



House of Commons
Defence Committee

**Sunset for the Royal
Marines? The Royal
Marines and UK
amphibious capability:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Third Report**

**Sixth Special Report of
Session 2017–19**

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The Defence Committee

The Defence Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Defence and its associated public bodies.

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Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/defcom and in print by Order of the House.

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Sixth Special Report

On 4 February 2018, the Defence Committee published its Third Report of Session 2017–19 [HC 622] on *Sunset for the Royal Marines? The Royal Marines and UK amphibious capability*. The response from the Government was received on 4 May 2018. The response is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government Response

The Government notes and welcomes the House of Commons Defence Committee's inquiry 'The Royal Marines and UK amphibious capability inquiry' and the findings set out in the Committee's third report published on 4 February 2018.

The Government recognises that the Royal Marines are an integral part of the Armed Forces, and are pivotal to the defence of the United Kingdom (UK) and, indeed, to the defence of others. The Royal Marines are the UK's Commando Force and the Royal Navy's (RN) amphibious troops. An elite force held at very high readiness, they are trained for worldwide rapid response, able to deal with a wide spectrum of threats and security challenges, operating in often dangerous and extremely difficult circumstances.

The Royal Marines have provided 353 years of unbroken service, of protecting the nation's security, of distinction. Through dedication, impressive training and incredible resilience they have played a crucial role in keeping our country safe, and will continue to do so.

The Government's responses to the Committee's Conclusions and Recommendations are detailed below.

The National Security Capability Review

1. The NSCR is still ongoing and we will examine the process and its substantive outcomes when it has concluded. Even with the Defence element of the NSCR being separated from the rest of the review, as has recently been announced, the conclusions and recommendations in this report have continuing relevance to the process that this sorry episode has demonstrated. The entanglement of Defence with other issues under the control of senior National Security Council/Cabinet Office officials has led to an unacceptable lack of Ministerial accountability. We warmly welcome the new Defence Secretary's success in regaining control of the Defence Review process, but we remain concerned at the post-Levene disintegration of the Chiefs of Staff Committee as the primary source of direct military advice to the Government. (Paragraph 12)

The Government works on the principles of Parliamentary sovereignty. Ministry of Defence (MOD) Ministers are, and will remain, accountable to Parliament, providing full and accurate information about the Government's Defence policies and decisions, and the actions of the Department and the Armed Forces. This has not changed as a result of Lord Levene's 2010 Defence Reform Review.

2. Our predecessors, along with other Committees such as the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, have been critical of the process surrounding previous SDSRs: in contrast to earlier exercises, such as the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, there has been very little consultation and engagement outside Government during

the review process. Unfortunately, we see no evidence of this state of affairs changing in the NSCR. Bodies that would expect to be consulted in the course of these reviews have not been 'brought in' to the process, and have struggled to receive substantive answers to many questions that have arisen. This is a particularly serious omission where Parliament is concerned. Decisions of this magnitude should be debated in Parliament and information provided to select committees to allow for proper scrutiny. Parliament should also have real influence on the review process. Presenting the outcome of a review of this nature to Parliament without any prior Parliamentary input or scrutiny is totally unacceptable. This is not entirely the fault of the Ministry of Defence, as the NSCR is being co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office. Nonetheless, a lack of engagement will only encourage the emergence of rumours and leaks that distract from the overall review. The Department may dismiss such reports as 'speculation', but they are inevitable in a secretive—indeed a closed—process without proper external engagement, given the scale of the force structure reconfigurations that are reportedly being considered. The Department may wish to reflect upon this in future defence and security review exercises. We recommend that the Modernising Defence Programme be used as an opportunity finally to involve those organisations, individuals and institutions—including Parliament—which have previously made valuable contributions to strategic defence reviews. (Paragraph 13)

The Government recognises the importance of wide engagement on a programme that is core to the long-term security of the UK. The MOD will engage widely, including with: Parliament; think tanks, academics and other Defence experts; international allies and partners; personnel from across Defence; the media; Devolved Administrations; Defence industry; and the public. Importantly, the Government is keen that the HCDC, where appropriate, is able to provide input into the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP).

The MDP will build on the firm foundations of the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (NSS / SDSR15) and the National Security Capability Review (NSCR).

The Committee will wish to be aware that the MDP is internal to Defence, and all of the work will be led by MOD, in line with the context of the NSS, working closely with the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury.

The Defence Secretary, Permanent Secretary and Chief of Defence Staff will direct the programme. Final decision-making authority sits with the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Defence Secretary, supported by the National Security Council.

Through the MDP, the MOD aims to modernise Defence and the Armed Forces more quickly in light of the increasing threats we are facing, and to deliver better military capability and value for money.

3. The Secretary of State and other Defence Ministers are accountable to Parliament for all the policies, decisions and actions of their department. This is a longstanding constitutional principle which is articulated in the Ministerial Code. It is not acceptable for Ministers to avoid answering questions on force structure and manpower changes on the basis that these were decisions taken by the Service Chiefs, as if Ministers are devoid of responsibility to account for these decisions. If this is the way that the Levene Reforms have been interpreted by the Department, then this is an interpretation made

in error. It is not possible for any Department of State to arrange itself internally so as to insulate Ministers from Parliamentary accountability or allow them to hide behind officials. The Service Chiefs are more distant from strategic decision-making than they have been at any point in modern history. The decisions they are required to make on force structure are often invidious choices, entirely restricted by the political and financial parameters, set by Ministers, on how resources are allocated. The Department should be aware that we will not accept an abdication of accountability by Ministers, and will expect Ministers, led by the new Secretary of State, fully to account for and explain the policy rationale behind force structure changes that emerge from this or any future Defence review process. (Paragraph 14)

The Government fully accepts and upholds the long-standing principle of Ministerial accountability to Parliament. The Levene reforms have not altered or diluted this principle in any way. The Government regrets if any impression to the contrary has been given to the Committee.

Amphibious warfare

4. The more recent doctrine and tasking of amphibious units places great emphasis on unopposed landings, ideally at night, to maximise stealth, surprise and the amount of time available to get reinforcements and equipment ashore before the enemy is in a position to counterattack. Any assessment of current UK amphibious capability based on a 'D-Day'-style conception of amphibious landings, in the teeth of all-out enemy resistance, completely misses the point. (Paragraph 18)

The UK's amphibious forces are configured and trained to provide manoeuvre from the maritime flank, across the spectrum of operations, either discretely or as part of a larger Joint Force. The scale and tactics employed to achieve this will be determined by the operational requirement, which can range from small groups of specialists targeting a specific requirement to considerable overt mass alongside allies, with whom the UK's amphibious forces are interoperable by design and trained with on a regular basis.

5. The institutional expertise the United Kingdom possesses in amphibious warfare has been hard won, and continues to be maintained today in UK Armed Forces by a group of specialists, mainly found in the Royal Marines and in the Royal Navy's amphibious fleet. Dispensing with a unique cadre of military expertise from across the three Services, or reducing it to the level where it cannot be deployed on a strategically meaningful scale, would be an irreparable act of folly. The UK is one of the few nations that have a sovereign capability in this specialism. Reductions of the type and scale that are reportedly being contemplated would wipe this out, and there would be no going back. It would be yet another step away from full-spectrum capability. (Paragraph 24)

The Government has consistently acknowledged the UK's international standing in the area of amphibious warfare, and the contribution made to that reputation by the RN and the Royal Marines. This is why the Government remains committed to ensuring the future of the amphibious warfare capability within our future force structures.

The Royal Marines

6. We are concerned by the reduction in the strength of the Royal Marines inflicted since 2010, and the further reductions that will follow from the restructuring of 42 Commando. 3 Commando Brigade is required to generate high readiness forces, often entailing units being at short notice to move for extended periods. With the operational tempo remaining high, sustaining Lead Commando Group at high readiness on a reduced strength will put further strain on personnel and equipment. We believe that reductions on the scale contemplated would bring 3 Commando Brigade below the critical mass needed for it to maintain readiness and conduct its standing tasks, let alone be deployed at a tactically significant strength on operations. This is without the further dramatic cuts in personnel that are reportedly being considered. The Department should tell us how the readiness of 3 Commando Brigade and Lead Commando Group is to be sustained following the restructuring announced in April 2017. (Paragraph 32)

The Government notes the concerns of the Committee, and recognises the apprehensions that have been raised by reports of these changes. The Government can reassure the Committee that the Royal Marines remain an integral part of the Naval Service's future.

With regard to the reduction in the Royal Marines headcount of 200 announced in April 2017, Project SYKES (the name given to the 3 Commando Brigade restructuring) was instigated to meet two overarching objectives: first, to improve the force generation mechanisms of 3 Commando Brigade and second, to identify manpower efficiencies. On the latter, 100 of the 200 headcount are administrative or training roles from across the Corps where it has been determined that this is not the best use of highly trained Royal Marines Commandos and these roles could be carried out by Reservists and civilians. The other 100 positions arise from the restructure developed by 3 Commando Brigade. This work determined that it would be beneficial to Defence and the RN to build a specialised Maritime Operations Commando Unit. 3 Commando Brigade therefore evolved to ensure that the Brigade was maximising their utility, addressing future threats and ensuring continued integration with the RN.

These changes do not diminish the capability of the Marines – there has been no reduction on the SDSR 15 endorsed headmarks for 3 Commando Brigade. If anything, this concentrates the skills of our highly trained Royal Marines where they can be best used.

7. 3 Brigade's position as a formation that is dependent on elements from all three Services to be deployable makes it particularly vulnerable at a time when all Services are facing considerable manpower pressures. It is the unique nature of the Brigade that gives it its strength, and reductions in supporting elements from other Services and branches would also compromise its capacity as a deployable fighting force.(Paragraph 33)

The Government recognises the value that the additional Army units provide to the strength of 3 Commando Brigade's ability to operate as a self-contained expeditionary force. It has been open about the recruitment challenges that are faced in some specialist areas, but continues to ensure that the Armed Forces have sufficient personnel to meet their operational requirements.

8. The Royal Marines and attached commando units famously have one of the most rigorous and demanding military training regimes in the world, enabling them to be ready to survive, manoeuvre and fight in a variety of roles and in extreme environmental conditions. Amphibious operations place a premium on specialist training in all parts of the chain of command to plan and execute these complex military tasks. Exercises are vital for putting this training into practice, for maintaining readiness, and for maintaining a credible, high visibility deterrent. Cuts to training and exercises because of lack of resources are another sign of the neglect of this capability. We require the Department to set out in detail, for each training serial or exercise due to involve elements of 3 Commando Brigade that has been run at reduced capacity or cancelled in FY 2017–18: a) the individual units that did or were due to participate in that serial or exercise; b) the extent of reduction in capacity; c) the cost of running the serial or exercise at full capacity; d) the reason for reduction in capacity or cancellation, and e) whether the serial or exercise will be reinstated at full capacity in FY 2018–19 and, if not, why not? (Paragraph 37)

This Government recognises that the Royal Marines have a worldwide reputation as one of the world's most capable fighting forces, with a global reputation for their Mountain and Cold Weather Warfare expertise.

In support of Navy Command's Annual Budget Cycle 17, and as a short term measure, a number of collective training exercises did not take place in financial year 2017/18. These exercises include the Royal Marines' Winter Deployment to Norway in 2018 (45 Cdo); Exercise Curry Trail 18 a jungle training exercise in Belize (45 Cdo); Exercise Orange Marauder (45 Cdo); Exercise Steel Sabre (29 Cdo); and the Royal Marines Reserve Exercises Commando Phoenix and Hair Spring 18 (Norway). It is anticipated that specialist Royal Marine collective training overseas will resume in the next financial year. The Government can reassure the Committee that the Royal Marines, including the Lead Commando Group, continue to retain their ability to respond to a broad range of contingent or emerging tasking.

The training of instructors is recognised as essential to the maintenance of such environmental expertise and has continued with the Royal Marines Mountain Leaders training in Norway as planned.

For operational security reasons, the Government does not comment on the level of detail requested by the Committee in relation to the training or exercises for 3 Commando Brigade, as disclosure would, or would likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces.

9. It is a matter of particular embarrassment that resource constraints have affected training and exercising with our allies. These opportunities for joint training are invaluable for defence co-operation and for sustaining interoperability. These relationships, which have been forged by the Royal Marines with their American and Dutch counterparts, are models of defence co-operation. Running down the ability of 3 Commando Brigade to participate in a meaningful way in these exercises has the potential to do serious damage to this country's defence relationships with our closest allies. It also puts at risk our standing commitments to NATO, at a time when the organisation that is the cornerstone of our defence policy needs our full support. (Paragraph 38)

Training and exercising with multinational forces remains an important element in the development of our Armed Forces' capabilities. Defence continually assesses and prioritises activities in support of mandated outputs and it is a normal part of military and financial management and prioritisation for specific courses or exercises to be cancelled, postponed or rescheduled, in accordance with operational resources or commitments. The UK Armed Forces will continue to make a significant contribution to international military co-operation through exercises and international operations.

10. The contribution made to UK Special Forces by the Royal Marines is disproportionate to the size of the Corps and is indicative of the quality of the people who pass through its ranks. The growth in the use and tasking of Special Forces in recent years makes a continuing 'pipeline' of trained and resilient personnel vital. Reducing the strength of the Royal Marines will substantially reduce the recruitment pool available, and reduce Special Forces' amphibious warfare expertise. (Paragraph 41)

While it is rightly the case that the Government will not comment on the UK's Special Forces, like the Committee, it recognises the contribution the Royal Marines continue to make in this area of operational capability. The Government will continue to support the significant contribution such forces make to the UK's security at home and abroad.

11. We welcome the decision to consolidate HQs of a number of units in 3 Commando Brigade to a new location in the Plymouth/Torpoint area. This is in keeping with the Department's overall objectives to make better use of the Defence Estate and reduce its cost, and will have the benefits of consolidating units within the Brigade. But the Department should communicate clearly and often with the personnel affected and their families as the reforms to the Defence Estate proceed, and we would urge that the work in relation to Plymouth/Torpoint site is completed and its outcome communicated as soon as is possible. (Paragraph 43)

The Government recognises the importance of timely communication with their personnel and their families affected by any decisions related to the Better Defence Estate Strategy. All sites included in the announced proposed closures are subject to further assessment studies for feasibility and cost, which will report in early 2019. A subsequent announcement will be made following this, with members of the Corps informed through internal communications.

The Committee will wish to be aware that the MOD is investing £4 billion over ten years to create a Defence estate which supports capability by being of better quality, more cost effective and efficient, as well as 30% smaller overall by 2040. Supporting military capability is at the heart of this Strategy, which has been developed with military advice from the Front Line Commands. It enables infrastructure that is affordable and optimised to support Defence capabilities, outputs and communities both now and in the future.

12. Given the number of challenges the Corps is facing, it is unsurprising that the combination of these factors is beginning to have a serious effect on morale and Service satisfaction. The Royal Marines have historically exhibited a higher than average level of morale, Service and unit satisfaction than across the other parts of the Armed Forces. AFCAS 2017 shows that the Royal Marines have seen large decreases in these categories. While falling morale and satisfaction across all Services deserve urgent

attention from the Department, these notably dramatic reductions, within units that are known for their distinctive ethos and level of 'esprit de corps' are a matter of particular concern. The reports that have emerged about the NSCR will have done nothing to improve morale amongst the Royal Marines and attached units, and may well do further damage. The Department has indicated in its written evidence that work has been initiated to gather data on outflow and morale to inform future action plans. We wish to receive detailed information on the work that is being done, the nature of the data being gathered, the level of resource and staffing being dedicated to this exercise, and other steps that are being taken to arrest these alarming reductions in morale. (Paragraph 45)

The Government recognises that the Royal Marines are highly trained and committed individuals who pride themselves on being a very high readiness force capable of operating anywhere around the world. With a deep sense of duty, they have enjoyed success across the spectrum of military conflict.

The management of morale in the Royal Marines and, indeed, the wider Armed Forces is a high priority for Defence. The Department seeks to measure morale in a robust, consistent and scientific manner, through mechanisms such as the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS).

There are multiple and interconnected factors that influence morale in the Royal Marines, no one factor can be seen in isolation. However, it is well known that Royal Marines join to go on operations, thus it is clear to their chain of command that cuts in activity in 2017 did affect the Corps' morale. Maintenance of activity levels in 2018/19 will not only ensure operational readiness and specialist skills, but also maintain morale and hence retention.

The Armed Forces Covenant acknowledges the sacrifice made by Service personnel and their families, not least that of the Royal Marines. The launch of the Armed Forces Families Strategy alongside the Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy seeks to improve the Department's understanding of the lived experience of Service personnel and their families so that this is appropriately reflected in the Service Offer.

Following the publication of AFCAS 17, action plans were devised by the Naval Service's Heads of Fighting Arms to address the issues raised, which will be delivered via the Chain of Command. In particular, a Personnel Liaison Team has been established, which supports serving personnel and their families, and which complements the Divisional System by providing an open and honest feedback loop to the senior leadership and policy makers of the Naval Service. We are also developing a number of other initiatives under the Armed Forces People Programme which is focused on modernising the employment offer for Service personnel to allow us to attract and retain the right mix of people and skills.

With regard to the Royal Marines specifically, the introduction of women into the Royal Marines General Service will enable the Corps to recruit from a much wider base than ever before. In the longer term, the findings of the Fleet Commander sponsored Royal Marines Ethics Study will be included in the culture and training of Commando 2035, ensuring that the Royal Marines remain modern, relevant and representative of the best elements of the UK populace.

Amphibious ships

13. We strongly oppose the withdrawal of the Albion class LPDs from service ahead of their out-of-service dates in 2033 and 2034. They are purpose-built amphibious assault platforms which provide the primary means of deploying a landing force over a beach. There are no other ships in the Royal Navy which could conceivably sustain this capability in the future. The wider utility and the versatility of the LPDs beyond their primary roles in amphibious assault are substantial, and will be sacrificed if their disposal goes ahead. (Paragraph 57)

The Government notes the Committee's opposition to the withdrawal of the Royal Navy Albion class Landing Platform Docks (LPD). As advised by the previous Minister for Defence Procurement in her letter of 25 January 2017 to the Chairman of the Committee, there are no current plans to decommission HMS ALBION and HMS BULWARK early, indeed, HMS ALBION has completed her refit and recently deployed to the Asia-Pacific to support allies in the region. Furthermore, Defence is constantly reviewing future capability requirements and recognises the utility of littoral Manoeuvre. As the Committee would expect, at this early stage of the MDP all elements of the force structure remain in scope for modernisation. However, any speculation regarding the deletion of the Albion-class LPDs does not represent the official position of the Department, nor does it reflect the ongoing requirement for the wider utility and capabilities provided by those ships.

14. The Ocean has repeatedly shown her worth, being at the centre of the UK's engagements in Sierra Leone, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Her disposal without replacement is a serious loss to the amphibious fleet and is rightly criticised throughout the evidence we have received (Paragraph 58)

It is recognised that the decommissioning of HMS OCEAN has been a deeply emotive subject. HMS OCEAN entered service in 1998 with a specific service life, based on her build specification, of 20 years. The MOD continued to invest in her to ensure that she remained operationally effective. Her refit from December 2012 to August 2014 was necessary to allow her continued use; without that investment she would have been unable to take part in further operations.

15. The decision taken in 2015 to dispose of HMS Ocean without replacement is to be greatly regretted. Her unique capabilities and versatility as a platform have been demonstrated time and again on operations. Her disposal represents a serious loss to the amphibious fleet, and was the first indication that the Royal Navy's amphibious capability is being run down to release necessary manpower for fixed-wing aircraft carriers. (Paragraph 66)

While her contribution to the UK's operations should be recognised, HMS OCEAN's Out of Service Date was well known and planned for by the RN. As announced in the SDSR, the Queen Elizabeth Class (QEC) Aircraft Carriers will be enhanced to support our amphibious capability. Together with the existing amphibious ships of the RN [HMS ALBION and HMS BULWARK] and the Bay Class ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA), these will provide the capability to deploy our amphibious forces.

16. We ask the Department to provide us with details on every aspect of the enhancement of the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers to support amphibious capability set out in the 2015 SDSR, and the timescale for completion of the enhancement. We request

information on whether it is planned for one or both Queen Elizabeth class carriers to operate as an LPH, and the modifications that this would require. If this is the case, we would also request details on whether it is intended for the carrier to operate fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft simultaneously—for example, the number of helicopter spots that can be operated while simultaneously maintaining fixed-wing launch and recovery capability. We request details on the intended command, control and communications systems that are part of this modification and how the capacity of these systems compares with those of an Albion class LPD. We understand that the number of F-35s that the carriers will operate has not yet been confirmed, but ask how many personnel would make up the Carrier Air Wing and how these personnel can be accommodated at the same time as an embarked amphibious force. (Paragraph 67)

Following the withdrawal from service of HMS OCEAN on 31 March 2018, the aviation element of the Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH) role will be re-invested in HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH.

A similar LPH operating capability will be delivered by HMS PRINCE OF WALES, soon after she enters service. Together with the existing amphibious ships of the RN and the Bay Class ships of the RFA, the aircraft carriers will provide the capability to deploy our amphibious forces and support RN operations.

The new enhancements to the aircraft carriers would include Communications Systems for amphibious operations, improving the domestic services in the aircraft carrier for Royal Marines, providing ammunition storage, increasing the number of helicopter operating spots and expanding the operating capacity for helicopters. We are continuously reviewing what capability we require and any further enhancements will be examined in the future. At this juncture, it is worth remembering that, in any configuration, the QEC will enhance our ability to conduct littoral operations. A carrier capability will offer fifth generation fighter aircraft (and the attendant capabilities they deliver) in support of land activity.

For operational security reasons, we do not comment on specific capabilities or force composition, as this would, or would be likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces.

17. Several issues arise which would create problems for a carrier acting as an amphibious platform in any configuration. The most significant of these is that carriers can provide only an airborne amphibious capability and cannot transfer any equipment, vehicles or supplies that are too heavy to airlift. Unlike HMS Ocean, the Queen Elizabeth class has no capacity to operate landing craft. The proximity to the shore with which these high-value assets might have to operate is also, in an age of increasingly sophisticated anti-ship missile capabilities, very hazardous. (Paragraph 68)

On the subject of Carrier protection, the QEC Aircraft Carriers will operate as part of a Maritime Task Group, tailored to meet the required task. While the precise number and mix of vessels deployed would depend on the operational circumstances at the time, our Armed Forces will be able to draw on other units for support. These will all contribute

to the military effectiveness of the group and to its protection as a whole. It is also worth noting that many of our operations are conducted with Allies and in coalitions so a wide spectrum of armaments and capabilities is available.

18. In combination with purpose-built amphibious ships such as the LPDs, the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers could provide support to an amphibious operation. However, they are not primarily designed as amphibious ships and cannot operate as such in a stand-alone role. This makes them a poor substitute for an amphibious assault ship in this specialist role. (Paragraph 69)

The QEC Aircraft Carriers have been designed to operate as part of a Maritime Task Group in both the Carrier Strike and Littoral Manoeuvre roles, offering a significant basing option for the projection of air and amphibious power. It has been made clear that Carriers can offer a number of operational capabilities, one of which is, in conjunction with other Armed Forces assets and units, the ability to enhance and support amphibious operations.

19. The Bay class LSD(A)s are valuable vessels for supporting amphibious operations alongside amphibious warships and have recently shown their suitability for conducting a range of tasks including disaster relief operations. For the reasons we have set out, they are, nevertheless, no substitute for dedicated amphibious assault warships. (Paragraph 75)

The RFA ships offer invaluable support to the RN. While they can conduct many of the tasks of Royal Naval vessels, should they be required to operate in an amphibious capacity, they would do so with the support of other RN assets. The actual requirements for amphibious capability will be dependent on the operational task.

20. With the understanding that the tender process for the Type 31e Frigate is still ongoing, the Royal Navy's specification information for the vessel suggests that it would be able to embark only a force of tactically negligible size, let alone the equipment and supplies necessary to sustain a landing force ashore. While some capacity for aviation is also included in the Type 31e specification, it is not at all clear how an embarked force would be moved to its objective. We ask the MoD to give us further details on the amphibious role that is contemplated for the Type 31e, particularly in relation to the size of a landing force that could be embarked, the space for its equipment and how such a force might be delivered to its objective. (Paragraph 78)

The Government stands by the 2015 SDSR commitment to design and build the Type 31e (T31e) Frigate, with the first ship to be accepted by 2023. The intention is that the T31e will replace the existing General Purpose variant Type 23 Frigates. The T31e will be geared towards maritime security and Defence engagement, including the Fleet Ready Escort, our fixed tasks in the South Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Gulf, and our NATO commitments. The T31e will be designed with export in mind, a credible, versatile frigate, capable of independent and sustained global operations.

The Type 31e will be procured through competition. A UK owned design and UK build and integration will be specified, with a clear focus on exportability of the design from the outset. The aspiration is that the T31e will need a hangar and flight deck, accommodation to augment the ship's company with a variety of mission specialists as required, together with appropriate stowage facilities. Specific capability requirements will be finalised as the

programme matures, which includes the potential for T31e to provide Force Protection to amphibious operations. It has never been part of the requirement set that the ship, a frigate, will contribute significantly to embarkation and sustainment of the landing force.

21. Previous operations have relied on civilian commercial vessels being chartered or requisitioned ('taken up from trade') to provide sealift for personnel, equipment and supplies. This relies on being able to obtain suitable civilian vessels at short notice. Noting both the decline in the numbers of registered militarily useful commercial vessels and a reduction of the number of Point class ships that are chartered by the department to support operations, we seek reassurance that the need for strategic sealift is being adequately prioritised. We ask the MoD to explain the process which it and the Department for Transport use to identify and register militarily useful vessels. Given the decline in these numbers since the last review of strategic sealift requirement in 2011, we also request the Department to revisit this issue, with a view to taking steps to halt the decline. We further request an update on the current status of the agreements in place with Foreland Shipping relating to the Point class vessels, and an explanation of why two of them were released from the contract arrangements in 2012. (Paragraph 82)

Should extra capability or capacity be required at a time of national emergency or war, as has been the case in the past, the MOD would charter suitable merchant ships from the commercial market. The extent of such a requirement would of course depend on the nature of the circumstances faced.

The requirement to charter 'shipping to be taken up from trade' can vary widely depending on the circumstances faced; it is therefore not possible to provide exact details until the specific requirements are known.

With regard to the MOD contract with Foreland Shipping Ltd for the provision of four Point class roll-on, roll-off vessels, this contract expires on 31 December 2024. The review of the MOD's strategic sealift requirement in autumn 2011 concluded that better value for money would be achieved if the number of vessels contracted as part of this Private Finance Initiative (PFI) was reduced from six to four. This reduction became effective on 27 April 2012. Under the PFI agreement all six vessels are owned and operated by Foreland Shipping.

22. Disposal of the LPDs and the reduction in strength of the Royal Marines would have a profound effect on Plymouth, a city which shares a long association with the amphibious fleet and which has been designated as a future Amphibious Centre of Specialisation. As well as the impact it would have locally, it would represent a substantial waste of hundreds of millions of pounds of investment that has been put into these units and this capability. We ask the Department to provide us with details of the work that it has done in the course of the National Security Capability Review on examining the impact on local communities, and how it will be incorporated into the work of the Modernising Defence Programme. (Paragraph 84)

The Government recognises that the Naval Service presence in Plymouth generates substantial local economic activity. The Committee will wish to be aware that it is MOD policy not to provide a breakdown by geographical or economic area of the potential commercial and economic benefits of Government investment.

The contributions made by all three of Her Majesty's Naval Bases (HMNB) are a vital component to our national maritime capability, and a major source of employment nationally and in their surrounding communities. The MOD and the Naval Service remain firmly committed to effectively utilising our Naval Bases, with each bringing their own contribution to our nation's defence.

The Government can reassure the Committee that HMNB Devonport continues to be of vital importance to the RN, retaining key elements that support the protection of the UK and help us conduct our operations in support of British interests world-wide.

The future for Devonport Naval Base is extremely positive, and even when all submarines are based in HMNB Clyde, Devonport will remain a refit and maintenance facility for the Submarine Flotilla, delivering the major refit, overhauls and refuel of all classes.

Furthermore, HMNB Devonport is home to Britain's amphibious ships, survey vessels and half her frigates, plus the training hub of the front-line Fleet, Flag Officer Sea Training, and the RN's Amphibious Centre of Excellence at Royal Marines Tamar. The recently announced re-basing of the Type 23 Anti-Submarine Warfare Frigates will see Devonport become the focus for the generation of surface ship Anti-Submarine Warfare capability. It will also bring the RN another step closer to delivering a Carrier Strike Task Group, with both Portsmouth and Devonport playing key roles in the delivery of this national capability.

The future of amphibious warfare

23. Global trends point to an increasing proportion of the world's population living in coastal and littoral zones. There is growing awareness that future conflicts are likely to take place in or near 'megacities', and a large proportion of these cities will be on or near a coastline. An amphibious capability opens a range of military options in such an environment. (Paragraph 94)

The Government continues to assess the global security context and its implications for Defence policy. Our Armed Forces plan and train for a number of scenarios, requiring the use of a range of military responses, and this includes the use of our amphibious capabilities.

24. The Government has put a renewed emphasis on the UK having an increased role outside the Euro-Atlantic area and there have been continued discussions of returning to a presence East of Suez. Amphibious platforms, with their inherent flexibility and capacity to operate at considerable distance from the home base, are ideally suited for this role. The uncertain situation in Asia-Pacific, with continuing tensions in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula, would make having a flexible, sea-based platform, with the ability to deliver amphibious infantry trained to operate in extreme environmental conditions, highly desirable. (Paragraph 95)

Amphibious ships are one of the options available for the UK when deciding to globally deploy military force. The force structure, capability, and use of such forces will be dependent on our operational intent and requirements in each case. Our aim is to provide our Armed Forces with the assets that enable them to have the flexibility to adapt to the circumstances they may face in any part of the world.

25. At a time when all of the world's major defence powers are investing in amphibious units, the United Kingdom is reportedly considering divesting itself of these vital assets. Our allies place a great deal of value on amphibious capability. Both allies and potential adversaries see the value in their amphibious platforms and are seeking to increase their strength and capacity. Once this capability is disposed of, it cannot be regenerated quickly or easily. Its deletion or reduction by the Modernising Defence Programme would reinforce the view that the exercise is wholly divorced from strategic reality. Such a step would signal that we are moving further away from cooperating with our allies and matching our competitors. (Paragraph 96)

We recognise the importance of the UK's capability to deploy amphibious forces, which will be enhanced by the QEC Aircraft Carriers. Through the MDP, we aim to build on the strengths of the Armed Forces, modernising them more quickly in light of the increasing threats we are facing, and delivering better military capability and value for money.

26. The international investment in amphibious capability demonstrates the continuing relevance of amphibious operations to modern warfare. Doctrine and platforms will continue to adapt as both the nature of these operations and the technology behind them change. Nonetheless, the ability to strike an enemy from a secure sea base, the ability to insert a force at a point where an enemy is vulnerable and not expecting to be attacked, and the ability to concentrate, reinforce and resupply faster than an enemy is able to do the same, are basic points of advantage in warfare. In restricting these, the UK would be decreasing the range of tactical options available to commanders, and assuming a greater level of risk in operations. (Paragraph 97)

The Committee's points are noted and this is why the Government has continued to invest in a range of platforms and technologies that will enable our Armed Forces to train and deliver military capability in a range of scenarios. The new QEC Aircraft Carriers, submarines and frigates will enable our military to be an adaptive force, with the flexibility to respond to our operational needs.

27. The United Kingdom's unique experience and expertise in amphibious operations are assets which should be sustained. Their relevance to modern warfare is clear and the evidence submitted to our Inquiry overwhelmingly confirms that they will continue to be relevant in the future. We reject the argument that the capability to project force from the sea over a beach is obsolete. With a diversifying and uncertain picture of future threats, the UK should be enhancing, not diminishing its options. Disposing of our amphibious capability would not only put the interests of this country at serious risk, but would also be a drastic waste of tailor-made vessels, expensively refitted for another 15 years' use, and of a military specialism that has been fostered across all three Services. (Paragraph 98)

The Government has made clear that it is not disposing of the UK's amphibious capability. Prior to her decommissioning, the MOD continued to invest in HMS OCEAN to ensure that she remained operationally effective, and this investment was fully utilised right up to the end of her service life. HMS OCEAN was subsequently sold to the Brazilian Navy for £84M, with £55M of the revenue generated being reinvested in Defence. [The difference between the sale cost and the revenue generated for Defence is due to the fact that the ship needed to be made ready to meet the requirements of the Brazilian Navy. The cost of this work was borne by the Government of Brazil and included in the sale price].

28. The Royal Marines have always shown resilience and flexibility in absorbing the changes that have arisen as the nature of warfare evolved. In recent years, however, the Corps has had to face a succession of challenges which are putting 3 Commando Brigade's status as a highly trained, high readiness commando force, that is able to deploy independently at scale, under threat. These challenges have also been having an appreciable effect on the formerly high morale and sense of unit pride—traditionally the hallmarks—of the Royal Marines. This was evident even before the reports of the cuts being considered as part of the NSCR, which are likely dramatically to reduce capacity and morale much further. After more than three and-a-half centuries of service to the nation, Her Majesty's Corps of Royal Marines is in danger of being sacrificed to short-term Treasury bookkeeping. (Paragraph 99)

The Government recognises that recent speculation in the media has been unsettling to our personnel, their families and the wider communities that continue to support them. The morale in the Royal Marines is recognised as a high priority for Defence and the position to address this issue is outlined in the response to Paragraph 12 of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations.

29. Along with the Royal Marines, the Albion class ships lie at the heart of UK amphibious capability. There is no substitute for these dedicated and sophisticated platforms. Attempts to create stop-gap solutions, with vessels that are not designed for the purpose, will result in the assumption of wholly unacceptable levels of operational risk. We understand that the Royal Navy and Royal Marines will need to adapt, as they move towards what the First Sea Lord has called a 'carrier-centric future'. However recent defence reviews have made this adaptation a reductive rather than a constructive process, informed largely by resource constraints and consequential manpower shortages, rather than by any coherent strategic concept or any identifiable operational requirements. (Paragraph 100)

As advised by the previous Minister for Defence Procurement in her letter of 25 January 2017 to the Chairman of the Committee, there is no current plan to decommission HMS ALBION and HMS BULWARK early, indeed, HMS ALBION has completed her refit and recently deployed to the Asia-Pacific to support allies in the region. Furthermore, Defence is constantly reviewing future capability requirements and recognises the utility of Littoral Manoeuvre. As the Committee would expect, at this early stage of the MDP, all elements of the force structure remain in scope for modernisation. However, any speculation regarding the deletion of the Albion-class LPDs does not represent the official position of the Department, nor does it reflect the ongoing requirement for the wider utility and capabilities provided by those ships.

The Government has also set out how, with new ships and submarines in Service, build and development, the RN is gaining operational capabilities. Our Armed Forces, including, the Royal Marines, may have to be more adaptable in the future, but this will be based on our continued assessment of the threats we face.

30. The fundamental flaw in the NSCR process was its assumption that as the threats facing the UK are intensifying, reductions in military capabilities, prescribed by the SDSR only two years earlier, must be inflicted. The answer to new and intensified threats must be augmented capabilities—not massively reduced ones such as the deletion of amphibious forces and specialised ships. The Modernising Defence Programme must

not proceed on the same contradictory basis as the NSCR. It should result in a level of finance and resource being made available to the Naval Service which allows both the carriers and amphibious capability to be supported. The price of one cannot be the destruction of the other. (Paragraph 101)

It has been made clear that the MDP will build on the firm foundations of the 2015 NSS and SDSR15 and the NSCR.

Through the MDP, the MOD aims to modernise Defence and the Armed Forces more quickly in light of the increasing threats we are facing, and to deliver better military capability and value for money.

4 May 2018