



Summary

New Zealand Defence Force: Resetting efforts to reduce harmful behaviour

In 2016, the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) launched Operation Respect after a series of reviews found that inappropriate and harmful sexual behaviour was a problem in the organisation. Operation Respect is intended to eliminate harmful behaviour in NZDF and create a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment for its people. Initially, Operation Respect focused only on sexual harm, but in 2017 the scope was expanded to include all inappropriate and harmful behaviours.

The Ministry of Defence commissioned an independent review of Operation Respect, which was completed in 2020. The review found that while progress had been made in better preventing and responding to inappropriate and harmful behaviour, Operation Respect had lost momentum and needed renewed focus. The review also found that there was a “code of silence” where many personnel felt unable to raise concerns about harmful behaviour because of a fear of repercussions and because they did not trust NZDF’s systems and processes.

Over the next 20 years, the Office of the Auditor-General will assess how well NZDF is progressing towards achieving Operation Respect’s aims. We will do this by carrying out regular performance audits and monitoring of NZDF’s actions to implement Operation Respect.

The focus of our first audit is on how well NZDF reset Operation Respect after the 2020 review, and whether it has been designed and setup in the right way to achieve its aims.

What we found

Changing attitudes and behaviours in an organisation is difficult. This is especially so in organisations such as NZDF, which has a long history built on command and control, strong team cohesion norms, and a masculine culture. There are fluid boundaries between people’s work and personal lives. NZDF is also a complex organisation; it has three different services with distinct identities and a large civilian workforce.



NZDF has been making progress since Operation Respect was initiated in 2016. NZDF is a different organisation from what it was 10 years ago, and behaviours considered normal back then are not seen in the same way today.

However, harmful behaviour persists in the organisation. In our survey of NZDF personnel, 1.3% of respondents (or 78 personnel) had experienced unwanted sexual activity in the previous 12 months. Women, in particular, continue to experience high rates of inappropriate and harmful behaviour. Women in uniform, early in their careers, are the most affected. In the last year, 7.2% of junior uniformed women who responded to our survey had experienced unwanted sexual activity. Nearly one-quarter of junior uniformed women who responded to our survey (24.6%) had experienced some form of inappropriate sexual behaviour, and more than one-fifth (19%) experienced bullying, harassment, or discrimination.

NZDF moved quickly to address the review's recommendations. Although NZDF's approach was well intended, it was not driven by clearly stated and shared goals or underpinned by a clear and well-considered strategy. The absence of a clear and well-considered strategy has meant NZDF's actions have not always been co-ordinated or targeted at the right issues. If this is not addressed there is a risk that Operation Respect will have limited and only temporary impact.

It has not been clear who is responsible for leading and driving Operation Respect and there has not been enough direction or oversight from senior leaders. Without this, the ability of the programme to bring about change has been significantly constrained.

The success of Operation Respect is fundamental to the military's operational effectiveness. NZDF operates in a wide range of environments, from combat operations to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. NZDF personnel must be ready to work in difficult and dangerous conditions. This requires strong and trusted leadership, and effective teams where all personnel trust each other. This will not occur if personnel are harming each other.

To meet the challenges of the 21st century, NZDF needs to attract and retain personnel with a wide range of skills and perspectives, and it needs to respect and value what this diversity brings to the organisation. This is fundamental to NZDF

being a modern military and creating the effective leaders and teams that will be the foundation of the organisation's operational success. Operation Respect is critical to meeting the challenges that NZDF faces – but NZDF has not yet set out a clear and compelling narrative that explains this to its personnel.

NZDF is aware that its initial response to the 2020 review has not been sufficient. Senior leaders are committed to Operation Respect and now recognise the scale of the task ahead. Work is underway to create a new Operation Respect organisational strategy and plan. In creating the strategy and plan, senior leaders need a shared understanding of the problem and a clearly defined and shared view of the future that Operation Respect is trying to bring about.

It is essential that senior leaders play a strong and visible role in setting the vision and direction for Operation Respect and that more robust ways to hold all leaders accountable are established. A significant shift in approach is required that will affect many aspects of NZDF's work. There are fundamental elements that need to be in place for Operation Respect to make a lasting difference.

Operation Respect presents a significant opportunity for NZDF. Staff turnover has been high following NZDF's involvement in the Covid-19 response and the organisation is rebuilding. Operation Respect needs to be a foundation of that rebuilding.

Our recommendations are designed to ensure that NZDF is putting in place the foundations needed for Operation Respect to succeed. Visible efforts to create a more safe, respectful and inclusive environment will enable NZDF to recruit and retain the right people to take the organisation forward.

Monitoring progress and outcomes

As part of our work, we have developed an outcomes measurement framework that will enable us to assess NZDF's progress against five outcomes. We intend to report against this framework about every two years. The first of these monitoring reports, *A safe and respectful New Zealand Defence Force: First monitoring report*, is also available on our website.