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BRIEFING

Motivations and Attitudes of New Recruits Regarding Remuneration Issues

Focus Group Investigation and
Analysis

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Prepared for the UK Ministry of Defence

The research described in this report was prepared for the UK Ministry of Defence.

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Summary

This document, prepared for the Service Personnel (Policy) (SP(Pol)) Directorate within the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD), presents key findings and trends from a series of focus groups which RAND Europe conducted at a tri-Service level. The objective of this work is to better understand the views of new recruits of the pay and allowance package provided by the MOD and to identify trends for further analysis.

Within the context of this project, the MOD wished to examine six key issues relating to the overall remuneration scheme. They are:

- Recruitment drivers and motivations
- Comparison of training expectations with experience
- Advantages/drawbacks to being in the Armed Forces
- Career aspirations and the role of remuneration
- Satisfaction with the current remuneration package
- Motivational utility of operational pay package

Key Perceptions/Findings

After analysing the responses of focus group participants in light of the project objectives, a number of key findings stand out. While we examine these in greater depth later in this report, a summary follows:

- **Other factors than the remuneration package more directly impact recruitment:** When examining why people joined their respective Service, the focus group participants rarely cited remuneration reasons as direct factors for joining the Armed Forces. Other factors, such as lifestyle and family/colleague experience, appeared to be more directly relevant. However, pay and allowances may *indirectly* impact recruitment through their influence on perceptions of Service life or experiences of former Service members (who, in turn, influence others to join the military).
- **New recruits are generally positive about their chosen occupation and opportunity of a career:** Factors such as service camaraderie, lifestyle, and pride in themselves and what they have undertaken combined to create a positive view of service life. Negative factors were focussed on the immediate training environment, with few recruits voicing significant concerns about their post-training situation. Remuneration issues were not explicitly mentioned. Additionally, the majority of our respondents expressed a desire to serve for significant periods of time, many through a full career.

- **Most new recruits are still evaluating their remuneration package:** Although there was no salient view, a slight majority of the respondents were more positive or ambivalent about the package and there was an expectation that it will improve once they leave initial training. Others responded that they had made a deliberate decision to join the Armed Forces for reasons unrelated to financial compensation. One area of the remuneration package which stood out as being positive was that of the benefits, although there seemed to be a variable understanding that these benefits made up a portion of the remuneration package.
- **Pay is only one important factor (of many) in the decision to remain in the Armed Forces:** Although pay and promotion prospects (to include its monetary benefits) are important factors to consider in the decision to stay in the military, there are a number of intangible non-remuneration issues, such as family concerns, career opportunities, and quality of life which appear to play at least as important a role as remuneration factors in this decision. Thus, a holistic approach toward retention incentives appears to be the most effective way to convince Service personnel to stay in the Armed Forces.
- **House purchase is important to new recruits, but the motivation behind this remains unclear:** Our respondents overwhelmingly commented on the value of purchasing a home, although the motivation behind this desire was less apparent. Many respondents both recognised the value of ‘getting on the property ladder’ and expressed a desire to ‘buy-to-let’, although the intersection of these two groups is uncertain. However, there was some concern about the salary-house cost disparity.
- **The views of new recruits are similar to those of longer-serving Service personnel:** As will be shown later in the report, we did not find significant divergence between the views of new recruits and longer-serving personnel. Although new recruits are more focussed on their immediate training environment, their views generally coincided with their longer serving peers regarding motivation to join the Forces, drivers of retention, dislike of disruption (particularly concerning families), and the positive impact of the introduction of operational pay.

Focus Group Methodology, Conduct, and Composition

For this project, we used focus groups as the method to capture Service member perceptions about their remuneration package. Focus groups are a qualitative research method where multiple groups of individuals are asked to discuss a topic to gain insights into their perceptions and attitudes. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members.

During a four-week period at the end of November and beginning of December 2006, we conducted twenty-six focus groups with MOD Service personnel at seven locations in

the UK.¹ Within each site, groups were divided by rank structure,² in order to provide an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their candid comments. This structure also allowed them to focus on issues and areas that most affected them.

Overall, 220 new recruits participated in twenty-six groups. Each of the focus groups lasted between 70 and 90 minutes. The semi-structured protocol allowed the project team to guide the groups and so ensure that their discussion was consistent and also flexible and dynamic. A facilitator led the focus groups while another member of the project team took notes of the session. The note takers attempted to capture the essence of the discussion and used the participants' own words to the greatest extent possible. After completion of the groups, we summarised the sessions and entered the data into a software package designed to assist in data analysis. By being able to look at responses both across all sites, but also within rank or Service groups, we were able to determine which perceptions were *salient* to their respective groups. The salience of responses is the crucial factor when identifying key trends across the various focus groups. Salient responses are those that occur across a majority of the groups and, thus, can be taken to be more representative of the groups' views than those responses that only occurred in one or two groups.

The question protocol that we used can be found in Appendix A of this report; further focus group demographic information can be found in Appendix B.

Focus Group Perceptions

When asked what made them interested in the Armed Forces, group participants provided two reasons that were salient across the groups. A family history or experience with the military as well as lifestyle opportunities (such as sport, adventure, exciting opportunities) were the reasons given across all groups. However, all groups also stated that a positive perception of Service life within the Armed Forces as well as the opportunities that it could provide were the factors which actually encouraged them to join the Forces. Many participants within the focus groups considered other Services when joining, and this was particularly true for officers.

When comparing their expectations of Service life to their current experience, there was no consensus regarding how well they had been prepared for life in the Armed Forces. Information provided by Armed Forces Career Officers was variable, and some new recruits seemed surprised by the structure and challenge of military training. There was great variation between those who felt training was more difficult than expected, about the same as expected, or easier than expected.

¹ The sites visited were: RAF Cranwell, RAF Halton, RMA Sandhurst, Catterick Barracks, CTC Lympstone, HMS Raleigh, and BRNC Dartmouth.

² The rank groups were Officers and Other Ranks

When looking at positive aspects of being in the Armed Forces, three factors were salient across all groups: camaraderie within the Services, lifestyle (to include sport and adventure training), and the belief that they were undertaking a worthwhile occupation. Within the Services, the Army personnel looked forward to the excitement of their future jobs as well as the benefits provided by the Armed Forces, a sentiment shared by the Royal Marines.

Turning to negative aspects of the Armed Forces, the issues of concern centred around the training environment. Complaints were heard of poor pay during training, lack of time/freedom, and long working hours. There were also concerns regarding future disruption which may impact on families.

When looking at factors which provided the greatest influence in deciding to stay in the Armed Forces, focus group members provided four salient reasons: future family priorities (which had the greatest consensus), job satisfaction, remuneration (basic pay and pay upon promotion) and career prospects and promotion opportunities.

There was little consensus around the value and appropriateness of the overall remuneration package; most new recruits appear to be still evaluating it, particularly the basic pay. However, it was clear that the allowance package was very poorly understood, and, in general, focus group participants had a positive view of the Armed Forces benefits package (such as housing and medical benefits, travel warrants, advances of pay, etc.).

When asking focus groups about their views on the new MOD operational pay package, the response was generally positive. There was variability in awareness (and understanding) of the policy, but other ranks in particular saw the policy change as positive and encouraging. There was a vocal minority who were more cynical and felt that the policy was centred on publicity rather than Service member reward.

Finally, when discussing the importance of purchasing a home, two responses were salient—those who wanted to purchase a home as quickly as possible and those who wanted a home in order to let it out. However, the intersection in motivation between these two groups was not possible to measure. In addition, there were those who expressed concern about how disparities in salary levels and house prices could limit the ability to purchase.

Comparison to Previous Remuneration Focus Group Work

In early 2006, RAND conducted a similar focus group investigation examining remuneration issues amongst serving Armed Forces personnel. The need to understand any potential differences between that demographic and new recruits led to the work summarised above. However, we also conducted a comparison between the findings of the two studies to identify areas of alignment and divergence of views.

Overall, there is considerable convergence between the analysis of new recruits and longer-service Armed Forces personnel. The greatest alignment is in the following six areas:

Pay: Overall, there does not appear to be a problem with individual Service member pay. Although some personnel expressed discontent with their levels of pay, this does not appear to be representative across all of the focus groups.

Allowances: In both studies, we found wide evidence of either a lack of understanding of the allowance package or elements of the package which drove unwanted behaviour. This argues for a simpler, more transparent package where it will be easier to assess its impact.

Recruitment: In both sets of focus groups, remuneration issues did not appear to be a direct influence in the decision to join the Armed Forces. Family connections and lifestyle opportunities appear to be the most directly relevant.

Operational Pay: Although the latest operational pay package did not exist when we conducted our initial focus group work, there was considerable desire for a monetary package to compensate Service members on deployment. Now that the package has been introduced, it appears to have been positively received amongst the new recruits to the Armed Forces.

Retention: There are a number of factors which impact on the decision of individual Service members to remain in the Armed Forces when their initial obligation is completed. Chief among these are family issues, career and promotion prospects, job satisfaction, and job security. Remuneration issues are represented through both career opportunities (both inside and outside of the Services) and promotion prospects.

Disruption: Both sets of study participants expressed concern about the degree of disruption that they and their families did (or were anticipated to) experience. This is an issue which is important to the group members, and it is important for the Armed Forces as too much disruption could impact on retention decisions, prompting personnel to leave the Services.

Although there is much similarity in the findings between the two related pieces of remuneration work, there are areas of divergence which largely reflect the short-term perspective which characterised the views of new recruits.

First, there is a heightened emphasis on immediate concerns. Many of the new recruits were very focussed on issues surrounding the training environment. Thus, quality of life factors (particularly those to do with training such as free time and dress codes) were often discussed. Additionally, there was less discussion and understanding around their allowance package; perhaps because few Service members experienced the fullness of the allowance scheme while in a training environment.

Second, there was less emphasis on issues which focussed on the future environment. There was little emphasis on issues associated with “stretch”—frequent deployments,

long working hours, etc., although some participants did discuss future “disruption” issues, such as time away from family and frequent moves.

We expect that as these new recruits exit their training phase and report to their first operational units, that such issues will take on a higher profile. However, in the training environment, they were either superseded by more immediate concerns or had not yet been experienced.

Finally, we identified a number of areas that require further study on the basis of questions raised during this series of focus groups and the resulting analysis. By examining these issues in greater detail, the MOD will be able to better formulate remuneration policy and improve its impact on the behaviour of Service personnel.