

Fleet:

The evolving landscape of defence

Vice Admiral Andy Mathews took over the role of Chief of Materiel Fleet in 2009 after a long career as an engineer at sea as well as significant periods in support and acquisition. Here, he comments on some of the major issues and projects facing the Naval Service in 2010 and beyond.



As Chief of Materiel Fleet, what do you see as the major challenges ahead?

In terms of major challenges, the biggest one is a period of uncertainty. We are facing an 'interesting' year ahead, with a General Election, a Defence Review and the need to get the Defence Budget balanced. It is going to be a challenging time for all of us. You have to overlay that with the fact that we have to support a very busy Royal Navy.

The Navy is globally deployed. The main effort for all three Services is Afghanistan, but people do not often recognise the scale of the Royal Navy's commitment to Afghanistan. Of the 9500 military personnel there, up to 3000 could, depending upon the units deployed, be from the naval services; the Marines, Naval Air Squadrons, medical teams, and a number of other specialists. In operations around the Gulf, we still have over 1000 people supporting the Iraqi Navy in the wind-down from Operation TELIC; we have mine-countermeasure vessels in the Gulf; and we have frigates and destroyers on counter-piracy, embargo and counter-terror operations around the Gulf area and Horn of Africa. And this is only the picture East of Suez. We also have units in the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Antarctic, around the UK and, of course, we have our submarines, both attack and our nuclear deterrent. On the latter, we maintain one at sea on patrol and ready, as we have done continuously for the last 40 years. This range of operations means that we have to look at different kinds of support solutions – we must work with our contractors in different ways to get logistics and engineering support out to those ships that are globally deployed. Doing that, with the other pressures – ageing platforms increasing tempo and budget pressures – that are coming through because of the Defence Review, will be challenging.

I think the key will be our people. Pressures on budgets mean pressures on people in many ways. Sustaining our people, and particularly making our civil servants feel valued, is vital. We have a mixed team of military and civil servants, and we have outstanding people here at DE&S that the country should be proud of.

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What can you tell our readers about the Maritime Change Programme?

The Maritime Change Programme is primarily about changing our relationship with industry, building on what came out of the Maritime Industrial Strategy within the wider Defence Industrial Strategy. We need to look at how we build long-term partnering arrangements with industry which drive them to invest and make efficiencies, and allow us (the MOD) to share in those benefits. Key to this is rationalising our support infrastructure to match our future requirements. There are challenging things that we have been doing in terms of partnering agreements. One of those is what has become, with VT's exit from the shipbuilding business, the BAE Systems Surface Ships Terms of Business Agreement. We also looked at how we do surface ships support, and have signed the Surface Ships' Support Accord, which is about how we work with industry to manage classes of ships in a through-life way. The Maritime Change Programme is a big programme that we have to deliver, because the benefits it produces are absolutely key to making our budgets affordable.

