Ian Spencer Head and Director

Royal Geographical Society

with IBG

Advancing geography and geographical learning



Job title: Head of Foundation of Geospatial Intelligence and Director of the Defence Geographic Centre

Organisation: Ministry of Defence

Location: Feltham and Northolt, West London

and Wyton, Cambridgeshire, UK

How did you get to where you are now?

I read Geography BSc at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College (University of London) and then joined the UK Ministry of Defence's Mapping and Charting Establishment in 1990; the organisation then comprised 900 staff and I was one of six graduate trainees appointed that year. At the same time I was elected a Fellow of the RGS. I worked in various MOD roles, including promotion to more senior roles, involving geographic information source evaluation, information management, and product and standards development.

I was promoted in 2004 and became a member of the Defence Geographic Centre Management Team. I moved every couple of years through roles including capability planning, delivery and integration; business and resource management and corporate planning; learning and development; information management; and geographic research. I was promoted into my current position as Deputy Head NCGI-Foundation and Director of the Defence Geographic Centre in October 2015.

My role includes being "Head of Profession" for civilian geographers in the MOD, and in 2018 I was appointed one of the Deputy Heads of the Government-wide Geography Profession.

What do you do as part of your role?

I am the senior civilian Geographer and Geospatial Analyst in the UK Ministry of Defence and one of three Deputy Heads of the UK's National Centre for Geospatial Intelligence (NCGI). I am responsible for delivering global Foundation GEOINT - assured geospatial and environmental information, products and services - to UK Defence, and also to support partners across Government.

My teams comprise 450 civilian and military personnel delivering geographic support and aeronautical navigation support through the Defence Geographic Centre and the No1 Aeronautical Information Documents Unit. I am also responsible for service delivery agreements through which a further 280 personnel within the UK Met Office and UK Hydrographic Office satisfy Defence's global requirements for meteorological, oceanographic and oceanographic support.

My week is split between senior level meetings with colleagues and seniors in the wider MOD, and managing the day to day operations of the organisation through my team of experienced leaders at Civil Service Grade 7 and the military equivalent. I also regularly engage with senior military and civilian officials in other countries, typically travelling abroad up to four times per year.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

Good leadership and management skills combined with good communication skills are vital. One minute I may be leading negotiations with a senior official from another country (so that we can share information and expertise, through a formal memorandum of understanding); the next minute I may be dealing with an urgent personnel disciplinary or welfare issue, or dealing with the safety issues arising from an infrastructure or equipment failure.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

My main function and that of my team is to ensure that the UK MOD and Armed Forces receive the most suitable geographical information and data services that will enable them to understand location, and to plan, navigate and operate anywhere in the world. It is therefore all about geography.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Knowing that what I and my staff do really matters to our nation, in terms of its security, and in terms of the safety of the people who keep our nation safe, or providing assistance overseas in the event of crisis. Every day I champion the contribution that geography makes to our machinery of government, and the best of times are when I see my staff being celebrated and recognised for the work that they do.

What are the opportunities for career progression?

The Civil Service is a rich environment for a variety of career development paths. Within my part of the MOD we recruit at Civil Service Executive Officer-equivalent level, currently up to 60 people per year. The organisation is relocating to Cambridgeshire by 2023 and I anticipate significant progression opportunities for the staff who decide to stay with the organisation, or who join after the move. There are also opportunities to move into adjacent roles in other MOD analytical professions.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go in to this career?

Keep an open mind about what you want to do and how you want to progress. Some people arrive with an ambition to achieve promotion as quickly as possible. It isn't always about that, and when you start your career you need to navigate carefully to identify what learning you need to pursue - having A Levels and a degree doesn't automatically make you a great manager, people person, or deep expert. Be prepared to continue learning.

How do you maintain your knowledge and interest in geography outside of work?

I have become increasingly involved in supporting the growing Government Geography Profession, and getting involved with activities that support the development of the Chartered Geographer community.

Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?

I grew up in a coal mining community in the Rhondda Valley in South Wales. Both the people and landscape were so visibly shaped by physical processes (glaciation) and human interaction with the landscape (coal mining, and disasters such as the Aberfan landslide). I just wanted to understand my place, why it was the way it was. Geography was in my heart, and it was easily seen through every window at home and at school. I also had an enthusiastic and inspiring teacher.

Geography is the lattice and glue that joins together everything about our world, and is vital if you want to understand the complex interrelationships between different systems and disciplines.