

The House of Lords has completed detailed Committee consideration of the Armed Forces Bill, with a lengthy debate on the Reserve Forces producing questions which went considerably wider than the provisions of the Bill itself.

Peers discussed employment protection for reservists, time off for training, recent training cuts, recognition of civilian qualifications and the Government's controversial plan to replace the 13 regional Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations (RFCAs) with a single national organisation.

The debate also produced the rather lighter discussion about [notifying reservists by email](#) which we reported separately.

Supporting reservists at work

Several amendments sought greater employment protection for members of the Reserve Forces.

Lord Harlech proposed, among other things, a requirement for larger employers to have a reservist employment policy and a statutory entitlement to up to ten days' unpaid leave for reserve training. He also raised the position of self-employed reservists.

Another proposal would have protected reservists against being refused employment because of their reserve service.

Existing legislation provides important protection where an employee is dismissed because of liability for mobilisation, but peers identified a different potential problem at the recruitment stage: an employer may simply decide not to employ an applicant because he or she is a reservist.

The Government resisted the amendments. Lord Coaker emphasised the existing partnership with employers and initiatives including the Armed Forces Covenant and Employer Recognition Scheme, and expressed concern about imposing additional statutory burdens.

The amendments were not pressed, but the discussion highlighted the continuing dependence of the volunteer reserves on the goodwill and practical support of civilian employers.

What happens when Defence cancels the training?

Recent reports of reductions in Army collective training also surfaced during the debate.

Lord Harlech pointed to a particular difficulty for reservists. A reservist may arrange annual training months in advance, negotiate time away from work and perhaps use annual leave, only to find that the military exercise has been cancelled.

Apart from the effect on military training, repeated cancellations risk using up goodwill which has been carefully built with employers.

He asked specifically about the effect of the current reductions on reserve collective training and Annual Continuous Training. Lord Coaker undertook to provide a written response and place it in the Library of the House.

That answer will be worth watching.

Civilian and military qualifications

Another interesting discussion concerned duplication between civilian and military training.

Lord De Mauley questioned why reservists who already possess relevant civilian qualifications can sometimes be required to repeat military courses covering substantially the same ground.

Lord Lancaster of Kimbolton, himself a serving reservist, referred to work on a common skills framework intended to improve mutual recognition of civilian qualifications and skills acquired in Defence.

For a Reserve Force which deliberately recruits people partly for the skills and experience they bring from civilian life, removing unnecessary duplication would seem a worthwhile objective.

Thirteen RFCAs to become one

The most sustained disagreement concerned the future of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations.

The Bill will abolish the existing 13 regional RFCAs and the Council of RFCAs and replace them with a single UK-wide RFCA constituted as a non-departmental public body.

The proposal is not new and did not originate with the present Government. Reform has been under consideration for several years, following concerns about governance, accountability and financial oversight.

Nevertheless, the proposed solution attracted considerable criticism from across the House.

Peers stressed that the existing associations are much more than administrative organisations maintaining reserve and cadet premises. Their voluntary membership has traditionally brought together military experience with employers, education, local authorities and other people possessing detailed knowledge of their regions - and able to act as advocates for the reserves and cadets in their own networks.

Concern therefore centred less on the need for improved accountability than on whether creating one national organisation would weaken those local connections.

The Government intends the new national RFCA to have regional councils. Much of the argument was consequently about how influential those councils will actually be.

Critics questioned whether genuine regional representation would survive or whether the councils would effectively become local advisory bodies beneath a centrally controlled organisation.

The role of Lord-Lieutenants was also raised. They currently have a longstanding relationship with the regional associations – county Lord-Lieutenants serving as presidents or vice-presidents – alongside their wider involvement with regular and reserve forces and cadets in their areas.

Lord De Mauley, chairman of the Council of RFCAs, told the House that the Bill removes that involvement from the new organisation.

Lord Coaker strongly acknowledged the value of Lord-Lieutenants and the importance of maintaining local connections, but made clear that the Government intends to proceed with creation of the new national body.

Importantly, however, he undertook to make draft regulations governing the proposed regional councils available before the Bill's Report stage.

Those regulations should give a much clearer indication of whether the new councils will retain meaningful regional influence and voluntary involvement.

A wider question about the reserves

There was considerable agreement across the debate about the importance of the Reserve Forces.

The Strategic Defence Review envisages increasing the Active Reserve by 20% when resources allow, while the Armed Forces Bill expands and standardises arrangements for recalling former regular personnel as part of the Strategic Reserve.

But legislation making people available for service is only part of the equation.

Reservists need worthwhile training, employers willing to support them, sensible recognition of skills and qualifications, and an organisation capable of maintaining Defence's links with communities throughout the country.

The Lords debate exposed some significant questions about each of those things.

Not all require further legislation, and not every amendment proposed in Committee would necessarily provide the right answer. But as Defence seeks to make greater use of reserves in a more uncertain security environment, they are questions which deserve

rather wider attention.

What happens next

The Bill has now finished Committee stage in the Lords. The Lords Report stage is next, when peers can return to issues raised in Committee and vote on amendments. This is where the RFCA issue may become contentious: Earl Minto indicated that the House might be asked to decide the matter if the Government's response was inadequate. Before Report, Lord Coaker has promised sight of the draft arrangements/regulations for the new RFCA regional councils.

After Report, the Bill goes to Third Reading in the Lords, following which it returns to the House of Commons for consideration of the Lords amendments.

The Armed Forces Bill will affect regular personnel, reservists – and veterans too, by raising the age limit for mobilisation and lowering the threshold for mobilisation - and more generally by significantly expanding the scope of the Armed Forces Covenant.

If you agree that it's worth having such changes scrutinised by a group of the same people it affects - regulars, reservists and veterans - and you are forces or ex-forces yourself, you can support BAFF by joining or rejoining now.