

## Defence Review Backs Cadet Expansion in Schools to Rebuild Public Engagement

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The UK's Strategic Defence Review (SDR) has proposed a significant expansion of cadet forces in secondary schools, aiming to reconnect younger generations with the nation's Armed Forces. The plan includes a 30% increase in school-based cadet numbers and the introduction of defence education into the national curriculum, part of a broader strategy

to address long-standing recruitment shortfalls and rebuild societal understanding of military service.

Launched under the oversight of Lord George Robertson, a former Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and current Defence Secretary John Healey, the SDR sets out a ten-year transformation of British defence. With Armed Forces recruitment figures falling behind targets and interest in service dwindling, the review warns that without decisive steps to re-establish civic links to the military, national resilience may continue to erode.

A core recommendation of the review is the expansion of the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) and broader cadet programmes, particularly within state schools. Currently present in roughly 500 schools, the ambition is to double this figure by 2030, with a target of reaching 250,000 cadets nationwide. The proposal includes new partnerships between the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Department for Education (DfE), embedding structured military awareness programmes, including Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) activities.

In addition, the SDR calls for “phase zero” military exposure schemes, similar to Australia’s voluntary gap-year service, designed to offer teenagers first-hand experience of the Armed Forces before deciding on a career in uniform. These outreach initiatives aim to cultivate practical skills in areas such as cybersecurity, robotics, and artificial intelligence, sectors where the military faces acute skills shortages.

While the Labour-led government has publicly supported the review’s direction, its follow-through remains uncertain, especially amid fiscal pressures. Conservative voices have cautioned against allowing the

programme to become a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive national renewal. Former defence minister Tobias Ellwood MP welcomed the focus on societal resilience, saying, “This is the kind of forward-looking, all-of-society strategy we urgently need. National defence is not just about weapons, it’s about people.”

The review also recommends a new Defence Readiness Bill to better prepare British industry, the reserves, and the general public in the event of large-scale emergencies. With rising global threats, the time to rebuild Britain’s defence ethos is now, not when it’s too late.