

7 May 21

CADET HEALTH CHECK REPORT 2020 – MOD SUMMARY

Background

1. The annual Health Check of Cadet Forces is conducted by a small volunteer team appointed by the Council of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations and led by Baroness Garden of Frognaal. Its purpose is to provide MOD with objective and independent observations on the overall health of the cadet forces, their ability to deliver MOD-endorsed outcomes, and any risks to their future well-being and sustainability. It is a 'light touch', non-statutory review which complements the MOD and single Service governance processes. A short report is provided to Chief of Defence People at the end of each calendar year, and this document is MOD's summary of that report and our initial response to its observations.

2. This is the 5th annual report since the team was formed. In a normal year, the team attends a range of cadet activities where their observations come from interaction with both adult volunteers and cadets at the 'coal face'. The Covid-19 pandemic has prevented the team from doing this, other than virtually, and has therefore significantly hindered their ability to gather evidence and provide observations this year. They have therefore been unable to focus their report on the recruitment and retention of, and support to, adult volunteers as intended, but were able to provide observations on areas of best practice and areas of concern.

Introduction

3. The team reports that, despite the stop-start nature of cadet activity in the last 12 months, they continue to be confident that the Services are doing all that they can to deliver a challenging and stimulating experience in line with the MOD endorsed outcomes. Their single most important observation is the determination and resilience of large numbers of Cadet Force Adult Volunteers (CFAVs) who continued to deliver a package of activities, predominantly in the virtual environment, to maintain interest and provide a meaningful outlet for their cadets. They were also able to witness the agility and empathy of the single-Service Cadet Force Headquarters in the provision of measured direction and guidance to CFAVs to enable activity to take place in an unfamiliar and ever-changing landscape.

Observations related to the Covid-19 Pandemic

4. The report makes several observations specific to the cadet forces' reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic. It applauds the very close collaboration between the cadet forces on the communications surrounding the pandemic, the clarity of guidance and direction for the delivery of virtual activity and the return to face-to-face training.

5. Members of the team attended a few virtual cadet training sessions, and the report comments that these events were well organised, imaginative, high quality, and that attention was paid to safeguarding young people online. The team praises both the very significant time and dedication from CFAVs who planned and delivered the virtual experience at short notice, and the provision for hardship funds made by the cadet forces to enable disadvantaged cadets to access virtual training.

6. The report notes that not all cadet units will have thrived through the past year and that there are examples where connectivity, time, availability, and IT skills have meant very limited unit-level activity. It points out that there will need to be a period of stabilisation and consolidation undertaken by all the cadet forces, and that there is a risk that cadets and CFAVs will not re-engage with their units at pre-lockdown levels when able to do so. We are in no doubt that the cadet forces will take time to recover from the pandemic, both in terms of activity and cadet and adult volunteer experience and numbers, and that we will not have a clear picture of the impact until much later this year. All cadet forces have plans in place for recovery and are running campaigns to recruit cadets and adult volunteers. We will monitor and support these during the recovery period, however long that might be.

Further Observations

7. The previous report commented on the dichotomy between the success of the Cadet Expansion Programme achieving its target of 500 cadet units in schools, and a reduction in actual cadet numbers in schools. This year the team was pleased to see a 5.4% increase in cadets in school CCF contingents. However, they expressed concern that schools might not see their CCF as a priority during their recovery from Covid-19 closures. We share this concern and are also clear that we will not know the true impact of Covid-19 on cadet numbers in schools until much later this year. We are, however, pleased that the Education Secretary has recently announced additional funding for School Staff Instructors in state schools in England and stated that: “we want to make sure that children have a balance between academic and extra-curricular activities to set them back on track towards excellent futures.”

8. As last year, the report comments on the loss of HMS BRISTOL without the provision of any viable alternative for either accommodation or the experience that children had previously gained of ‘living onboard’. It notes that the loss will not have been fully appreciated because of the cancellation of training due to Covid-19. The Royal Navy continues to explore options for both temporary accommodation to support training activities during summer 2021 and for subsequent years but recognises that this will not replace the experience provided by HMS BRISTOL.

9. The report observes that the implementation of the MOD Cadet Forces Safeguarding Framework is a significant development which provides an overarching approach to safeguarding children in the cadet forces. It also provides evidence of how effectively collaboration across the cadet forces has been galvanised by the Cadet Safeguarding Working Group.

10. The report welcomes the collection of data about the level of BAME participation in the cadet forces in addition to the existing annual statistics. However, it raises a concern that the breakdown of the BAME figures will be confined to the parameters currently in general use by the MOD for its service personnel. The cadet forces are, in fact, collecting data using the full current list of ethnic groups on Gov.uk recommended by the government when asking for someone’s ethnicity. We are aware that the list of ethnic groups set by the Government Statistical Service may evolve over time, and we would adjust our data collection accordingly.

11. The report also suggests an expansion of data collection and publication to include all groups with protected characteristics including those suffering from social disadvantage, in support of the development of the cadet experience. The cadet forces are diverse and inclusive organisations and we believe that the characteristics and social needs of individual cadets are understood at a local unit level to facilitate safe, equal access to the cadet experience and provide any necessary support. However, we acknowledge that the collection of such additional data may enable the cadet forces to better serve their diverse cadet population and will discuss what additional data each cadet force might want to collect to enable this. We are mindful that the task of collecting data falls, in most cases, to the adult volunteer.

12. The final observation is that the publication of the final report of the University of Northampton study into the social impact of the cadet forces might lead to pressure for further expansion. This could place the cadet forces in a position where experience and supporting resources are spread so thinly that the ability to provide meaningful participation would be under threat, and therefore the cadet forces should be given the opportunity to return to a pre-Covid steady state of operations before any further expansion should even be considered. We are alive to this risk.

Areas of Focus for Cadet Health Check Report 2021

13. The direction from the 3-star Youth and Cadet Steering Group remains that our policy focus should be on attracting and retaining the adult volunteers who form the lifeblood of the cadet forces. Acknowledging that the ability of the team to conduct its work will depend on the extent of lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, access to cadet activity and available resources, the next report is intended to focus on:

- The level of support provided to adult volunteers (including support for administrative tasks), the potential for improvement and a comparison with best practice across cadet forces and other youth organisations;
- The recruitment and retention of adult volunteers, including a potential volunteers' experience of the recruitment and onboarding process;
- The recovery of the cadet forces from the impacts of Covid-19 including the short/medium term risk to delivery and sustainability; and
- The support provided to adult volunteers by Professional Support Staff.

Summary

14. The annual Cadet Health Check Report is an important element of the governance of the cadet forces which ensures that we continue to deliver a challenging and stimulating contemporary cadet experience, that both develops and inspires young people within a safe environment and achieves the outcomes which MOD has endorsed. The 2020 report again provides valuable independent observations of the health of the cadet forces which help shape our delivery of the Cadet Force 2025 Strategy and associated policy. The team aims to deliver its next report to the Chief of Defence People in December 2021.

Commodore J M S Fry Royal Navy
Head of Youth & Cadets
Ministry of Defence