

RECOVERING NATIONAL CAPABILITY

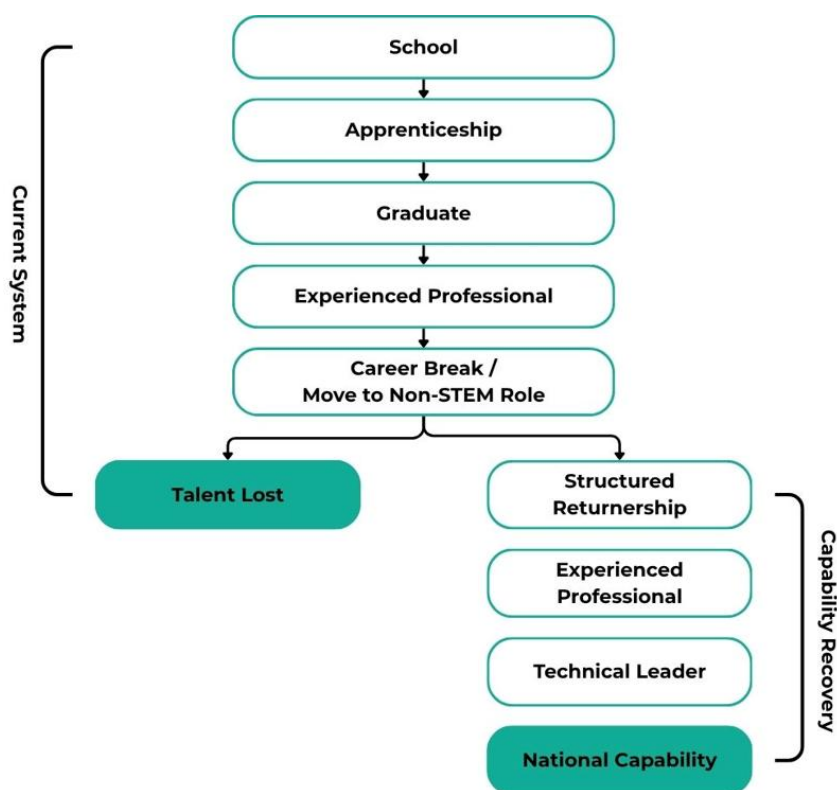
THE MISSING WORKFORCE STRATEGY FOR DELIVERING THE UK'S INDUSTRIAL AMBITIONS

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THE DECISION

Recognise capability recovery as the UK's fourth strategic workforce pathway, alongside apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling - and deliver it through structured returnerships and other recognised mechanisms.

The UK's missing workforce pathway



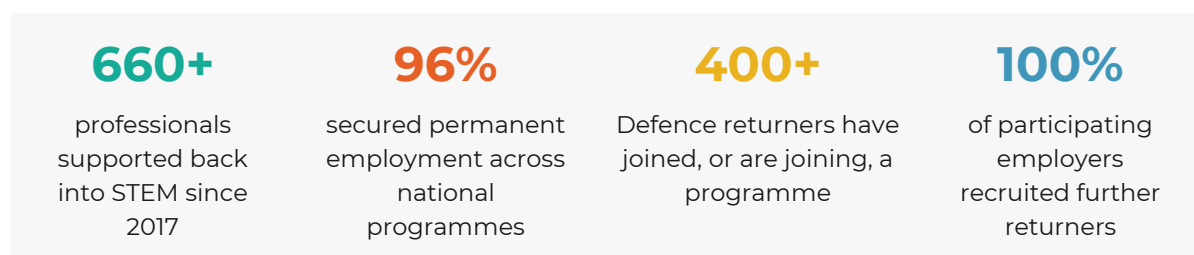
The policy problem

The UK's Defence ambitions face a critical workforce constraint. Increased investment will not translate into industrial capacity unless the sector can secure the experienced people needed to deliver it. Skills England and the Ministry of Defence project that Defence will require approximately 82,000 workers across 14 priority occupations between 2025 and 2035. 53,000 to support growth and 29,000 to replace those expected to leave. Some 87% of the additional demand will require qualifications at Level 4 or above.

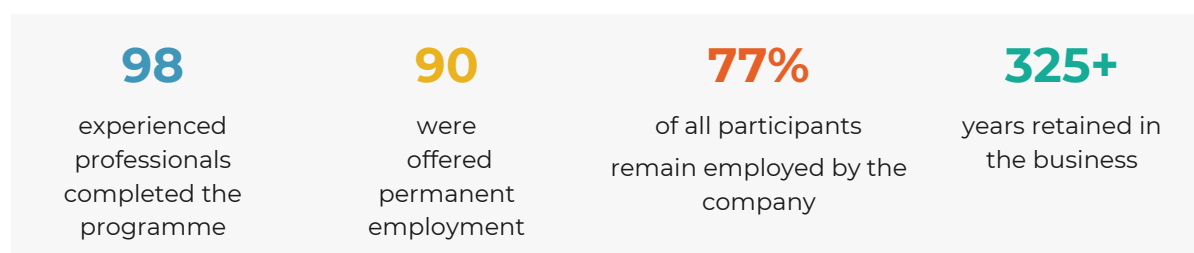
Traditional pipelines are essential but cannot produce experienced capability at the pace required. Twelve of Defence's 14 priority occupations are also priorities for other strategic sectors, meaning Defence cannot solve the problem by competing more aggressively for the same limited workforce. Its largest age group is already 50–59, while the proportions aged 30–39 and 40–49 are below the UK average. The sector must therefore create new talent, retain existing people and recover experienced capability currently outside its workforce.

Whilst UK workforce policy has established routes for apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and reskilling, there is no national pathway for reconnecting experienced professionals after a career break or time outside strategically important sectors. Career breaks may create a technical currency gap as standards, tools and regulations evolve, but they do not erase professional judgement, leadership or accumulated experience. Structured returnerships recover and refresh that capability through targeted upskilling, recertification and supported re-entry, reconnecting in weeks or months expertise that may have taken decades to build.

Evidence that capability recovery works



The strongest longitudinal evidence comes from a major Defence Prime's decade-long partnership with STEM Returners:



From policy gap to national workforce infrastructure

A national capability recovery framework

Six recommendations for Government and industry

1	Establish capability recovery as a strategic workforce objective Adopt it explicitly within UK workforce policy, the Modern Industrial Strategy, Defence Industrial Strategy and Skills England remit.
2	Recognise the fourth national workforce pathway Place capability recovery alongside apprenticeships, graduate recruitment and lifelong learning, delivered through structured returnerships and other recognised mechanisms.
3	Introduce capability recovery targets Require Defence Growth Deals and sector workforce plans to report returner recruitment alongside apprenticeship and graduate intake.
4	Extend funding parity Fund returnerships on comparable terms, including the targeted upskilling and recertification needed to refresh technical currency.
5	Adopt a measurement standard Include capability recovery within future Skills England assessments and MOD reporting, tracking years of experience recovered, retention and progression—not only vacancies filled and time to hire.
6	Extend the model to the Defence supply chain Use shared programmes and the Defence Office for Small Business Growth to give SMEs access to returner talent at viable scale.

Three actions within six months

RECOGNISE	PILOT	CONVENE
Capability recovery as a strategic workforce objective in the next update to UK workforce policy.	A common returnership reporting framework across Defence and Nuclear with the MOD, Skills England and industry.	A national Returnership Taskforce to agree definitions, metrics and an implementation roadmap.

What success looks like by 2035

5,000+ experienced professionals returned to strategically important sectors through structured returnerships

Every major Defence prime operates a structured returnership programme; SMEs can access shared cross-employer programmes

Skills England and the MOD publish annual capability recovery data, with thousands of years of expertise recovered and retained

The UK's industrial future will be determined not only by the talent it creates, but by the capability it chooses to recover.

Full evidence, methodology and case studies: Recovering National Capability - The Missing Workforce Strategy for Delivering the UK's Industrial Ambitions (Natalie Desty, STEM Returners, August 2026).