

UK Labour government defence review calls for schools to support “nation’s readiness for war”

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The UK Labour government’s Strategic Defence Review (SDR) “Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad” has broad implications for education. The SDR aims to create new pathways between youth and the armed forces and to develop existing avenues to ensure increased recruitment for the war agenda of British imperialism.

Due to cuts to the armed forces budget following the end of the Cold War with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the number of full-time trained soldiers stands at 70,860. Labour plans to increase this to 73,000 but is struggling to meet even this target.

The last time the defence personnel statistics were logged, in April 2024, the combined armed forces were 5,440 below target overall. Armed Forces minister Luke Pollard explained the SDR was intended to meet “the longstanding challenge of recruiting and retaining new generations with different requirements.”

The writers of the review are former NATO secretary-general Lord George Robertson—a former Labour defence minister; retired British Army officer General Sir Richard Barrons; and Anglo-American academic, foreign affairs advisor and author Dr. Fiona Hill. They state in their foreword: “The hollowing out of our forces—which was the hallmark of taking a big ‘peace dividend’ after the end of the Cold War—will, over time, be reversed.”

Recruiting youth is central to the section of the SDR, “Strengthening the nation’s readiness for war”. It states, “[N]ations go to war, not just armed forces. The Government must have the necessary plans, powers, and personnel to achieve an effective and sustainable transition to war if required.”

But the authors are forced to acknowledge major difficulties. The review states, “Critically, they [young people] ... have fewer connections to the Armed Forces.

There is no quick fix to these challenges,” adding, “Long-term success depends on reconnecting society with the Armed Forces and the purpose of Defence...”

While they cannot openly say this, the review’s authors are fully aware that millions of young people, indeed an entire generation, have grown up over the past 25 years hostile to the illegal wars of occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq begun under the Blair/Brown 1997-2010 Labour governments. Today, millions are opposed to Starmer’s backing of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

As part of the SDR’s goal of meeting the “longstanding challenge of recruiting and retaining new generations”, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is looking to boost recruitment to the cadet forces by 30 percent by 2030, with an ambition to reach 250,000 cadets in the longer term.

In its recommendations, the SDR suggests young people be enticed into the armed forces via the cadets, STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) engagement and outreach, and early recruitment and awareness initiatives.

The review pinpoints the importance of schools as hosts for cadet programmes and sites for encouraging children to learn about the military. It argues that the MoD should “Work with the Department for Education to develop understanding of the Armed Forces among young people in schools”.

The Combined Cadet Forces (CCF) are already run in conjunction with schools across the country within 500 secondary schools. Each CCF is an educational partnership between the school and the Ministry of Defence, and a CCF may include a combination of Royal Navy/Royal Marines, Army or Royal Air Force sections.

The SDR emphasizes the need for a skilled workforce to support modern defence capabilities, including expertise

in areas like artificial intelligence, cyber security, and robotics. This focus on advanced skills is intended to influence educational priorities and the development of the curriculum in secondary schools and beyond.

This is already well underway, with schools having access to a wide range of resources from the army education website. Each resource is a tool by which the army advertises for recruits, subtly mixing key historical events with the need to support the army in the present.

On the necessity for defence-connected STEM education, the SDR states: “Defence needs a dynamic ‘blend’ of Regulars, Reserves, and civil servants to give it the mix of skills, experience, and strategic depth required for the threats of this era. Greater harnessing of industry skills in select areas, and a focused training and education offer”.

While secondary schools are not directly mentioned, the expansion of cadet programmes and the emphasis on developing a skilled workforce imply a connection.

The SDR backs “the Prime Minister’s launch of a national conversation on defence and security. This should be centred on a two-year series of public outreach events across the UK, explaining current threats and future trends, the role wider society must play in the UK’s security and resilience, and the rationale for investing more in defence and security as an insurance policy.”

This outreach campaign will centre on increasing awareness among young people of “national threats” and the rationale for a vast increase in military spending.

This is even more critical, just a few weeks since the review was published, with the government now committed to lifting military spending to 5 percent of GDP. The increase means hundreds of billions of pounds in military spending over the next decade, and the evisceration of welfare spending.

Elsewhere, the SDR states that the focus on improving recruitment efforts “should be on speed, drastically shortening the period between applicants expressing interest and joining. A more modern, accommodating approach is required, including through: more flexible medical and fitness standards, reducing the number of pre-existing conditions that are a barrier to entry; and shorter commitments that give people a flavour of military careers, offering them a route in while building skills and experience they can take with them for life.”

As an example: “The Australian military’s ‘gap years’ offers an exciting model from which to learn”. The SDR notes that the MoD plans to roll out its own “military gap

year” policy shortly. This will be aligned with a “series of Tri-Service ‘phase 0’ camps to which applicants can report within 30 days of expressing initial interest, with suitable recruits offered roles at the camps’ conclusion.”

The review also emphasizes the importance of modernizing recruitment processes to appeal to a broader demographic, including underrepresented groups. While specific programmes targeting secondary schools are not detailed, these efforts indicate a strategic focus on engaging youth early to consider careers in the military.

An article in the *i* newspaper following the SDR’s publication noted that “The new Defence Readiness Bill would allow reserve forces to be called up more quickly in times of crisis.”

The paper cited former Conservative defence minister Tobias Ellwood MP—the chairman of the House of Commons Defence Committee who has close connections to the military—who “said that reading ‘between the lines’ in the review, it meant national service was potentially coming down the line.”

Ellwood added: “This is about a greater engagement with Britain’s industry, with the British people, with dealing with a threat picture that we’ve never seen before... ultimately, you still need manpower. “Look at the front line [in Ukraine]. It’s exhaustive on both sides. The death tolls, the casualties are enormous.

“But I think for Britain especially this is about an all of society approach. Yes, we need a highly trained, professional Armed Force. But what can all of us do in society?”



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