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Church leaders have denounced the Government's decision yesterday to spend at least £3 billion on a nuclear weapons system. The Government has delayed a final vote on buying a replacement for the Trident weapons system until 2016, but yesterday Defence Secretary Liam Fox announced his approval for the initial £3 billion phase of production.

Leaders from The Methodist Church, The Baptist Union and the United Reformed Church said the Government's backing of a new nuclear weapons system was "unaffordable, immoral and strategically unwise". Paul Morrison, policy adviser for The Methodist Church, said: "The Government's decision means that we are committed to £3 billion of expenditure whether Parliament chooses to purchase the new Trident system in five years time or not. This comes at a time when communities are suffering from the impact of local government spending cuts. Youth services, SureStart Centres, Back-to-Work Clubs have all had their funding cut because we have been told that we can no longer afford to sustain them.

"The £3 billion the Government has committed could pay the entire budget for every SureStart Centre in the country for the next two years; £3 billion would stop every council cut this year, and the first ten months of next year.

Instead, that money is being used to purchase an option of whether to buy weapons of mass destruction." According to government figures, a new nuclear weapons system would cost £25 billion in production costs and at least £4 billion a year to maintain. If Parliament votes against a Trident replacement, the £3 billion expenditure yesterday would be added to the country's deficit without anything to show for it.

Simon Loveitt, United Reformed Church spokesperson on public issues, said: "The Government's decision is to commit us to a massive piece of spending from which there is no going back – and yet they tell us their primary focus is to bring down the deficit. This is not what people voted for."

Graham Sparkes, Head of Faith and Unity at the Baptist Union of Great Britain, said: "If we buy these weapons the annual cost is predicted to be more than £4 billion for every year we have them. The total cuts across Government this year amount to £6.2 billion. With £4 billion each year we could double university funding, but if we buy these nuclear weapons, we will cast a shadow over the next generation."