The UK military’s Harmony Guidelines stipulate the duration of tours of duty. They differ for each of the armed services, and are designed to safeguard against excessive deployments and overstretch.

For the army, the guidelines state that a tour should last for six months and be followed by a 24-month break. Therefore, if the guideline is followed, a unit should not be deployed for more than 12 months within a three-year period.

Research led by Professor Roberto Rona at King’s Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), showed that when servicemen and women had been deployed for more than 13 months within three years, they were more likely to report mental ill health as well as symptoms of physical ill health and problems at home.

Unforeseen increases in the length of a tour were especially detrimental: if the tour of duty was longer than anticipated, servicemen and women were much more likely to report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) afterwards.

The number of tours, however, made no difference to people’s psychological wellbeing. ‘The length of each tour and the “down-time” in between was more important than the actual number of deployments,’ says Professor Sir Simon Wessely, co-director of KCMHR.

‘Our research highlighted the importance of adherence to the Harmony Guidelines covering tour length,’ he says. ‘The guidelines weren’t often broken, but if they were, there was an effect on people’s mental health.’

The research team also showed that whilst ‘Regulars’ were not at increased risk of mental health problems following deployment, the ‘Reserve’ personnel were. This led to a specific programme of mental health support within the NHS for Reserves.