

The 2011 Independent Commission on the Reserve forces identified the TA as a declining asset, in need of reform. The recent announcement is the conclusion of a process which began with the SDSR back in 2010, recalls Nick Watts, Deputy Director of the UK Defence Forum. This is one more piece in the defence reform process, calling for an Army Reserve of 30,000; a maritime reserve (RNR and RMR) of 3,100 and a Royal Auxiliary Air force Reserve of 1,800.

The Army Reserve will occupy much of the thinking of the MOD due to the manpower required. What up until now has been called the TA comprised those ex-military personnel with a reserve liability and Volunteer Reservists. In the Cold War era the TA's role was to bolster the UK's NATO commitments mostly in Germany. Naval and Royal Marine reservists were used as reinforcements to established units; the Royal Auxiliary Air Force played a similar augmenting role.

TA units provided formed sub-units (Company or Squadron strength) for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reservists have been killed in action and injured and have won decorations for gallantry. The "old" TA has passed into folk memory, but a new formula is needed to preserve the best practice established on operations, so that the Reserves may be sustainable into the future. To some extent the hand of the MOD has been forced by the budgetary constraints that it has to live with, but the outcome is one which all who support the ethos of Reserve forces will applaud.

In future Army Reserve units will be more closely integrated into regular formations, forming part of the Army's adaptable Force structure. More training will take place overseas and units will have access to modern kit. More importantly reservists will have access to health care and welfare benefits if they are injured on operations.

Reservists will also receive one days paid leave for every 8 days service. The other side of the financial package relates to employers. No longer is Britain's commerce vested in large employers who wouldn't miss one or two people. Small studios and workshops would feel the absence of one of their key employees. This will be the litmus test. While the NHS provides the bulk of medical reservists, SMEs will need to be engaged and persuaded of the benefits of having one of their staff away for extended periods. Reservists will provide a large number of individuals with specialist skills for all three services. New areas such as cyber and human interaction will require people with in depth knowledge.

How this will play out over the next few years will be closely watched by all three services, as well as by employers. Many European countries have strong cohorts of reserve forces, as does the USA. Wherever Britain's armed forces are sent after 2014, the public will have to get used to seeing more of their work colleagues and neighbours being called up, should the UK find itself in another enduring operation.