By Noel Dempsey

22 June 2021

UK defence personnel statistics

1 Understanding military personnel statistics
2 UK Armed Forces
3 UK Regular Forces diversity
4 UK Regular Forces: inflow and outflow
5 Reservists
6 Location of personnel

commonslibrary.parliament.uk
## Contents

1. Understanding military personnel statistics 5
2. UK Armed Forces 7
3. UK Regular Forces diversity 9
4. UK Regular Forces: inflow and outflow 11
5. Reservists 12
6. Location of personnel 14
1 Understanding military personnel statistics

There are three main ways to measure the number of military personnel (also known as strength): the total full-time UK Armed Forces, total full-time trained UK Armed Forces, or the total full-time UK Regular Forces.

The total full-time UK Armed Forces is the most comprehensive of the three measures. It comprises trained and untrained members of the UK Regular Forces, Gurkhas, and full-time reserve service personnel (FTRS).¹

The total full-time trained UK Armed Forces is the most important measure as this is what the old 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (2015 SDSR) and new ‘Defence in a Competitive Age’ (DCA) personnel targets are based on.

1.1 The SDR and DCA targets

Previously the 2015 SDSR indicated that the required number of full-time trained UK Armed Forces personnel by 2020 would be 144,200. The 2015 SDSR also re-affirmed the Government’s commitment to increase the number of trained personnel in the reserve forces (Future Reserves 2020) to 35,600.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2015 SDSR and DCA personnel targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trained personnel targets of the full-time UK Armed Forces and Future Reserves 2020 by SDR and DCA target</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015 SDR</th>
<th></th>
<th>DCA</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Reserve</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Reserve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Navy/Marines</td>
<td>30,450</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>30,450</td>
<td>3,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>82,000</td>
<td>30,100</td>
<td>72,500</td>
<td>30,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Air Force</td>
<td>31,750</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>31,750</td>
<td>1,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>144,200</td>
<td>35,060</td>
<td>134,700</td>
<td>35,060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Defence, SDSR 2015 Defence Key Facts; Ministry of Defence, Defence in a Competitive Age

¹ See this glossary for detailed explanations
The Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, announced on March 22 2021 that the army will be reduced to 72,500 by 2025. This is set out in the *Defence in a Competitive Age* command paper. This means the target of 82,000 trained personnel in the Army set by the 2015 SDSR has been scrapped.

There was no change in the targeted size of trained personnel in the Royal Navy/Marines or Royal Air Force. Nor has there been a change in the targeted size of the reserves.

### 1.2 Trained and untrained

Historically, military personnel were considered untrained until they had completed phase 2 of training:

- Phase 1 includes all new entry training to provide basic military skills
- Phase 2 includes initial individual specialisation, sub-specialisation and technical training following Phase 1 prior to joining the (trade) trained strength

The Royal Navy, Royal Marines and the Royal Air Force continue to differentiate their strength into untrained and trained.

However, from October 2016 the Army began to use two definitions: trained and trade-trained. From this point personnel who had completed Phase 1 of training were considered trained, whereas those who had completed both phases were considered trade-trained.

The reason for the change was to allow phase 1 trained personnel to help in any response to crises in the UK, like flood assistance. Trade-trained army personnel are equivalent to trained Royal Navy and RAF personnel for comparative purposes.

Trade-trained is the most important definition to understand, as this is what the 2015 target and the new DCA targets are based on.
2 UK Armed Forces

The total size of the full-time UK Armed Forces (trained and untrained)\(^2\) at 1 April 2021 was just under 159,000. Most personnel were within the Army (56%) with the remainder being equally split between the Royal Navy/Royal Marines and the RAF.

Across all services there were 30,400 officers (19%) and 128,600 personnel with other ranks (81%). The distribution of officers to other ranks varied across each service: a quarter of all RAF personnel were an officer (25%) compared to less than a fifth (16%) in the Army.

2.1 Trained strength

As at 1 April 2021 all branches of the UK Armed Forces were below the old 2015 SDSR target. This continues to be true for the Royal Navy/Marines and the RAF when combined against the DCA target, although the Army is currently 6% above targeted size.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of UK Armed Forces</th>
<th>Army</th>
<th>RN / RM</th>
<th>RAF</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DCA target</td>
<td>72,500</td>
<td>30,450</td>
<td>31,750</td>
<td>144,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trained strength</td>
<td>77,200</td>
<td>29,458</td>
<td>29,941</td>
<td>136,599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surplus / Deficit</td>
<td>4,700</td>
<td>-992</td>
<td>-1,809</td>
<td>-7,601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of target</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the DCA targets indicate the targeted required level of trained personnel, the Defence Planning Round (DPR) for the three services determine the number of trained UK Armed Forces personnel required each quarter to execute military tasks. The requirements set out by the DPR are shown in the chart below.

\(^2\) For the remainder of this paper the term trained will be used to mean any personnel who have completed Phase 1 and Phase 2 of training unless otherwise specified.
2.2 Operational pinch points

The surplus/shortfall in the size of the full-time trained UK Armed Forces against the requirement is one indicator of the Armed Forces ability to execute military tasks. Other indicators include the surplus/shortfall in key trades or ranks: these are known as Operational Pinch Points (OPPs).

An OPP is when ‘shortfalls in the trained strength of a branch specialisation, sub-specialisation or area of expertise need to be mitigated to prevent a measurable, detrimental impact on current, planned or contingent operations’.

The latest Ministry of Defence annual report shows that there were 36 OPPs in January 2020 across the Armed Forces. Broken down by service the number of OPPs are:

- Army: 17, an increase of 10 compared to April 2019 and mainly relate to Communications, Intelligence and Engineering roles
- Royal Navy/Royal Marines: 19 (including four from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, the same as in April 2019 and mainly relate to engineering roles
- RAF: A review reduced OPPs to zero, down from 7 in April 2019
3 UK Regular Forces diversity

Data on the diversity is published twice a year and focuses on the diversity of the UK Regular Forces rather than the wider UK Armed Forces. The latest publication is at 1 April 2021.

3.1 Gender

At 1 April 2021 there were 16,470 women in the UK Regular Forces and accounted for 11% of the total trained and untrained strength.

The proportion of women in the UK Regular Forces has increased over the past few years. At 1 April 1990 women accounted for around 6% of the total UK Regular Forces; by 1 April 2000 this proportion was around 8%. Since 2000 the share of women in the Regular Forces has increased almost every year.

In the 12 months to 31 March 2021, 10.7% of the total intake to the UK Regular Forces was female.

On 8 July 2016 David Cameron (the then Prime Minister) announced that women would be allowed to serve in close combat roles by 2018. This was achieved on the 25 October 2018 when Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson announced that all roles in the military are open to women.

3.2 Ethnicity

As at 1 April 2021 around 9.2% of personnel (13,700) identified as belonging to a non-white ethnic group. The Army had the highest proportion (13.4%), followed by the Royal Navy/Marines (4.8%) and RAF (3.3%). As with women, the total proportion of non-white ethnic groups personnel across the UK Regular Forces has increased over recent years: on 1 April 2000 around 1% of personnel identified as belonging to a non-white ethnic group.

In the 12 months to 21 March 2021, 8.8% of total intake were personnel from a non-white ethnic group.

---

3 Ministry of Defence, UK Defence Statistics Compendium 2009, p. 65
4 Ministry of Defence, Historic day for the military as all roles are opened to women, 25 October 2018
5 Ministry of Defence, UK Defence Statistics Compendium 2009
3.3 Age

At 1 April 2021 26% of UK Regular Forces personnel were under the age of 25. The average age of all Officers was 37, while the average age of all other ranks was 30. The overall average age was 31.

3.4 Religion

At 1 April 2021 64% of UK Regular Forces personnel declared a Christian religion. Around 32% of personnel declared no religion. The next largest religion declared was Hindu (1%) followed by Buddhist (0.7%). Around 0.4% of personnel declared they were Muslim. Other faiths (Druid, Pagan, Rastafarian, Spiritualist, Zoroastrian, Wicca, Baha’i and others) accounted for 1%.
UK Regular Forces: inflow and outflow

The chart below shows the total flow of personnel into and out of the UK Regular Forces for each year between 2000 and 2021. Inflow comprises entrants, re-entrants, direct trained entrants (including professionally qualified officers), transfers to the Army from the Gurkhas and from the reserves. Outflow includes trained and untrained personnel leaving the service, deaths, and recalled reservists on release. It does not include promotions (from other ranks to officers) or flows between services.

During the period shown, total inflow and outflow have both decreased over time. Inflow to the UK Regular Forces has decreased from 25,550 in 2000 to 16,256 in 2021 (a 36% reduction) and outflow decreased from 26,620 in 2000 to 12,299 in 2020 (53% reduction). Between 2000 and 2021 inflow has only been higher than outflow for six years.
Reservists

Reservists are civilians who commit to train a set number of days per year and may be mobilised/called into permanent service for a set period (usually no more than 12 months). They may train and deploy alongside Regular Forces on operations in the UK or overseas. Reservists are paid while training and deployed.

Each of the three services has a reserve element: Army Reserve, Maritime Reserve (comprising the Royal Navy Reserve and Royal Marines Reserve) and the RAF Reserve.

Reservists may also serve in Joint Forces Command, for example in the Joint Cyber Reserve Force.

In addition to the volunteer Reserves are the Regular Reserves: former personnel who retain a liability (obligation) to be called up for service in times of need are known as Regular Reserves.

The terms used for reservists can be confusing although a couple of categories worth mentioning: Mobilised Reservists are Volunteer or Regular Reserves who have been called into permanent service under the Reserve Forces Act 1996. Then there is a separate category of reservists who work full-time for a set period. These are known as Full-Time Reserve Service (FTRS) personnel and are used differently by each service and may have different commitments.

A glossary of terms used for reservists in the quarterly personnel statistical bulletins is available here.

Further information on Armed Forces Reserves, including commentary on Government policy since 2010 and current issues, can be found in a Lords Library briefing paper Armed Forces Reserves.

5.1 Future Reserves 2020

The Future Reserves 2020 (FR2020) refers to the programme begun under the Coalition Government (2010-15) to expand the size of the trained element of the Armed Forces Reserves, increase the circumstances in which they might be deployed, and better integrate the reserves with the regulars.

This policy was driven by the findings of an independent commission into the Reserves in 2011 and encapsulated in a 2013 White Paper ‘Reserves in Future Force 2020: valuable and valued’ (Cm 8655). The Defence Reform Act
2014 removed limitations on how the Reserves could be used and changed the name of the Territorial Army to Army Reserve.

The Ministry of Defence provided revised trained strength targets for the Reserves in November 2016 (HCWS248), revising those announced in December 2013.

The original December 2013 target was based on the number of trained personnel (those who have passed Phase 1 and Phase 2 training). Following the change in definition of the trained strength for the UK Regular Army and Army Reserve in 2016, the measurement/target for the Army Reserve is based on those who have passed Phase 1 only. The Maritime and RAF Reserves targets were unchanged.

The November 2016 statement set the trained strength targets for 31 March 2019 at 35,060 personnel: 30,100 personnel for the Army Reserve, 3,100 personnel for the Maritime Reserve, and 1,860 personnel for the RAF Reserve.

Neither the Defence in a Competitive Age or Reserve Forces Review 2030 papers specifically mentioned any change to the targeted size of the reserves.

The RAF Reserve is the only element of the FR2020 to have achieved its targeted size. The Maritime Reserve is close to achieving its target - by April 2021 it was shy of its 3,100 target by 232 personnel. The Army Reserve is currently missing its target by 3,158 personnel; this is despite the change in the trained strength measurement/target which occurred in October 2016. Overall, the trained strength of personnel within the FR2020 programme at 1 April 2021 was 32,700 – this is a deficit of 2,360 against the target.
Location of personnel

The Ministry of Defence publish annual data on the stationed location of trained and untrained UK Regular Forces personnel.\(^6\)

As at 1 April 2020 (the most recent data available) most personnel were stationed in the United Kingdom (around 96%). Of the 10,500 personnel stationed overseas the majority were in Europe (63%), followed by North America (16%) and North Africa and the Middle East (8%). Around 13% of personnel were stationed elsewhere in the world.

Within Europe (excluding the United Kingdom) most personnel were in Cyprus (2,290) and Germany (540). Around 1,000 personnel were stationed across Belgium, Gibraltar, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Norway, France and the Czech Republic.

Following the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review there has been a withdrawal of the UK’s personnel presence from Germany (a reduction of 15,500) with the aim to completely remove personnel by 2020.\(^7\)

As at 1 April 2020 of those personnel stationed in the United Kingdom the large majority were in England (90%), 7% were stationed in Scotland, 2% were in Wales and 1% were in Northern Ireland.

---

\(^6\) The stationed location for personnel in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines who are on sea service is recorded as the location containing the home port of their ship. Members of the Royal Air Force serving in the South Atlantic are recorded against the location of their home base. Any other personnel who are deployed on operations are recorded against their most recent stationed location.

\(^7\) Except for a small number of liaison and exchange posts.
The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:

commonslibrary.parliament.uk

@commonslibrary