

Research Briefing

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Deploying the armed forces in the UK

There is a provision for armed forces personnel to be deployed on operations in the UK when asked to do so by relevant civil authorities. This may be to assist with flood relief, bomb disposal or supporting major national events like the Olympic or Commonwealth Games. Such requests are known as “military aid to the civil authorities”. The armed forces do not maintain specific forces to assist civil authorities, as assistance is provided depending on the requirement.

When can the armed forces be deployed in the UK?

Civil authorities take the lead in responding to any emergencies or non-military threats to the safety and security of the UK and its citizens. Government departments or civil authorities may call upon the armed forces to assist in planning for, or the response to, an emergency. This is known as Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA).¹ Ministerial approval is required except when life is considered to be immediately at risk. Defending the UK against military threats is distinct to MACA and is not the subject of this briefing paper.

¹ Military Aid to the Civil Authorities used to be subdivided into three different categories - Military Aid to other Government Departments (MAGD), Military Aid to the Civil Power (MACP) and Military Aid to the Civil Community (MACC). These categories were removed in the third edition of JDP 02, UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience.

What is the legal basis for Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA)?

The legal authority to use Service personnel in operations under Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) is governed by the [Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#) and the [Emergency Powers Act 1964](#) (Section 2). In addition, service personnel can deploy under the Royal Prerogative for military tasks.²

Authorisation process

With only a few exceptions, requests for military assistance must be approved by the Ministry of Defence. In certain cases – when there is an urgent need to protect life, alleviate distress and/or protect significant property – local commanders are empowered to respond under the authority of a 1983 Standing Defence Council Order.³

What sort of things might the armed forces do under MACA?

Military personnel may be called out for a wide-variety of tasks, from bomb disposal to helping with flood relief.

The armed forces may be called upon by local and civil authorities for a wide range of tasks. But broadly speaking the military may be called upon in an emergency:

- for their niche capabilities (this is explained below)
- general support when civil authorities' capacity/capability is overwhelmed by an incident
- in preparation for major national events

One of the most common tasks is an example of a niche capability: explosive ordnance disposal search support to police services.⁴ Other examples include specialist reconnaissance aircraft to locate missing persons or to provide specialist aerial imagery.

² This is discussed in more detail in section 2.12-2.18 of JDP 02, [UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security](#), fourth edition, 31 December 2021

³ As outlined in JDP 02, [UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security](#), fourth edition, para 1.4

⁴ [DEP2015/0803](#), 13 October 2015. Explosive ordnance disposal does not just mean bomb disposal. It may take many forms – for example in 2016 army bomb disposal units helped safely dispose of potentially dangerous [chemicals](#) at a number of schools.

Natural disasters

More general support may be required [during times of flooding](#) or other natural disasters.

Supporting major events

Personnel have also been called upon to protect major events, such as G8 or NATO summits. 18,000 military personnel were involved in [protecting the 2012 Olympic Games](#).

Around 1,000 personnel will be [supporting the 2022 Commonwealth Games](#) in Birmingham, many of whom will support the West Midlands police security operation. Others will be involved in ceremonial duties or civil engagement.

Personnel may also be trained in anticipation of industrial action by emergency or essential services. The MOD made available 248 military fuel tanker drivers during a [national shortage in HGV drivers](#) in 2021.

Covid 19 pandemic response

Armed forces personnel were used throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in a variety of ways, including supporting the roll-out of testing facilities and vaccine provision. Approximately [34,000 personnel were deployed](#) on 466 MACA tasks during the Covid-19 pandemic (for the period 17 March 2020 and 1 April 2022).⁵ A [regional breakdown](#) is available in a parliamentary written answer (June 2022).

Terror attacks

Military personnel have also supported the police in response to terror threats or attacks.

In February 2003, troops in armoured personnel carriers were [deployed to Heathrow airport](#) in February 2003 as part of a temporary tightening of security in the capital. The Ministry of Defence provided logistical and technical support after the 7/7 bombings in 2005.

The name of the operational contingency plan to support the police following a terror attack is Operation Temperer. It was activated following the Manchester attack in May 2017, when the Government raised the national security threat level to critical. Approximately 1,400 Defence personnel were involved, primarily by guarding locations across the country to free up armed

⁵ [PQ 17117 \[Military Aid: Coronavirus\], 21 June 2022](#)

police officers.⁶ Operation Temperer was not activated in financial year 2021-22.⁷

Do soldiers carry their weapons?

Very rarely. Explicit authorisation is required for personnel to be armed. The MoD's guidance states "[using military personnel armed with weapons for MACA operations will always be an exception](#)".⁸

Can soldiers arrest people?

Responsibility for law enforcement lies with the police and the Home Office. The MoD guidance is clear that all MACA operations must be conducted within the law. Unlike the police, service personnel only have the same powers of arrest as ordinary citizens.⁹

There was some discussion during the Brexit process about deploying the military to help maintain public order. The MoD said in September 2019: "the maintenance of public order is the responsibility of the police. There are no plans to utilise military personnel in the event of civil unrest in the event of a no-deal Brexit".¹⁰

Are there specific forces to assist civil authorities?

The armed forces do not maintain specific forces to assist civil authorities, as assistance is provided depending on the requirement. 10,000 military personnel are available on standby to assist the civil authorities for significant terrorist incidents at short notice. The army has three battalions placed at extremely high readiness to respond to emergencies in the UK. This amounts to 1,200 soldiers on 24 hours standby on an enduring basis.¹¹ The

⁶ [PQ3537](#), 14 July 2017; [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2016/17](#), p36; [Prime Minister's statement](#) following second COBR meeting on Manchester attack: 23 May 2017

⁷ [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2021 to 2022](#), Ministry of Defence, 14 July 2022

⁸ JDP 02, [UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security](#), third edition, February 2017

⁹ JDP 02, [UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security](#), third edition, February 2017

¹⁰ [PQ290659](#), 30 September 2019 and [PQ221594](#), 19 February 2019

¹¹ [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19](#), HC 2347, July 2019

army also [changed its rules in June 2016](#) to allow troops who have passed basic training (phase 1) to be deployed on operations in the UK.

The Ministry of Defence Police (MDP)

The Ministry of Defence does have a specialist armed police force. The [MDP is a national civilian police force](#) and protects sites such as GCHQ, the Atomic Weapons Establishment, and naval bases.

MDP officers have the full powers and privileges of constables, identical to other civil police officers in the UK, within the jurisdiction defined by the MOD Police Act 1987.¹² That jurisdiction is limited and largely confined to Defence purposes (for example naval dockyards).

However, jurisdiction was extended by the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 to allow MDP officers to exercise police powers where a local police force requests the assistance of MDP officers. On those occasions, MDP police will be under the operational control of the local Chief Constable from the requesting force, and will have the same police powers as officers of that force.¹³ Further information on MDP jurisdiction and policing protocols with other forces is available on gov.uk: [MDP jurisdiction](#).

How many times is MACA used?

The MOD provides annual updates on MACA in its [Annual Report and Accounts](#). The numbers therefore relate to the financial year. In 2021-22, the MOD provided MACA for 264 operations involving 7,790 personnel.¹⁴ This was down from 487 in 2020-21, but a significant increase in pre-Covid years. For comparison, the MoD provided MACA on over 120 occasions in 2018-19.¹⁵

The MOD has also provided MACA requests by year in response to a parliamentary written question (see table 1). This shows a significant increase in requests in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹² [The Ministry of Defence Policing Plan 2019-20](#) explains in detail the role of the MDP.

¹³ [Guidance: Ministry of Defence Police Jurisdiction](#), Ministry of Defence, 21 May 2014

¹⁴ [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2021 to 2022](#), Ministry of Defence, 14 July 2022

¹⁵ [Ministry of Defence Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19](#), HC 2347, July 2019

Table 1 MACA taskings by year

Year	MACA requests received	MACAs executed/completed
2016	123	115
2017	129	117
2018	136	115
2019	157	123
2020	550	314
2021	332	182
2022 (to 26 May)	76	31

Source: [PQ8961](#), 25 May 2022

Are the armed forces being used “more often”?

In a report published in July 2022, The Defence Committee observed the armed forces are being used “[more and more often](#)”, at a time when they are facing cuts to personnel numbers:

[...] We are seeing Defence being used more and more often as an emergency measure to relieve exceptional pressures on public services and perform such tasks that otherwise might be expected to be carried out by others.¹⁶

In its report for 2022, the Armed Forces Pay Review Body reported personnel felt the “[the armed forces had been asked to help support a government response to one event after the other](#)”. The body talks to personnel as part of its information gathering on pay, and notes the wider sense that personnel “felt that they were continually being asked to do more with less”. The body noted the impact this can have on morale and motivation.¹⁷

James Heapey, the Minister for the Armed Forces, has said that MACA is “[carefully calibrated to ensure there is no impact on the ability of the Armed Forces to defend the UK](#).” However, he did say during the early stages of the

¹⁶ Defence Committee, [The Integrated Review, Defence in a Competitive Age and the Defence and Security Industrial Strategy](#), 28 July 2022, HC 180 2022-23, para 78

¹⁷ [Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body: fifty-first report 2022](#), Gov.uk, 19 July 2022, para 6.24

pandemic “a number of lower priority Defence tasks were paused or halted” to allow for the establishment of the Covid support force.¹⁸

Could the effect of climate change increase MACA tasks?

The effects of climate change could potentially result in increased demand for the armed forces to respond to crises. In 2021 the MOD published an external report examining the [implications of climate change for UK defence](#) logistics in the provision of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and MACA operations. The report says the evidence of the rapidity, frequency and concurrency of natural disasters increasing in the UK has grown in recent years, with flooding expected to be one of the most prominent risks to the UK’s population in the next five years. The MOD and the armed forces have been called upon to support flood relief efforts in recent years: in 2014, 2015, 2019 and 2020.¹⁹

Policy development

Military aid to the Civil Authorities has long been identified as one of the standing home tasks of the armed forces and comes under the commitment to Protect the UK.

A policy review of MACA was published by the Government in February 2016 and in 2017 a new edition of Joint Doctrine Publication 02 [UK Operations: The Defence Contribution to Resilience and Security](#), was published incorporating the main elements of the policy review. One of the key developments is greater involvement of Defence in planning for rather than simply responding to civil contingencies. A fourth edition of JDP 02 was published in December 2021.

Planning for civil contingencies

The Ministry of Defence is not a designated lead department for planning for, and responding to, any civil contingencies, except in the event of a defence nuclear material accident or emergency. However as outlined above, current government policy is for Defence to be more involved in preparing for potential emergencies.

¹⁸ [PQ 21120 \[Military Aid\], 27 June 2022](#)

¹⁹ [Crisis Response in a changing climate](#), Rand Europe and the University of Exeter, Gov.uk, 4 May 2021

Defence is no longer considered a “last resort option”, the then Vice Chief of the Defence Staff has said; rather “defence should be ready and configured to play an early role in providing civil resilience”.²⁰ This was formalised in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review which announced military planners are to be placed in key government departments to give the military a “wider and more formal role in supporting national resilience contingency planning”.

Library briefing paper [Dealing with civil contingencies: emergency planning in the UK](#), CBP08016, looks at emergency planning in the UK, the responsibilities of each of the responding agencies and how those fit within the framework for planning for and responding to civil contingencies laid down by Government.

²⁰ JDP 02, third edition, foreword, 14 February 2017

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