

Defence spending must focus on more than ‘boots on the ground’

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The Government’s proposals to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP from April 2027 must be underpinned by investment in skills development beyond ‘boots on the ground’, with core engineering resources severely lacking expertise, specialist consultancy Engineering by Murray has warned.

UK STEM industries, including the defence sector, have been plagued by a shortage of technical engineers for several years, with the Institute of Mechanical Engineers warning recently that the profession could face a workforce crisis similar to that seen in the NHS, if skills and training are not prioritised.

As Chris Nelson, Associate Director at specialist recruitment consultancy, Engineering by Murray, comments, a lack of appropriate investment in skills growth will put the plans – and the country’s security – at risk.

“The resilience of the UK’s defence sector is increasingly under scrutiny, and while the focus has largely been on the size of the armed forces, it’s not just a ‘boots on the ground’ issue. An equally critical challenge to address is the lack of engineers available to support vital projects, not just in relation to technology and machine maintenance, but also emerging cybersecurity needs.

“The UK is home to several globally leading defence employers who are all likely to increase the size of their workforces in the coming years, but currently the specialist talent pool isn’t at the scale needed to support significant growth. Plans were discussed earlier this year to develop a National Engineering and Technology Workforce Strategy, but it’s clear that the defence employment market requires additional and urgent investment before most other sectors.

“The increase in defence spending has to be distributed in proportion to the realistic needs of the industry. Without the required technical engineering skills, the armed forces will be ill-equipped, which simply cannot happen. As the Government maps out its spending plans, we urge them to consider what resources are necessary and, critically, where they will come from at a time of a growing STEM skills crisis.”

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