Making Sense of Home Defence
From Planning to Practice

Frances Tammer, Frederick Harry Pitts & Gareth Stansfield

Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence & Security

With a Foreword by Paul Cornish, Director of the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence & Security

Foreword

Paul Cornish
Director of the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence & Security

In this timely new paper from the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence and Security, the authors focus on an increasingly important issue: how should the UK protect itself against aggressive and/or subversive behaviour of its adversaries? Intuitively, the term 'home defence' would seem to describe, well enough, the nature both of the problem and its solution. Surprisingly perhaps, things are not quite so straightforward. There is no common definition of home defence to be found in UK government publications or pronouncements. Nevertheless, we can at least identify its constituent parts. Home defence combines a range of civil and military activities that include what might be described as 'military aid', with two less concrete propositions: the 'whole-of-society approach' and 'resilience'.

The military aspect of home defence—'military aid'—can be understood to involve the use of armed forces personnel and equipment in a wide range of domestic UK scenarios: response to civil emergencies (e.g., flooding, large-scale fires and the spread of contagious disease); protection against and/or defeat of cyberattacks; defeat of violent assaults by terrorists and others on civilians and on key points in the UK critical national infrastructure (CNI); the disposal of explosive ordnance; and guarding and protection against direct attacks on military assets such as barracks, airfields, naval ports and stores of deployable equipment including weapons and ammunition.

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In the current UK domestic security debate, meanwhile, the 'whole of society' approach resonates in two ways, qualitatively and quantitatively. First, it is a declaration of unease at the diminution of the UK public's awareness of, and interest in security and defence as an essential national obligation. Second, it offers a self-contained solution to the problem it describes by arguing for better ways to explain the need for defence and to encourage wider participation in national security. This would appear to have been the intention of the 2025 UK Strategic Defence Review (2025 SDR) when it spoke of 'widening participation in national resilience and renewing the Nation's contract with those who serve.' In mid-December 2025 the Chief of the Defence Staff picked up and broadened the theme when he argued for a 'whole of nation response that builds our defence industrial capacity, grows the skills we need, harnesses the power of the institutions we will need in wartime and ensures and increases the resilience of society and the infrastructure that supports it.'

What, then, of 'resilience', the third constituent of home defence? At its most straightforward, resilience is about 'bouncing back'; ensuring that critical systems (which could be everything from banks to trains to the internet) can restore and maintain their core function in the face of attack or intrusion. Resilience, though, should probably be more than simply resistance to challenge and restoration of the (compromised) status quo ante. A resilient system should be one that can not only recover and rectify itself (i.e. address the original vulnerability) but also improve its ability to meet future challenges. This more ambitious understanding of resilience could be critically important In an era of very fast-moving, adaptive threats and challenges. We might call this 'smart resilience', embodying David Omand's idea of 'bouncing forward' to a different, more advantageous position. This can be achieved, in part, through technical and managerial measures such as in-built redundancy and operational recovery plans. And it might be possible for resilience to be 'smarter' still—perhaps even 'dynamic'—whereby the defender becomes more agile and adaptable than the adversary and can regain and hold the initiative by rapidly identifying and then managing their vulnerabilities.

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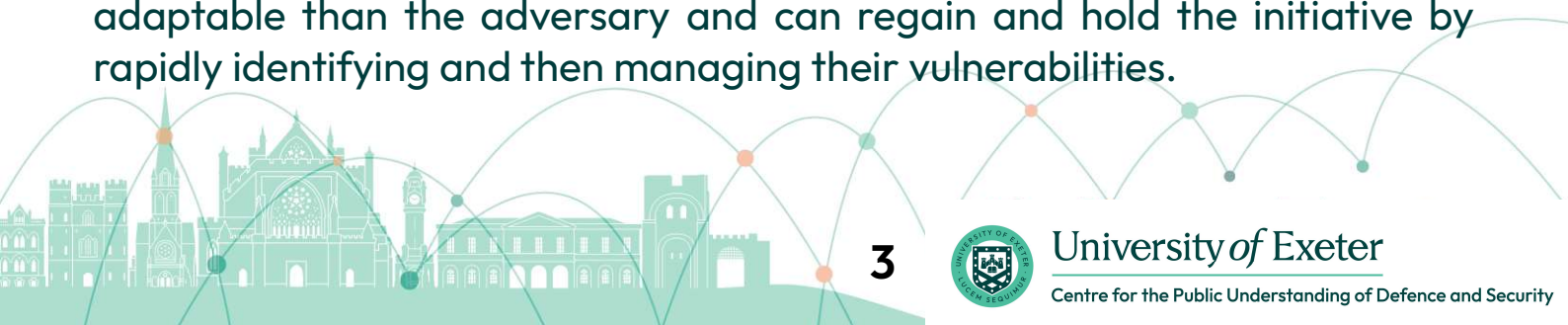
It is critically important that the whole-of-society approach should be seen neither as an elaborate public relations exercise, with casually-made rhetorical commitments that will not or need not be met, nor as a recruiting drive for the Armed Forces. The purpose of a whole-of-society approach should, instead be no less than the reinvention of a UK strategic culture fit for the geostrategic environment of the 21st century, such that national security and defence—effectively and properly managed—are once again accepted as a societal norm rather than an exception.

Each of the interconnected component parts of home defence makes its own, distinctive demands on UK national security policy, on public finances and on broader UK security culture, many of which are signalled in the SDR. The various improvements and developments set out below must be accompanied by improved collaboration between the components of home defence, all of which should be brought into a closer and more effective interplay of policy, budgetary allocation, decision and action. As the SDR makes clear, the solution to the problem of improving home defence cannot be left to any one agency but rests on closer collaboration not simply within defence, but between defence and all other departments of government responsible for home defence-related activity.

The SDR welcomed the Prime Minister's launch of a 'national conversation on defence and security', to be 'centred on a two-year series of public outreach events across the UK, explaining current threats and future trends.' The various outreach and engagement programmes envisaged should be open to full and frank discussion of the most complex and contentious aspects of the defence debate, and should be conducted in plain language that the public can understand, rather than in obscure MoD or military jargon: Is it morally right to enlist in the Armed Forces? If the UK expands and improves its defence posture, does that increase the likelihood of war? Should the UK adopt compulsory national military service, or some other model? At a time of stretched public finances, should welfare and health take precedence over defence? It is with the purpose of fuelling this conversation that the Centre for the Public Understanding of Defence & Security at the University of Exeter has been established.

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The concept of 'home defence' recently shot to prominence with the publication of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR). As set out in the Foreword above, the concept incorporates what can be understood as 'military aid' as well as broader notions of 'resilience' and the 'whole-of-society' approach. Given this definition and its component parts, government thinking about the necessity for home defence is reflected not only in the SDR but also the UK government Resilience Action Plan and the Cabinet Office Home Defence Plan. Meanwhile, a pipeline of forthcoming policies is designed to further underpin the codification of Government responsibilities, including the National Preparedness Act and/or the National Resilience Act (including changes to the Civil Contingency Act 2004), and the National Security Risk Assessment. However, there is no common definition of home defence within any government publications or pronouncements, resulting in continued stasis.

Broadly, home defence could be seen as covering everything from community resilience to the continuous at sea deterrent. This would include defence against sub-threshold threats to the homeland, such as cyberattacks and sabotage directed towards the critical national infrastructure (CNI) and supply chains, both military and civil. It would also include the protection of military assets, along with the formation of civilian forces.

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Crucially, it is cross-domain business, encompassing the 'grey zone' as well as the electromagnetic spectrum, cyber, the subsurface, maritime, land, air and space, across phases of cooperation, competition, crisis, and armed conflict. It is broad in scale and scope.

There is much work to do to make ideas, strategies and activities fit together, not least because the UK has for some years experienced a widespread disengagement with the security and defence of the country, with some parts of society seeing it as irrelevant to their lives—the state of the NHS and the cost of living, for example, being seen as far more important. In July 2025, the House of Commons Defence Committee criticised the government's lack of home defence planning in its 'Defence in the Grey Zone' report. Government and parliament, however, seem increasingly aware of, and responsive to, a range of perceived threats to national security.

This paper was prepared in response to a workshop held at the University of Exeter in November 2025 involving some 20 representatives of relevant stakeholder organisations. As a critical and constructive contribution to work currently being undertaken across government and parliament, the paper seeks to provide clarity as to what is meant by home defence and what steps the government needs to take to rapidly operationalise home defence, within the broader whole-of-society enterprise to create widespread national resilience. The essay concludes with political and practical recommendations for the consolidation of a home defence framework.

The need for home defence

At present, the UK is awakening to the reality of being effectively in a state of complex conflict with Russia while our security and economic welfare are challenged daily by China. This is increasingly acknowledged by government. For instance, Al Carns, the Minister for the Armed Forces, recently said that "the shadow of war is knocking on Europe's door once more. That's the reality. We've got to be prepared to deter it."

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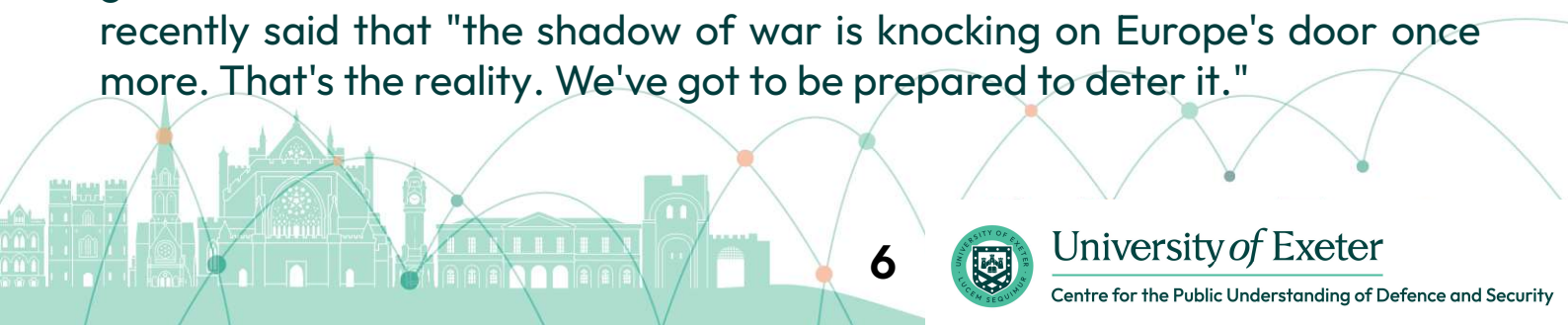
Carns had been preceded by Mark Rutte, the Secretary General of NATO, who argued that Europe must ready itself for a confrontation with Russia on a scale "our grandparents and great-grandparents endured". Similarly, the UK Chief of the Defence Staff spoke about the need for a whole-of–society approach as national security cannot be outsourced only to the armed forces, whilst the Chief of MI6 warned in more nuanced, but no less sober terms, "we are in a space between peace and war".

In general, however, these expert-level of expressions of concern have been only hazily set out to the general public. The result is that grave defence and security concerns are being made worse both by a poor societal understanding of the nature of the threats and challenges and by the consequent inadequacy of our response. To combat this, the launch of the SDR was accompanied by the Prime Minister's promise to launch a national conversation on defence and security. Amidst uncertainty about the forthcoming Defence Investment Plan, however, there are few public signs of this 'conversation' starting in any substantial or coordinated sense at the instigation of government.

The nature and immediacy of these challenges are such that the UK – whether it likes it or not—must accept a compressed, almost reactive, timescale. If measures are needed to ensure national security, then these are surely a matter of urgent *action* rather than a question of *planning* for threats and challenges that may occur at some point in the future. The unfortunate conjunction of an absence of successive governmental planning with the security challenges being faced, is compounded by a general public who have been left in a state of apathy and lack of education.

Owing in large part to the malign behaviours of adversaries like Russia, China and Iran, the list of threats confronting the country today is growing and has been assessed to include cyberattack; sabotage; attacks on CNI or space/satellite installations; food and water insecurity; climate change; and disease or pandemics (whether natural or man-made).

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In mid-2025 the UK Defence Secretary, John Healey, warned that Russia is conducting daily cyber-attacks on the UK. In addition, threats are assessed to persist from 'home grown' sources including from some parts of an increasingly polarised polity and an ongoing threat from remnant Islamic State or Al Qaeda associates.

The importance of readiness to defend the nation against these threats has been creeping up on us, but it was not until the 2025 SDR that home defence was reemphasised. However, direction from above and resource commitment are sorely lacking, which leaves the current approach to readiness looking amateur and without unifying purpose. In short, the UK is at a standing start, whilst many of our allies are years ahead. To illustrate this, the prospect of voluntary or compulsory conscription has seldom been comprehensively and openly debated—and, when it is, it is considered too awkward politically to be debated seriously.

This begs the question as to why the UK has appeared reluctant to have a full, open and nationwide conversation about responses to actual and potential foreign aggression whilst others in Europe are not at all reticent. Finland, Sweden, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Germany and France have all begun such a conversation and to make preparations in one way or another.

Yet in the UK, a promised increase to 2.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for defence is not set to come into play until 2027, with a further increase to 3% GDP in prospect for 2030 , albeit only 'if economic and fiscal conditions allow'. Even so, there are rumours (at least) of cuts to the defence budget in 2026 and early in 2026 the Chief of the Defence Staff made the Prime Minister publicly aware of a Ministry of Defence assessment showing a £28billion budget shortfall between now and 2030, which could mean even smaller allocations for home defence.

A pervasive but outdated optimism bias is preventing an honest discussion of the present and future reality which is that the UK is currently unprepared and indefensible at home, and unable to engage successfully in, and therefore deter, war.

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One illustration of this pervasive dysfunction is that, at present, the only publicly available materials for preparedness are based online. Yet with the internet assessed as one of the first early-stage casualties of an armed conflict or other military crisis, a major innate vulnerability is evident. Whilst there are valuable lessons to be learnt from civil defence initiatives during the Cold War, the digital domain represents a novel, unmitigated and potentially debilitating vulnerability that was not a factor then. Issues like this require much more thought and work to anticipate and address.

The 2027 Steadfast Defender Exercise—a NATO military exercise focused on operational readiness and joint training amongst allies—presents an opportunity to rally a national effort around correcting the overall lack of preparation and preparedness and should contain a substantial home defence component. However, this is no substitute for a tailored national level UK home defence exercise.

Organisational issues with home defence

As a signpost for governmental thinking, the SDR sets out a number of promising measures. A new Defence Readiness Bill will legislate to improve national preparedness. The MoD will contribute to a Cabinet Office-led Home Defence Programme which will review arrangements for CNI protection. With the Royal Navy taking a leading role in protecting the UK's undersea communications infrastructure, the possibility of a 'new deal' for the defence of CNI will be explored with CNI operators and wider government. The establishment of a 'new force' for home defence tasks will be considered; drawn from across government, incorporated within the new Home Defence Programme, and led by the Army as part of the Reserve Forces. It would possess basic arms and equipment, including drones, be locally recruited and employed and have a narrowly defined remit and training commitment.

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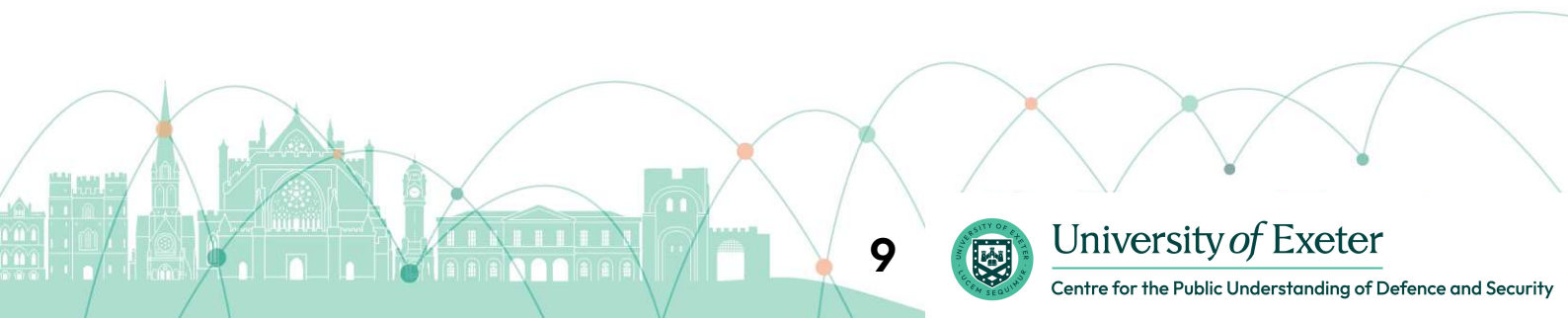
These measures give a clear sense of potential within the military domain but represent just one key component of what will need to be a wider organisational framework. The most relevant existing structure for this would be the local resilience forums (LRFs)—multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives from local public services, including the emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, the Environment Agency and others, as well as in some cases collaborating with the Reserves.

These agencies are known as Category 1 Responders, as defined by the Civil Contingencies Act. LRFs are supported by organisations, known as Category 2 responders, such as the Highways Agency and public utility companies. They have a responsibility to co-operate with Category 1 organisations and to share relevant information with the LRF. The geographical area the forums cover is based on police areas. LRFs also work with other partners in the military and voluntary sectors who provide a valuable contribution to LRF work in emergency preparedness. The LRFs aim to plan and prepare for localised incidents and catastrophic emergencies. They work to identify potential risks and produce emergency plans to either prevent or mitigate the impact of any incident on their local communities.

The diversity of risks and threats addressed by the LRFs epitomises how the concept of home defence necessarily changes according to the defence task at hand. This could range from key point guarding—for example, protection of CNI and civilian centres—to the continuation of social and economic life during conflict, including consequence management, feeding the population, evacuation of population centres and management of hospitals. This distinction draws our attention to the fact that it is necessary to prepare to resist an attack as well as simply dealing with the consequences of one.

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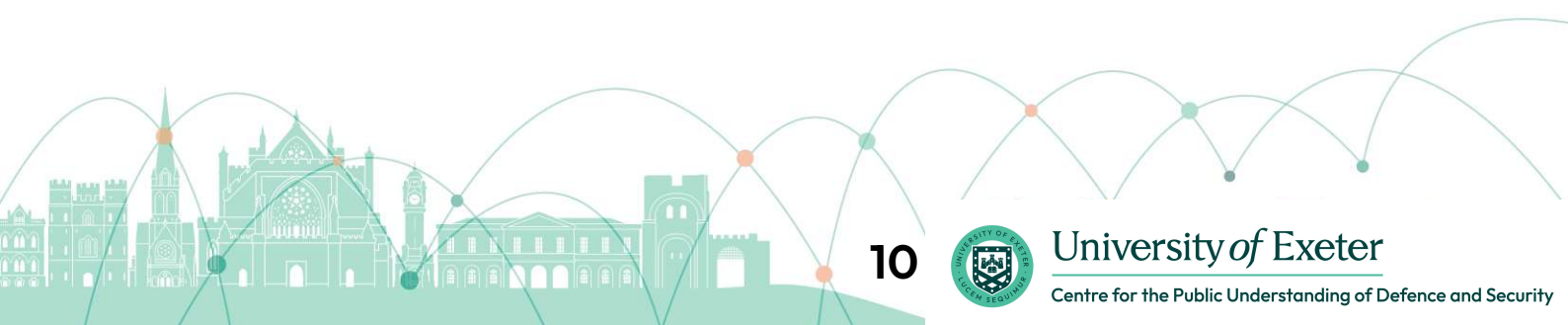
For all of the different elements gathered under home defence—military aid, 'whole-of-society', resilience—the resourcing, prioritisation and narrative does not yet feel concrete or well-aligned; it is as though a tipping point is awaited. It is significant, for example, that there is as yet no Senior Responsible Owner within government. This prompts obvious and so far unanswered questions about precisely where within government the responsibility for home defence should lie – the Cabinet Office, the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence or somewhere else altogether? There may even be a good case for a dedicated new lead department or ministerial portfolio with an exclusive remit to align governance, exercise full executive tasking and coordination and administer budgets in a coherent way that avoids fragmentation.

Whatever the organisational solution, and wherever it resides, there must also be specialist, rather than generalist, staff focusing on rapid delivery using existing capacity in central and local government departments as well as those law enforcement and emergency services already involved in crisis and resilience planning and response. This staffing vacuum needs to be rectified as quickly as possible, given the necessity for a whole-of-society approach to make home defence a meaningful reality. Our adversaries will only make more incremental and damaging impacts if we are slow to act, with UK vulnerabilities becoming increasingly intractable.

Practicalities of Home Defence

Whatever the precise character of the threat, the critical elements of home defence can be seen as running through four successive stages: preparedness, response, sustainment and recovery from the situation. In practice, these require both digital and analogue approaches - especially since attacks on infrastructure, inevitable in the first stages of a conflict, would create a low- or possibly no-tech environment.

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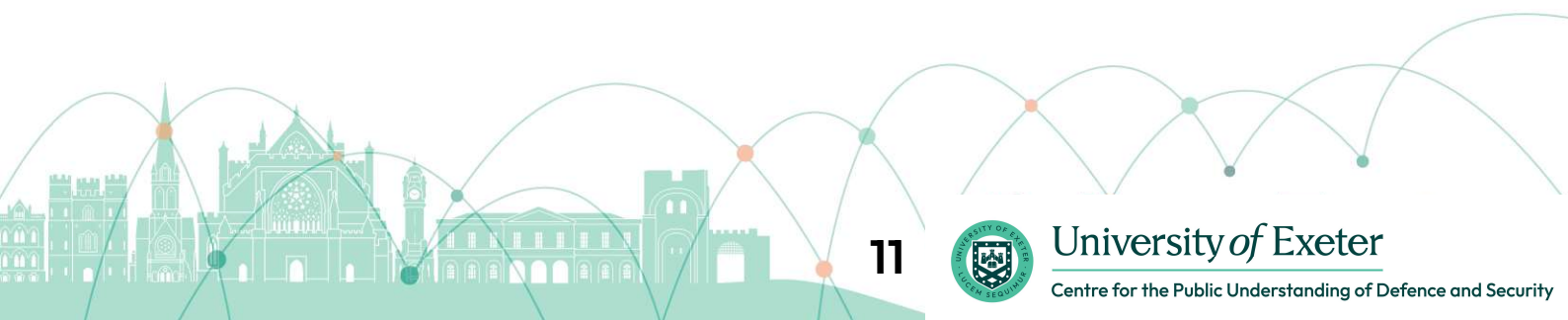
They also require sustainable sources of funding to empower the timely building of resilience, and expandable agency to put plans into effect using trained organisational actors. Socially and culturally, goodwill will be required to make any response a success, requiring communications to be cascaded through communities and that the means are found for doing so in spite of the possibility that physical or virtual networks may be inhibited or disabled.

The project of home defence might also consider whether it should have something of a compulsory element to it. In general terms, government does have some capacity to impose certain obligations on public and private actors in order to secure the country against threats. More specifically, it would be worthwhile investigating whether corporate governance could be compelled, rather than invited, to prioritise the national interest over shareholder value or international ownership, the UK having recently seen the substantial impact that weak cybersecurity can have on overall economic strength. The government must remember it has capability to compel actors to do the right thing in this regard, including by disincentivising or legislating against behaviour that weakens our resilience and resolve.

As well as the agencies and organisations already involved in the resilience framework, other sectors and occupations within UK society could be the focus of a cultural and ideological effort to reframe areas like corporate social responsibility around the security needs of the nation, ensuring that resilience is more broadly distributed across society. This is partly about getting this issue on the political and social agenda via the media and other routes. The public have both rights and duties, and getting the right messaging to ensure their support will be a critical first step in the development of home defence strategy and activities .

In light of the power of the information space in proliferating challenges to national security, the government needs to anticipate how society might feel about the steps required. There is clearly a role for education in informing public sentiment. Social media is a terrain within which this can be achieved but comes with its own risks, attendant on the use and abuse of the information space by our adversaries.

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Beyond the management of narratives and information, there are some practical steps that can be taken to better prepare the public. Some of these are small scale but meaningful in their impact on the prevailing sense of readiness – such as asking households to have torches, analogue radios, basic food supplies, water, batteries and so on. Industry and organisations, meanwhile, need to be supported to move away from 'just in time' responses to emerging crises and to stockpile and reduce reliance on imports in pursuit of resilience and sovereign capability, both in terms of military capacity but also in the civilian sector, for example, in food security.

Some organisational structures are in place, epitomised by the LRFs, but these often need to be empowered to take a lead on this agenda. There may be other forms of local organisations required to get community support. This would be enabled by the creation of a lead department or ministerial portfolio responsible for overall coordination of home defence. One aspect that requires serious thought is how to ready volunteer forces and identify protected professions; the conversation about which contains risks of its own for weakening resolve and support and must be managed carefully. The Civil Service should look to our partners overseas for examples of best practice, including Finland, Poland and the Baltics.

Finally, despite innovations like the network of LRFs, which meet regularly regarding a range of matters, there is no current substantive training being offered for the enablers of home defence, for example by the UK Defence Academy. The UK Resilience Academy, meanwhile, is very much focused on peacetime training for broader emergency and civil contingencies crises. Larger group training and education at scale needs to take place to include law enforcement and emergency services, local and central government officials and defence industry plus civil society groups, before it is too late.

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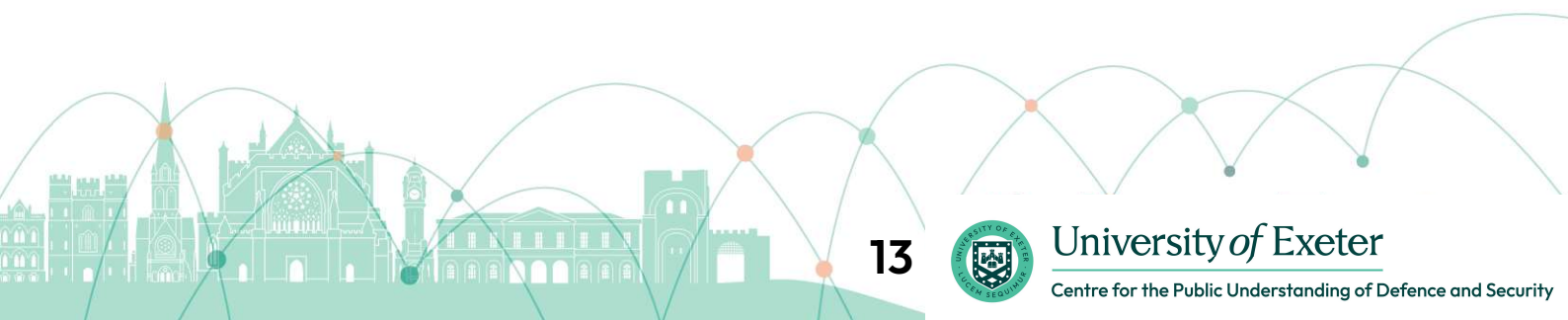
Conclusions and Recommendations for next steps

The UK can no longer afford to treat home defence either as a theoretical exercise or as politically and strategically peripheral. Effective home defence must be accepted as a strategic necessity in the face of persistent and escalating threats from hostile states and other hybrid actors. Current efforts remain fragmented, underpowered, and dangerously slow compared to those of UK allies, exposing critical vulnerabilities across UK infrastructure, cyberspace and societal resilience. Without immediate clarity of purpose, strong governance, and rapid mobilisation of resources, the UK risks critical strategic vulnerability at a time when adversaries are already acting. Home defence must move from aspiration to implementation—urgently, decisively and effectively.

This demands concrete action, with the following five recommendations setting out initial steps forward:

1. **Appoint a lead government department for home defence** with a clear mandate, executive tasking authorities, necessary financial resources, and experienced staff who understand the problem set.

2. **Set timelines for the development and delivery of a comprehensive home defence strategy** and its operationalisation in months not years.

3. **Examine best practice amongst close allies** in order to identify the most relevant principles, practices and solutions for expediting the UK's organisational and operational programmes.

4. **Develop fully funded education and outreach initiatives** in order to improve general public understanding of, and support for, UK defence and security. An urgent and paramount task is to encourage the public to participate, not least in recruitment into the Reserves who will in future play a major role in UK national defence.

5. **Organise and initiate a widespread, comprehensive programme of training**, geared initially towards senior and middle management leaders in the delivery of home defence. In the first instance, this should comprise seminars, scenario exercises and cross-sector panels, before being broadened outwards to include a broader swathe of society.

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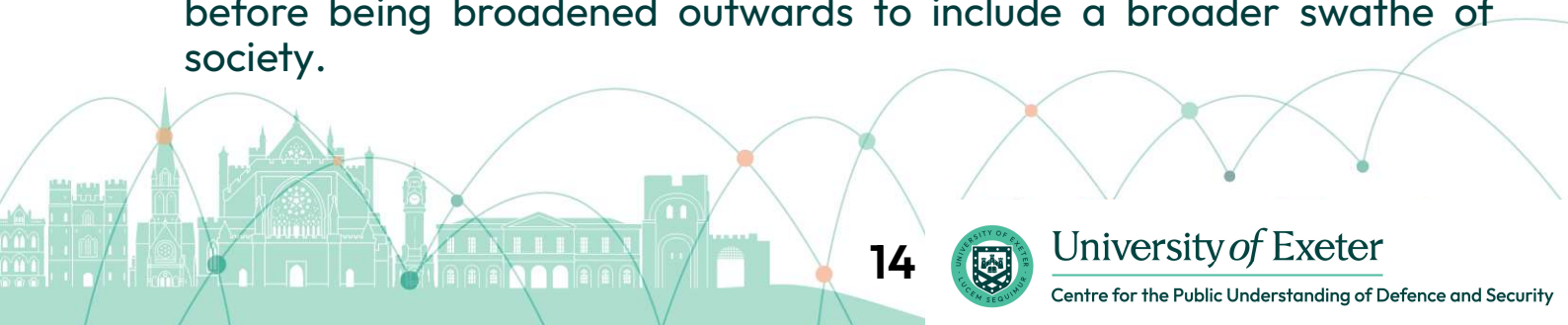
The essence of any 'whole-of-society' approach has to be to promote a sense of there being a coherent society to which individuals belong, and that the defence of it is something worth devoting their time and effort to. Otherwise, top-down rhetoric about home defence will fail to meet reality.

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