme members and not necessarily the Ministry of Defence or three armed forces.

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