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[24 April 2025](#) [Steve Barwick](#)

The Case for Parliament to Scrutinise the UK's Nuclear Weapons Programme

Increased UK military spending is in the political spotlight but the huge and increasing proportion that is spent on nuclear weapons is not. Steve Barwick and Tim Street make a compelling and urgent case for much greater scrutiny of the UK nuclear weapons programme by Parliamentary Committees.

Over the last few months military spending has catapulted up the political agenda. The UK Government's plans to increase the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) budget to 2.5% of GDP and [divert funds](#) from the overseas aid budget to pay for it has been contentious. Whilst these announcements made the headlines, there has been very little debate about the huge—and increasing—expenditure within the defence budget on the UK's nuclear weapons programme. This is all the more surprising given that the UK's development of a new generation of nuclear weapons is at a critical stage and faces a number of significant problems.

With the government's Strategic Defence Review (expected to report in the coming weeks) barely permitted to examine the nuclear programme, there are three compelling reasons why the time is right for Parliament to step up and demand effective oversight of this vastly consequential and expensive endeavour.

1. Nuclear inflation

In recent years, the UK Government has begun using the term [Defence Nuclear Enterprise](#) (DNE) to refer to the “network of organisations and arrangements responsible for maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent and submarine forces.” Another key body is the Defence Nuclear Organisation (DNO)—which oversees the majority of the MOD's spending on nuclear weapons. The DNO saw the forecast cost of its 10-year equipment plan increase by an incredible 62% to £99.5bn in 2023. Total expenditure on the DNE over the same period is even higher at £117.8bn, as this [includes](#) all direct elements supporting the “deterrent programme” and nuclear-powered but conventionally armed attack submarines, including the entire DNO budget, in-service submarine support elements from the Navy, and related programmes in the UK Strategic Command. Spending by the UK on its nuclear arsenal and submarines is thus now set to make up [nearly 40%](#) of planned spending on defence equipment over the next ten years.

In this context, it is vital that Parliamentarians use the powers available to them to investigate the nation's key nuclear weapons programmes. Without proper scrutiny there is no meaningful way for the public to understand what is happening. Furthermore, our elected representatives won't be able to check whether money is being wasted or weigh up the value of nuclear weapons spending against alternative options.

The likely result of no scrutiny will be more mismanagement, increased safety risks, and the waste of huge sums of public money. It is therefore in everyone's interest—including the Government's—for the UK's DNE to be put under the microscope and fully evaluated.

It is unlikely that skyrocketing spending on the UK's nuclear weapons is going to end anytime soon. The National Audit Office's (NAO) [2023 report](#) on the affordability of the MOD's equipment plan stated that after 2025 "there are significant uncertainties in long-term nuclear costings and funding." To deal with this, the NAO explained, "HM Treasury is increasing funding for the deterrent by £2 billion each year, and it will consider nuclear funding during the next Spending Review." It was thus hard to disagree with the NAO's conclusion that the MOD has "prioritised delivering the replacement nuclear deterrent to schedule over immediate cost constraints" and that its equipment plan was "unaffordable".

2. Nuclear decay

The reasons for these cost increases have not been made public, despite the programme to build four new Dreadnought class submarines being at a critical stage in its delivery. In addition, the Core Production Capability project, which is constructing the facilities which will manufacture the reactor cores and fuel for the submarines, was [rated 'Red'](#) by the Government's Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) in 2023 and 2024. A 'Red' rating means that 'successful delivery of the project appears to be unachievable'.

There are also serious questions regarding the additional strain that delays in constructing the Dreadnought programme are creating on the current submarine fleet. For several years crews and submarines have been asked to endure patrol lengths that are around six months long. However, the fleet was designed for patrols of three months. Between 1969 and 2012 the longest patrol on record was only 16 weeks long ([Hall](#), 2012; p.44). It is our understanding that there are serious concerns within the submarine service about the long-term sustainability of this patrol pattern.

There may also be safety implications that arise from the submarine fleet being required to undertake longer patrols beyond the time when they would ideally have been decommissioned. The current Vanguard class submarines were designed with the intent to retire them after 25 years in service: between 2018 and 2024. Recent reports of [a fire on board](#) one submarine, and a [malfunctioning depth gauge](#) causing an unplanned dive, starkly illustrate the risks to crews from faulty equipment. The MOD have not released any information about these incidents that could illuminate whether maintenance backlogs were a contributing factor, but it is probable that they have made such events more likely.

President Trump's recent statements on the US retreating from Europe, and his decision to suspend support to Ukraine, present another set of complications for UK decision-makers. These developments raise stark questions about the viability of the UK's [so-called "independent"](#) nuclear deterrent, not to mention any potential [new European role](#) for it. As a result, there has been some discussion about making the UK's nuclear arsenal technologically independent from the US. It is likely that such technological independence for the UK's nuclear weapons programme would be extremely challenging. If it is possible at all, then significantly higher spending on the programme [would be required](#). Were this scenario to be seriously considered, the case for scrutiny of the DNE would be even greater.

3. The accountability gap

The current situation is that MOD secrecy severely limits the information that is disclosed about the DNE in response to Freedom of Information requests or Parliamentary Questions. MOD transparency regarding the UK's nuclear weapons programme is thus now lower than any time since the early 1990s. Indeed, it appears that the MOD has been given a blank cheque to spend whatever is deemed necessary on the DNE. This is despite the fact that if there are further unplanned increases in spending on the DNE, the government will have to either increase the defence budget (meaning either more cuts to other departments or rises in taxation) or divert funds from non-nuclear (i.e. conventional) to nuclear military projects. The recent comment from the MOD's Permanent Secretary [that he is in favour of scrutiny and challenge](#) from MPs is welcome, but more now needs to be done to ensure that up-to-date information on equipment plans and spending is released.

To fill the accountability gap, Parliamentarians—in particular the Defence Select Committee—need to regularly scrutinise the UK's nuclear weapons programme. There is precedent for this. During the construction phase of the current nuclear-armed submarine fleet, the Committee annually reviewed the Trident nuclear weapons system (between 1986 and 1994), monitoring its progress and issuing reports to the House of Commons.

There is therefore now a compelling case for the Defence Select Committee—possibly with the Public Accounts Committee—to hold an inquiry into the rising costs and risks across the DNE, including on progress constructing the four new Dreadnought submarines, none of which have been completed. This should become an annual inquiry.

There should also be a separate inquiry, by the Defence Select Committee in partnership with the Foreign Affairs Committee, focused on potential future options for the UK's nuclear weapons system. This would include looking at the benefits of reducing the UK's warhead stockpile and the adoption of a formal policy of No First Use. These are two of the many possible measures that the UK could take to create a climate of confidence for multilateral nuclear disarmament and strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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