

THE COMPELLING CASE FOR PARLIAMENT TO SCRUTINISE THE UK'S DEFENCE NUCLEAR ENTERPRISE

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Introduction

- This paper sets out the case for the Defence Select Committee (DSC) to scrutinise the UK's defence nuclear enterprise (DNE), which is the "network of organisations and arrangements responsible for maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent and submarine forces".¹ The DNE, which is at a critical stage, is facing a number of significant problems and increased costs. At a time of heightened interest in defence expenditure, this paper provides an overview of these issues and outlines measures the DSC could take to improve transparency and accountability concerning the DNE.

Rising costs and operational risks in the DNE

- The Defence Nuclear Organisation (DNO)—which oversees the majority of the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) spending on nuclear weapons—saw its 10-year equipment plan spending increase by 62% to £99.5bn in 2023.² Total expenditure on DNE over the same period is even higher at £117.8bn as this includes all direct elements supporting the deterrent programme and nuclear-powered attack submarines, including the entire DNO budget, in-service submarine support elements from the Navy and related programmes in the UK Strategic Command.
- The National Audit Office's (NAO) 2023 report on the affordability of the MOD's equipment plan said that the DNO had "prioritised delivering the replacement nuclear deterrent to schedule over immediate cost constraints".³ As noted in the DSC's 28 January letter to the MOD (with the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee), the MOD has not published an Equipment Plan for 2024, or provided the NAO with the data that would allow them to update these figures. It does appear the DNO appears to have been given approval to spend whatever is deemed necessary to avoid delays in the production of the Dreadnought submarine class (none of which have yet been completed).
- As Professor Malcolm Chalmers has noted, spending by the UK on its nuclear arsenal and submarines "now accounts for almost 40% of planned equipment spending".⁴ If there are further unplanned increases in spending on the DNE, the Government will have to either increase the defence budget (meaning more cuts to other Government departments or rises in taxation) or divert funds from non-nuclear (i.e. conventional) to nuclear military projects.
- The reasons for these cost increases have not been made public, but the Dreadnought programme is at a critical stage in its delivery. The Core Production Capability project, which is constructing the facilities which will manufacture the reactor cores and fuel for the submarines, has been rated 'Red' by the government's Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) in 2023 and 2024. On both occasions the IPA cited the challenges involved in producing these vital components in line with HMS Dreadnought's delivery schedule. A 'Red' rating means that 'successful delivery of the project appears to be unachievable'.⁵

¹ <https://www.defencenuclearenterprise.com/>

² <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8010/CBP-8010.pdf>

³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/equipment-plan-2023-to-2033/?nab=1>

⁴ <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uk-defence-spending-decisions-cant-wait-strategic-defence-review>

⁵ <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/article/the-uk-governments-major-projects-report/>

- Delays to the Dreadnought programme will put additional strain on the current submarine fleet, which is already struggling to maintain patrols. For several years crews and submarines have been asked to endure patrol lengths that are around six months long. However, the fleet was designed for patrols of three months. Between 1969 and 2012 the longest patrol on record was only 16 weeks long.⁶ Neither the return of the Faslane shiplift to operational status, nor HMS Vanguard rejoining the fleet after its long-extended deep maintenance period, have resulted in shorter patrols. It is our understanding that there are serious concerns within the submarine service about the long-term sustainability of this patrol pattern.
- There may also be safety implications that arise from the submarine fleet being required to undertake longer patrols beyond the time when they would ideally have been decommissioned. Recent reports of a fire on board one submarine, and a faulty depth gauge causing an unplanned dive, starkly illustrate the risks to crews from faulty equipment. The MOD have not released any information about these incidents that could illuminate whether maintenance backlogs were a contributing factor, but they are highly likely to have made such events more likely.

Overcoming secrecy: the urgent need to scrutinise the DNE

- MOD secrecy severely limits the information that is disclosed about the DNE through Freedom of Information requests, or in response to parliamentary questions. If anything, the MOD's approach to disclosure may have become worse under the current government, although in conversation with Baroness Blower (Patron of NET), the Lords' Minister for Defence, Lord Coaker, said that he welcomed greater scrutiny of the DNE.
- The MOD said in 2023 that it was withholding information on the planned in-service dates of key nuclear weapon upgrade programmes for "reasons of national security" and did not release this information in its 2022, 2023, and 2024 Major Projects Portfolio data. Since 2011 the MOD has published an annual update to Parliament on the progress of such upgrades, but there was no report published for 2023 or 2024.⁷
- In a 2024 report the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) identified a gap in Parliamentary scrutiny of MOD spending. The report, which focuses on the MOD's 2023-2033 Equipment Plan, states that some parts of the plan "cannot be scrutinised in the public domain for security reasons" and that none of the arrangements and mandates of the other relevant committees allow for proper scrutiny of these areas.⁸
- Following recent developments involving the US and Europe regarding the security of Ukraine, there has been some discussion regarding making the UK's nuclear arsenal technologically independent from the US, and providing it within an expanded European role. It is likely that such technological independence would be extremely challenging, if it is possible at all, and it is almost certain that it would require significantly higher spending on the DNE.⁹ If this scenario were to be seriously considered then the case for scrutiny of the DNE would be even greater.

⁶ Keith Hall. HM Naval Base Clyde. Stroud: The History Press, 2012, p44.

⁷ See: <https://fas.org/publication/delays-deferment-and-continuous-at-sea-deterrence-the-united-kingdoms-increasing-nuclear-stockpile-and-the-infrastructure-that-makes-it-happen/>
<https://www.nuclearinfo.org/comment/2024/11/secrecy-ramping-up-as-problems-mount-in-the-uk-nuclear-programme/>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-united-kingdoms-future-nuclear-deterrent-annual-updates-to-parliament>

⁸ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43732/documents/216970/default/>

⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2025/03/10/britain-dependent-on-us-weapons-now-face-terrible-choice/>

- The level of public disclosure about the DNE is now lower than any time since the early 1990s. Without proper scrutiny there is no meaningful way for the public to understand what is happening, or for elected representatives to challenge it. The likely result will be greater mismanagement, increased safety risks, and the waste of huge sums of public money.¹⁰
- There is precedent for the DSC providing greater and more regular scrutiny of the DNE than it does at present. During the construction phase of the current nuclear-armed submarine fleet, the Committee annually scrutinised the Trident nuclear weapons system (between 1986 and 1994), monitoring its progress and issuing reports to the House of Commons.

DSC Options for scrutinising the DNE

There are a range of options available to the DSC to increase transparency and accountability concerning the DNE. As noted above, the Committee could hold an inquiry into the costs and risks of the DNE, including on progress constructing the four new Dreadnought submarines.

The DSC might also want to consider, as a separate inquiry, possibly in partnership with the Foreign Affairs Committee — or as an adjunct to the proposed inquiry on costs and risks — a focus on potential future options for the role of the UK's nuclear weapons.

Other measures the DSC could take to scrutinise the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) were outlined in a 2021 article by Dr Matthew Harries, former Director of Proliferation and Nuclear Policy at the Royal United Services Institute. These measures could easily be broadened to encompass the whole DNE:¹¹

1. **Letters to the Defence Secretary:** for example, asking for the benchmarks by which the MoD plans to judge success of the reorganisation at AWE.
2. **Questions on warhead replacement during regular evidence sessions with the Defence Secretary,** the Minister for defence procurement and the MOD permanent secretary. The Committee did this in a recent session with the permanent secretary, with some important results, including confirmation that there is 'a very close connection in design terms and in production terms' between the US W93 and the new UK warhead programme.
3. **One-off evidence sessions:** for example, with the senior responsible owner (SRO) of the Nuclear Warhead Capability Sustainment Programme (the existing programme under which upgrades to the UK's nuclear weapons infrastructure have been made). The current SRO was officially notified upon appointment, as is routine, that he would be held personally accountable to parliamentary select committees. He should be called to give evidence...to discuss the programme's challenges to date and any improvements that need to be made.
4. **A post-appointment scrutiny session** with the chair of the AWE. He should be asked for his vision for AWE reform, and for his thoughts on what has to happen for the new arrangements to be an improvement on the existing MOD–AWE relationship.
5. **A full inquiry:** for example, on 'The Atomic Weapons Establishment: Strategy, Policy and Programmes'. This is an ambitious recommendation and must compete with the other considerable demands on committee time. But given the stakes involved, it would be worth the investment. The Committee could also consider the establishment of a sub-committee on these issues.
6. **A Committee visit to AWE:** This would allow the Committee to hear for themselves the technical and personnel challenges involved in this project.

¹⁰ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmselect/cmdfence/273/27316.htm>

¹¹ <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uks-new-nuclear-warhead-issues-parliament>