



# Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill

## Oral evidence: Armed Forces Bill 2026, HC 1712

Tuesday 24 February 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Clive Efford (Chair); Luke Akehurst; Alex Ballinger; Sarah Bool; Juliet Campbell; Al Carns; Pam Cox; Mr Paul Foster; Gerald Jones; Jayne Kirkham; Mike Martin; Ian Roome; Rachel Taylor; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 1 - 56

### Witnesses

[I](#): Ted Arnold, Senior Public Affairs and Policy Manager, Help for Heroes; Mark Atkinson, Director General, Royal British Legion; and Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope KCB CBE, Chair, Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo).

[II](#): Rebecca Lovell, Head of Policy, Naval Families Federation; Andrea Devlin, Director, RAF Families Federation; and Collette Musgrave, Chief Executive, Army Families Federation.

[III](#): Andy Cole, Chief Executive, Royal Star & Garter; Caroline Cooke, Head of Policy, Forces in Mind Trust; and Chloe Mackay, CEO, Combat Stress.

[IV](#): Lieutenant Commander (Retd) Susie Hamilton, Scottish Veterans Commissioner; David Johnstone, Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner; and Colonel James Phillips, Veterans Commissioner for Wales.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ted Arnold, Mark Atkinson and Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon. This is the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, and this is our first evidence session. We have four panels giving evidence to us this afternoon, and this is our first. Welcome, and thank you very much for taking the time to come and give evidence to the Committee. Please introduce yourselves.

**Mark Atkinson:** I am Mark Atkinson, director general of the Royal British Legion.

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** My name is Nick Pope and I chair Cobseo, which is the Confederation of Service Charities.

**Ted Arnold:** My name is Ted Arnold. I am senior public affairs policy manager at Help for Heroes.

Q2 **Rachel Taylor:** I would like to thank you and your organisations for all the fantastic work you do for veterans in my constituency of North Warwickshire and Bedworth and across the country.

What are the shortcomings of the Armed Forces Covenant as things stand, and to what extent do you think this Bill would address some or all of those shortcomings?

**Mark Atkinson:** Thank you for the question and your comments about our organisations. To give you a little history, the Royal British Legion campaigned for the introduction of the Covenant. We led that campaign alongside other charities in the sector. We were really pleased that the Covenant was introduced in 2011. We spent the following decade calling on successive Governments to strengthen it. We are pleased that a legal duty was first introduced in the Armed Forces Act 2021. There has been real progress over the last 15 years or so. There is a real opportunity to further strengthen the Covenant through the Armed Forces Bill that the Committee is scrutinising.

However, there are undoubtedly gaps in what we currently have that I hope will be addressed by the Bill, both in terms of the policy areas and public bodies that the duty applies to. When giving evidence to the Defence Committee last year, Nick and I called on the Government to extend the breadth and depth of the Covenant duty to make sure that more within the armed forces community benefited from that protection. We certainly want to see more areas and public bodies covered. The awareness of the duty certainly also needs attention. There is a lot to do to support the implementation of existing legislation, and if we are going to extend it, that is needed even more.

**Ted Arnold:** As Mark has just said, the last Act was foundational. It moved the Covenant from being a voluntary duty to a statutory duty. That really mattered for the veterans we support. It raised awareness of the Covenant, but it also formalised consideration of service-related disadvantage. However, as Mark said, the scope was limited, particularly



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in relation to national policymakers being under the framework and the policy areas in scope.

This Bill, particularly clause 2, addresses that structural gap. The recovery of the wounded, injured and sick veterans we support spans multiple systems. It is not just healthcare, but social care, welfare benefits and compensation, and employment. This gives greater coherence across the recovery system, which is critical to the long-term independence of many of the veterans we support.

**Rachel Taylor:** Is there anything you want to add, Nick?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** I want to return to the idea behind the Covenant in the first place, which was to form a bond between the nation and the military and to talk about there being no disadvantage through service, along with special recognition for those young men and women who have given the most to this nation. That is a great thing to do, and it is really laudable. I think we would all agree that, for the last 14 or 15 years, the Covenant has given us a framework to get after that laudable aspiration. However, the principles and the scope depend on four things: clear definition, effective application, robust enforcement and clear measurement. We have to get after all those four aspects—both with current and future Covenants—if we are to really make a difference.

When looking at the annual report on the Covenant, Mark, I and others in the sector—the families federations, Help for Heroes and others who the Committee will hear from today—have consistently commented on areas where we are falling short, such as application. Take housing, where different local authorities across the country have different views on how they see the Covenant and train for it depending on whether there is a councillor interested in the veterans or armed forces community, or whether there is an armed forces champion. We arguably have a bit of a postcode lottery that we may want to get after. It is a complex and complicated area, but collectively we really support the idea behind the extension of the duty and what is in the Bill.

Q3 **Rachel Taylor:** Do you think that the right policy areas are covered within the scope, or does anything else need to be included?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** I will start off on scope. I think that the teams around the table here have done quite a lot of work with other Government Departments and the devolved Administrations to think about policy areas we might consider. In some areas, we have taken an initial idea of 14 policy areas down to 12 by combining things such as health and social care into a single policy area. It is quite an ambitious list, if I am honest. Getting under the skin of what the Covenant means to you if you are in an OGD—not the Ministry of Defence—and how it fits with your extant statutory guidance is going to be a hard ask. I would say start cautiously with 12—that is actually ambitious—and, if necessary, move on.

There will, however, be some areas we will look at to see where the current Bill is up against the boundaries. For instance, if you go to some of



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our unitary authorities or councils, such as Manchester, or to areas in the devolved Administrations, I am sure some of the work we do between now and the end of the year to tease out the statutory guidance associated with the Bill will get into the detail of those particular areas.

**Mark Atkinson:** I guess the debate has been about breadth versus depth. Do you retain the existing policy areas but work harder to raise awareness among public bodies and the armed forces community and make sure that the Covenant has maximum effect, or do you broaden and stretch it out? Government policy has been to go for that maximalist approach. That is one that we support at the Royal British Legion—that more policy areas should be covered.

To answer your question directly, there are areas that, even with the extended Covenant duty, would not be covered. If you take things such as domestic violence or financial wellbeing and debt, there are areas where we would like to see further stretch. To build on Nick's comment, this has been the debate: breadth versus depth. The principle of extending the Covenant duty is the right one, but—I am sure we will talk about this in our session—what will come with that is an expectation around implementation and support for public bodies.

Q4 **Rachel Taylor:** Can you give us an idea of how much resource the Government have put into this, as it stands now?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** That is arguably a question you might throw at the Ministry of Defence, because resource comes in two or three areas: time, manpower and money. When I have been on the other side of the fence dealing with previous Armed Forces Bills that have come before the House, the Ministry has had to provide a financial statement associated with the resource connotations. This one is more complex, I would argue, because you are looking now for resource implications across Government rather than singularly from the MOD. I am afraid I cannot answer the question, because I think it is really a question for statutory services.

Q5 **Mr Foster:** As a veteran and a retired sapper, may I thank you for everything that you and your organisations do for veterans up and down the country? There have been huge improvements since I retired on the support that veterans get, and I thank you for that. The Bill would retain existing definitions of the Covenant's legal duty on "due regard". I know the principle of due regard was also discussed in previous Committees, but do you not think it should be replaced with a more prescriptive duty? What would you define as due regard?

**Ted Arnold:** Due regard is a recognised public law standard—we have seen it used in the Equality Act. It requires informed and documented consideration of service-related disadvantage. It is procedural rather than outcome-guaranteeing, but I think that is appropriate for this. The Covenant is really about preventing disadvantage rather than necessarily creating automatic prioritisation, even though the principle of special consideration is there for those who have been injured or bereaved. The



key is in the guidance and making it clear that consideration should be evidenced and applied consistently. The important thing for us to get right now is the guidance following on from due regard.

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** Paul, my elder brother was a sapper, so I will not hold that against you. Due regard, disadvantage and special recognition are now well understood, so if we move away from using those particular words, replacing them will always be difficult. The trick, as Ted said, is in the statutory guidance. That gives us the vehicle to develop the guidance between now and the summer in a way that puts flesh on the bones of those kinds of words, which arguably can mean different things to different people.

Q6 **Mr Foster:** As has been mentioned, general awareness of the Covenant, even across the public sector, is not necessarily as good as it should be. I am a former local authority leader, and we had an armed forces champion for a number of years. Other authorities did not seem to place due regard, for example, on having an armed forces champion. I worry that, where we are trying to legislate the Covenant into law, the due regard of the Royal British Legion could be different from the due regard of South Ribble borough council, for example. It is really challenging, especially across the public sector. I think it is important that we understand the guidance is robust and evidenced. What we could end up with here—and I would be interested in your comments—is, if we are not careful, a continued postcode lottery of services and of due regard up and down the country.

**Mark Atkinson:** I agree, and I think that the Government's ambition to broaden and deepen the duty is a positive one and we should welcome it. However, the implementation, consistency and standards that Nick referred to are critical. We want to avoid that postcode lottery. Wherever you live as part of the armed forces community, there should be consistency.

What we do know is that there are low levels of awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant duty within the armed forces. The Minister himself referred to the fact that many within the serving community do not know that it exists or that the protections are there. We have a job—a shared responsibility between Government and charities like mine—to raise awareness of the duty. We have to make sure that public bodies are held accountable for its application.

We also know that there is a great deal of support among the general public for the Armed Forces Covenant. We did some polling back in 2025: 73% of people supported the Armed Forces Covenant duty. We know that the general public believe in this. They see it as a way of recognising the service of those who have been in the armed forces. I think our job is to raise awareness and hold public bodies to account.

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** When we get into the statutory guidance, I am delighted to say that the Government have been very good at leaning in towards the third sector to help develop it, and we feel included. I guess the same principle is something that we would look to



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see playing across other Government Departments, because it is much easier to own a problem than for it to be given to you.

As we develop the statutory guidance, I would hope that we, in conjunction with the MOD, can lean out to OGDs to start to think about the guidance as it pertains to their own particular areas. If that happens, the chances of effective application throughout the system would be more telling.

**Q7 Christian Wakeford:** Mark, you mentioned consistency of services. Obviously, in Greater Manchester we have pockets of brilliance and then huge amounts that are lacking—Wigan being a prime example, and I speak as a Greater Manchester MP. What more can be done to share those elements of best practice?

When we refer to the armed forces continuous attitude survey, only 22% of respondents in 2025 knew a lot about the Armed Forces Covenant, its implications and their rights. What more can be done to feed that through, not only to former personnel but to the services that they are hoping to use?

**Mark Atkinson:** I think there is a shared responsibility. This is not just Government and MOD; I think we in the sector—the charity sector—also have a responsibility to showcase and celebrate good practice where the duty is being taken seriously by public bodies, and to help disseminate that good practice. Undoubtedly, through the statutory guidance and other means, we need to shine a light on what good looks like, as well as holding to account others who are not fulfilling their responsibilities.

This may be coming up in your questions, but we are conscious that the Bill extends responsibilities to local authorities, devolved Administrations, central Government Departments, etc. We think it would be beneficial for the Bill, and certainly the statutory guidance, to be really clear that it also applies to combined authorities, mayoral authorities and the Greater London Authority. It should be really clear, both on the face of the Bill and to combined authorities in Manchester and elsewhere, that this applies to them and that they should also be held to account. I am not sure at the moment that reference to local authorities is specific enough to make it clear that this does include combined/mayoral authorities and the GLA.

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** May I give a shout-out? You are going to get an answer, I think, on this particular question in a later panel when you speak to the family federations. Arguably, against the current provisions of the Covenant—housing, education and employment—a lot of those issues pertain to the dependants, the partners and the spouses of those who are serving. The consciousness and the families element of our business is an area where, at the individual level, even though the word “covenant” may not be recognised, the individual aspects of the consequences of mobility, particularly across areas of the UK footprint, are those that will be most pertinently faced by wives, partners and children. I guess I would hold that question and ask it again in about half an hour's time.



**Q8 Ian Roome:** Coming back to the due regard element, at the moment the guidance is that local authorities should show due regard. I am interested in our keeping that term. In the Defence Committee, which I also sit on, we picked up concern about the wording of "due regard" from serving commanding officers who felt that it did not give the impetus for local authorities to actually demonstrate that they have shown due regard, because the metrics are so different across the board. Paul was saying that it can be interpreted differently. Therefore, would organisations like yours like it to be more prescriptive so that people actually follow it?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** I will go back to an answer I gave about 10 minutes ago. My gut feeling is that the term "due regard" is here to stay, but my gut feeling is also that if we get the statutory guidance right, we will have a framework not only to seek to have effective application of the Covenant across local authorities and other public bodies, but to think about measurement. We can then go from measurement to holding to account. I am looking for the devil in the detail. I am looking for the detail and the guidance to enable us to get metrics together so that we can not just hold individual local authorities or other public bodies to account but share best practice. I shout out Manchester for its local authority, an area that is demonstrating really good joined-up and co-ordinated governance in application of the Covenant. I would like to find a vehicle for taking what is happening in Manchester and placing it in other areas of the country where it is arguably less well seen.

**Q9 Pam Cox:** Thank you, gentlemen, for your time and all the work you do. One of the important aspects of this proposed revised Covenant is that the duty will extend across Whitehall Departments for the first time. How do you think the guidance issued by the Secretary of State on the legal duty should ensure consistent delivery of the Covenant across Whitehall Departments, many of which will be experiencing it for the first time?

**Ted Arnold:** I think it requires that consideration at a policy design stage, not just delivery. Having the clear statutory guidance with practical examples and a training element is very important to support those Departments to embed the Covenant principles. It will also be important to have support from central Government and particularly the MOD, in helping to ensure that consistent implementation across Whitehall.

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** We are looking for cross-Government activity here. In many respects, we are using a single Government Department, the Ministry of Defence, to act as an advocate and a champion for cross-Whitehall activity. I think it is for Government, in many respects, to determine what governance framework it puts together to ensure you have a vehicle to look at cross-Government activity.

Not to put words in the mouth of the Minister for the Armed Forces, but I would be looking for a framework where you have a co-ordinating authority to push what, from a military perspective, seems a fantastic vehicle into other Government Departments, which clearly have a whole



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bundle of priorities of their own. That cross-Government framework is absolutely necessary when we are getting into robust application.

**Mark Atkinson:** This goes back to the earlier question about cost. The explanatory notes for the Bill state that implementing the duty across Government Departments “could lead to initial training and familiarisation costs ranging from £307,000 to £1.5 million”. At the Royal British Legion, our view is that that feels very low—to take this Covenant and apply it across Whitehall Departments. If that is the Ministry of Defence’s estimate of the cost for Whitehall Departments, it seems wholly inadequate.

There are bits of Whitehall for which this is going to be a significant change. If you take the Department for Work and Pensions, for example, one of our big concerns is the unfair treatment of military compensation in the means-testing of benefits. For example, military compensation is not taken into account when means-testing for universal credit, but it is taken into account when means-testing for pension credit. There is a whole piece of work to do within the Department for Work and Pensions to prepare it for the responsibilities that this Bill and duty will place on it. We are yet to be persuaded that £307,000 to £1.5 million is really going to shift the dial across Whitehall.

**Q10 Al Carns:** First, thank you very much for all your support and your work over the last couple of years moving this forward. I would be interested in your view about holding other Government Departments to account, whose responsibility it should be and, importantly, the annual report on education and communication capability not just at the Government level, but at the local government level. If you could also allude to how VALOUR may be able to support that in conjunction with your work, that would be really useful.

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** You are absolutely right to say that, legislatively, right now, the MOD has a requirement to place in front of the House a Covenant annual report. We in the sector, the Veterans Commissioners and others also get the chance to contribute to that report. When this Bill comes into law, we will need to think carefully about what kind of framework we use to place evidence back in front of the House. The very act of corralling that evidence and conjoining it across Government Departments is no small effort, so we will need to think carefully with your Covenant teams about how we effectively do that in the future.

It has taken nearly half an hour to get the word “Valour” on the record, which is interesting. VALOUR is a new kid on the block in many respects. For those who do not know, the Ministry of Defence is putting out a new framework to get after effective co-ordination of activities that are happening at the local level, and to have a central brain to gather evidence and think about prioritisation of activity. Below that central brain, a framework of regional offices can link into local authorities, integrated care boards and other public organisations to corral and co-ordinate activity at the local level.



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That, in itself, is a new kind of vehicle that gives us an opportunity to think about how we co-ordinate activities in a way that is very consistent with the Covenant. Inside the MOD, therefore, we need to think about the relationship between the Covenant, which relates to the armed forces community—those who are serving, have served, wives, families, partners, dependants and the bereaved community—and the VALOUR approach, which starts with veterans, but will hopefully in time spin out to other areas in the armed forces community. We will need to work out the governance framework. It is absolutely part and parcel of the delivery downstream, but we have work to do to make sure that the two areas are joined together.

**Mark Atkinson:** I think it is a shared responsibility, Minister. The Ministry of Defence and its ministerial team, working with other Government Departments, have that co-ordination and accountability responsibility. Speaking on behalf of RBL, this is an organisation that is about campaigning. As this duty is extended across Departments, we will certainly want to shine a light on those that are doing really well, taking it seriously, adapting their policy and thinking about the armed forces community, and also shine a light on those that are not. We are coming from slightly different perspectives in that our job is to share great practice, but also to hold feet to the fire, but there is also a shared responsibility with you and other MOD Ministers.

**Chair:** Do you want to come in briefly, Paul?

**Mr Foster:** This ties back to something Mark said. The figure of a £350,000 to £1.5 million budget for co-ordinating and enshrining this in law across all of Whitehall reconfirms my concern that there is not much due regard going on here. That worries me, and it proves the point we are discussing, because it looks like the MOD budgets more for pencils than it does for co-ordinating this piece of legislation. That concerns me, so I support what you say, Mark.

**Chair:** Was that just a comment—you are not expecting a response?

**Mr Foster:** I was just confirming.

**Chair:** You do not have to respond if you do not want to.

Q11 **Juliet Campbell:** Thank you very much for coming and for taking the time to share your knowledge with us. We really do appreciate it.

Thinking about when the Covenant has been implemented, you have touched on this, but how do you think Government Departments and the public sector or delivery bodies can be held accountable for the way they deliver the Covenant?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** Having sat in Government and been held to account by other members of Government for delivery of services or programmes of change, I can say it is great when it is going well, and when it is not going so well, it can be quite a robust conversation.



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I go back to my governance framework question. If we collectively feel that a Government Department—let's say DWP—is not delivering on some of the issues, one mechanism to call that out will be in the Covenant annual report at the end of the year; another might be through a process involving commissioners or ombudsmen, or through a cross-Whitehall governance framework. We have different mechanisms that we can use to shout out where we see areas either of poor practice or where, arguably, Government Departments are not necessarily pulling their weight on the principle and the scope of what we are aiming to achieve.

The question that follows from that is, where a Government Department is failing to deliver on the intent and scope of the Covenant and extension of duty, what mechanisms do you have for incentivising or changing behaviours? That is, again, a question for the Government to argue about how they change the paradigm, based on the evidence we provide. We will have to provide evidence to enable somebody to then take a view on what can be done to share best practice or to come up with a different way of delivery.

**Q12 Juliet Campbell:** Thinking about potential poor practice, some of that might be because of the level of knowledge. What do you think can be done to promote awareness among employees about the opportunities of this Covenant? What more can be done? How do we raise awareness and boost knowledge?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** Really, we are after an awareness campaign and a communications framework that allows us to celebrate success and also, arguably, to pick up on areas of shortness. That is a whole-of-society, whole-of-Government, whole-of-the-third-sector and whole-of-industry approach. We probably have some work to do on all sides on how we take this forward.

For me, this is a big change. The extension of duty, building on the Covenant so far, puts us in the foothills of understanding what is really going to happen across Government Departments. It has given us a really good framework. Building on what the Minister says about the relationship with VALOUR, I think we have some interesting building blocks to think very differently about service.

I want to place this in context. The vast bulk of the armed forces community leave service and thrive in society; they make fantastic contributions beyond service. When we think about the framework for recruitment and retention in the future, and the Strategic Reserve—I think the Committee will come back to that next week, to talk about the strategic work in the future—to me, it is really important to place that in context. So yes, communications matter, but communications in context also matter.

**Mark Atkinson:** I would like to make a slightly broader point. If you look at this through the lens of the individual, the ability to seek redress is very limited. If you do not believe a Government Department or a local authority has given due regard to the Covenant duty and taken it forward



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seriously, what are your options? Your options are to seek a judicial review, which most people do not have the means to do, or to rely on organisations such as us and those sat behind us to make representations to Government. There is not, at the moment, an opportunity through an ombudsman, the Armed Forces Commissioner or another body to raise that systemic concern. I do wonder whether there is potential to strengthen, yes, accountability for Departments, but also to support individuals to seek redress by strengthening the ombudsmen and commissioners.

**Q13 Alex Ballinger:** I have a question, following on from Juliet's, about employers. We have talked a lot about Government Departments and local authorities, but service leavers, spouses and others have a lot of interactions with employers, so I am pleased to see that employment is a new area included in the Armed Forces Bill this time around. Some employers are excellent at working with service leavers, but some are terrible. What sort of lessons should we take away from your experience of that? How can we improve engagement with employers? Are there any lessons for us to take away?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** There is a time in everybody's service when they have to think about life after service; Paul and Al have been there. For some people, it comes as an unexpected shock, particularly if they are leaving at a time not of their own choosing—those who are medically discharged or compulsorily discharged because of things such as drugs or administrative actions. Each of those individuals therefore has a transition journey, a path, that is unique to them as an individual. That is the individual part of it.

We have three, four or five different frameworks right now to think about employers. The MOD has a programme called the career transition partnership for everybody who is leaving service of their own accord and has done the requisite amount of service. It is a programme, basically, to align them in terms of thinking about employment beyond service. It is a very effective programme and delivers great outcomes.

There is a relationship between the Covenant and industry, public sector, private sector and third sector, through the employer recognition scheme, predominantly focused through the lens of the reserve soldier. There are about 13,000 signatories to the employer recognition scheme—an enormous number across the nation—of which there are about 1,000 gold members, 4,000 silver members, 4,000 bronze members and 4,000 new to the scheme. That is fantastic, but I would argue that we have not yet thought through how to use it to best effect. That is the second part.

We also run a series of clusters in the sector that bring like-minded charities together to think through how we might approach health or education, or, in this case, employment. Arguably, it is more of a niche area, looking at specific veterans or spouses and their employment in society.



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So you have a number of governance mechanisms there, but in a future model, where we are thinking about a Strategic Reserve—this might come up in the conversation next week—we might think differently about these organisational frameworks and about enabling Government to have a conversation not just with the individual who is leaving service, but with employers, if we are thinking about blurring the boundaries, with zig-zag careers, continuations of service and the Strategic Reserve.

I was struck a couple of years ago when I was visiting Israel not long after 7 October. I will not say which company it was, but I visited a factory that had 8,000 employees. On 7 October, 8,000 employees turned up to work; two days later, 3,500 of the 8,000 were driving south in Merkava Mk 3 tanks. The company did not demur and carried on working, just going to 24/7 working to deliver the outputs. I am less sure that that framework exists in the UK right now.

When we think about our relationship and contract with employers in the future, and think about individuals leaving service and going into gainful employment, or their partners and spouses doing so, we have work to do to think through the prism of readiness as well.

**Q14 Sarah Bool:** You talked last year, Sir Nick, about the danger of the Covenant's expansion being that we lose focus. I am worried about that, with the postcode lottery in how we apply it. It does feel like a huge amount of weight is now being put on this statutory guidance. If due regard cannot be too prescriptive, how prescriptive should the statutory guidance be, because it feels that guidance will be in its place?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** You have a better memory than I do, clearly. That is the challenge over the next four or five months. Some of the team from the MOD in the seats behind me, members of the sector and colleagues from across Government will be sitting down to put flesh on the bones of each of the 12 policy areas. It is not unique, but it is rare for us to sit together as different organisations to co-create and co-author guidance. I am glass half full about this. I think we have a vehicle here to deliver some guidance. When we do guidance, if you are sitting there as DWP or any form of local government, only some of it will pertain to you, so arguably it is a case of horses for courses, and we will develop guidance that is pertinent to individuals. I would not expect the armed forces champion of an ICB to read 12 lots of statutory guidance, so hopefully there is a vehicle there. I am being optimistic. Let's see whether it actually pans out.

**Q15 Al Carns:** I have one final question. In three and a half years' time, what does good look like?

**Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope:** By three and a half years, we will have taken statutory guidance. We will have had a Bill that has gone through Parliament. We will have applied that statutory guidance across all Government Departments in a way that is about effective application. We will have developed a robust measurement framework to assess what good looks like, either using VALOUR or other frameworks that we have.



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And we will have developed within Government a robust framework for holding to account, sharing best practice across Government.

Beyond that, arguably, we will have raised awareness within the public, private and third sectors and the armed forces community, so everybody understands the Covenant. If I lean back to last July, this House delivered I think the covenant for society. You could argue this Covenant extension of duty and the covenant for society are absolutely part and parcel of the same product, which is about big society, collectivism, community—what we are all trying to get after. So good to me is delivery in all those areas, so when we write our answer to the Government annual report in 2029-30, we say, “Job’s a good’un, tick, VG.”

**Chair:** Thank you very much for taking the time to give evidence this afternoon.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rebecca Lovell, Andrea Devlin and Collette Musgrave.

Q16 **Chair:** Welcome to our second panel, and thank you for taking the time to come and give evidence to us this afternoon. I will leave it to you to introduce yourselves, and we will then get to the questions.

**Rebecca Lovell:** I am Becky Lovell, and I am from the Naval Families Federation, where I am head of policy and the deputy chief executive.

**Collette Musgrave:** I am Collette Musgrave, and I am from the Army Families Federation, where I am the chief exec.

**Andrea Devlin:** I am Andrea Devlin, and I am director of the RAF Families Federation.

Q17 **Jayne Kirkham:** Thank you very much for being here. Forces families face a lot of challenges: they have to move regularly; they often face periods when one member is not there, as they have left or may have died; and they face lots of issues that other families do not. Bearing in mind all the aspects of life—whether that is health, education or children, so everything wrapping around them—how well do you think the Covenant actually supports forces families at present?

**Collette Musgrave:** We gave evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee last time, so thank you very much—you clearly all read that very closely. The answer at the moment is that it is a very mixed bag. There are some service providers and areas of the country that are very focused on the Armed Forces Covenant, and they have a high level of understanding. Almost everywhere has a high level of empathy, but there is perhaps not necessarily the level of understanding of the complexity of service life and its very diverse nature.

If you have experience of one service, you may think that everybody’s experience is a little bit like being in the Army. However, we know that the experience of being in the Navy, the Royal Marines or the Air Force can be very different. Each individual service person and their family will have



been on a different journey; we are all individuals, and they will have had an individual journey as well. Some elements will have been very positive for them, and some may have been very difficult because of their family situation. There is certainly a challenge for service families in engaging with providers and Government, and in receiving a consistent level of support and understanding of their particular circumstances.

**Rebecca Lovell:** In terms of the challenges, one of the areas we spoke about in our oral evidence last time, and in our written evidence, was the language that is used. Quite often, we find there is a focus in some areas on the veteran community—we absolutely recognise that they have very important needs, and we have talked about those—but it is about broadening that out to the armed forces community, including families, service personnel, their children, the bereaved community and partners. That is one area that we think really needs a focus as we move forward with this.

Q18 **Jayne Kirkham:** I am thinking particularly about families and support at school, and about things such as being encouraged to apply for the pupil premium or SEND support, so that you are looking across not only local authorities but multi-academy trusts. Have you found that to be an area where there is a large discrepancy in the way in which forces families cope?

**Andrea Devlin:** One of the greatest areas of challenge is education and the consistency of educational allowances and funding, not just within local authorities but across Government through the Devolved Administrations. It causes a huge amount of hardship for some of the families. They are often moving at short notice, and they are often not necessarily moving of their own choice. We are seeing an increasing number of families choosing to allow serving personnel to go unaccompanied, rather than disrupting the family, for all the reasons you have just outlined and because of that inconsistency. It can be much simpler for the family to stay in one place and for the serving person to travel. Of course, that then starts to impact on retention, so it may solve one problem, but it brings other challenges for that family too.

**Rebecca Lovell:** With the Royal Navy and the Marines, can I add the issue of dispersed families? You asked specifically about support within schools, and we find examples of really good practice across the board. However, families do come to us and say that there is no recognition in their school. It may be that they are in an area where there is a lower military footprint—that could be one of the reasons for it. Equally, we have other examples where they take particular care, understand their obligations and make provisions. That can make a real difference. It might also be that, from our point of view in the Navy, there is not the visibility on mobility, which is one of the areas that causes some disadvantage, as people may be aware. It is about the length of separations; when those are six months, nine months or longer, the children are not coming in and out of school, so it is maybe not so obvious. Also, with the submariner community, the issue of no contact adds a completely different element.



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**Q19 Al Carns:** First, I would like to thank you for your service. I always say that, when one person serves, the whole family does, so thank you very much for everything and for all the support you have given me over the last year and a half. The Covenant extends due regard to a multitude of different policy areas. Do you think they are the right areas, and are there any others you would like to see included as we move forward with the Bill?

**Collette Musgrave:** We certainly welcome the extension. We have long argued for it, because the experience of serving personnel and their families is that much of the tension comes from the fact that they are seeking—as citizens first, while in the UK—to access statutory provision, whether that is from their local multi-academy trust, a health service or a Government Department. There is a tension that comes with service life, the lack of understanding of service life, and some of the conflict of policy and processes even inside other Government Departments and the Ministry of Defence.

Overall, we absolutely welcome this extension on behalf of families. We can see in it many of the areas we have talked about before, and we have talked about the importance of extending it to them. We will probably go back to the argument that you heard from the previous panel: there is always that balance between depth and breadth. We have certainly expressed concerns in the past that in seeking to extend too far, there may be a risk that you are not able to support effective implementation, and you may very well lose some of the good practice that is already out there. In general terms, it probably covers most of the key areas that we are looking at, but there are certainly specific areas—perhaps I will leave this to my colleagues—where we would like to see a little bit more focus and clarity.

I completely appreciate that statutory guidance has yet to be developed, but it would be extremely helpful for families to be able to be confident that all aspects of family life, however it might be for them, could be covered by the Covenant—if not now, certainly with the intention that it goes into the future. We have previously referenced the private sector, and I know that you heard about that from the previous panel, particularly in respect of provision of financial services. Service personnel and their families come to us on a fairly regular basis about access to mortgages, credit, mobile phones or whatever it might be. That sits in the private sector. We would very much want that to be looked at in due course.

**Q20 Al Carns:** A theme that I have a feeling we are going to pick up throughout the evidence session is co-ordination, coherence and, particularly, consistency in the implementation of the Covenant across Government Departments, local authorities and all the different bodies that we rely on. What would you like to see to help us—not just MOD, but other Government Departments—enforce and hold people to account more effectively for the delivery of that due regard?

**Andrea Devlin:** Consistency is going to be key to making this work. It goes to Collette's point that being consistent across all areas will be more



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effective than broadening it any further. One of the areas where we will see some positivity coming is the MOD being subject to this change. You will perhaps get more consistency for your serving personnel, and they will start to understand what the Covenant can do for them. Sometimes the serving person does not necessarily see themselves as part of the Covenant side of the house. That is one area.

It is about consistency, but there will need to be some accountability: where do families go when there is disadvantage and when they do not see a way forward and do not know where to go? We mentioned defence recognition earlier. It is about understanding best practice and how we can put accountability into it for families, because otherwise it becomes quite hollow—they do not know where to go and how to escalate the problems they are facing. That needs to follow through. They use the families federation, but I think it needs to be greater than us.

- Q21 **Christian Wakeford:** Andrea, you mentioned the feeling of not knowing where to go. Indeed, RAF families themselves said that intervention often comes when they have hit rock bottom and are at crisis point—I imagine most MPs will probably see that in their casework as well. What more do you think the Bill or the Covenant should be doing in terms of early prevention and identifying the signposting that is so often either lacking or not quite right?

**Andrea Devlin:** I think it goes back to consistency. We could cite local authorities where it is exceptionally good, and they are working extremely hard with their serving community—not just their veteran community—and are inclusive of that armed forces community. That is also really key going forward. It is easy to forget the broad definition of the armed forces community. Making sure that that definition is truly always used, and that it is fully understood that it is not just veterans, with others as an add-on, would certainly make a difference.

It is about that broadening of the definition of the armed forces community, and understanding that it includes serving personnel, as well as building on best practice and having consistency. Often, where there is an armed forces champion, we have seen that it is an under-resourced or part-time role. Where we see success, it is very personality driven, as opposed to a consistent framework that allows those people to understand what they need to do.

**Rebecca Lovell:** One of the things we hope it will achieve is to strengthen the recognition of some of the families' experiences—around mobility and separation—develop that understanding and thereby improve visibility for service families.

As Andrea was saying, it is about having a person-centred approach from services, organisations, private companies and employers, so that families know who it is they need to speak to about their experiences and, more importantly, that the people they are communicating with have an understanding of exactly how to support them and recognise their strengths.



**Q22 Alex Ballinger:** Some of the evidence we have received has highlighted the difficulties families have when they are posted between nations—from England to Scotland or Northern Ireland—and people are put to the back of the queue in SEND waiting lists. You gave an example in your evidence of childcare costs going up by £12,000 for a family that moved to England and Scotland. Do you think that the Covenant changes that now make devolved Administrations responsible for paying due regard to the Covenant will help with that? What more do the Government need to do to ensure that we remove the barriers, in so far as possible?

**Rebecca Lovell:** We really welcome it. We know that there is excellent work going on in all the devolved nations, and the families federation works closely with various organisations across those nations. We believe that there will need to be some joint UK-wide guidance with clear national frameworks as well, and there will need to be cross-Government work so that there is a shared understanding of what we are trying to implement. There is potential for shared training as well. As you have said, in our evidence, families have very different experiences. We understand that having a local provision is important both within England and across devolved nations. We understand that context, but it is about thinking about what the family's experience is as they move in and out.

**Q23 Alex Ballinger:** There was a recent change whereby families leaving the service would not be disadvantaged when moving into council houses and would not be subject to the same residency tests as anyone else. Is that the sort of thing that should be rolled out for all services across the board? Is that something that would be helpful, or is it being considered?

**Collette Musgrave:** From the perspective of the families, the evidence to us is very strongly that more consistency would be extremely helpful. Something like local connection—while still resource dependent, because there are only a certain number of homes in an area—is relatively straightforward to negotiate. Having said that, it took an awfully long time to get that through. Once you start linking it to things where the devolved nations—this is their absolute right—have different taxation, different levels of childcare support and a different approach to how they use resources locally, that becomes quite challenging.

While we would of course sit here and say that, from the evidence of our families, it would be a fantastic thing to do, there is an element of getting to that point, which could be a long way down the line. In the meantime, we need to focus on ensuring that families understand what is available in any particular location. That should dock with the idea of those service providers understanding when this is about removing disadvantage, rather than providing advantage. That is sometimes where grit can come into the system, and we all have a collective responsibility to help communicate and to help people to understand what the art of the possible is as we move forward.

But in answer to your question: yes, in three and a half years' time, that is what I would love to see.



Q24 **Luke Akehurst:** I appreciate that the Committee has a deeper dive into housing next week, but I just want to touch on it. How confident are you that the Defence Housing Service will bring much-needed improvements to military housing?

**Collette Musgrave:** We really welcome the establishment of the Defence Housing Service. That housing is treated as homes, and not as infrastructure or a resource to be used as a tap for defence to control its spending or otherwise, is something that we, as families federations, have long campaigned for. The Defence Housing Service is absolutely the right direction in which to go. It remains relatively early days. A little like with the Covenant, we will see what implementation looks like. The Defence Housing Service looks very promising at the moment. It appears to be being set up in a way that addresses all the issues that we have raised directly from families in the past—concerns around governance, transparency, engagement and hearing the customer voice. As families federations, I hope we will have a role in that.

I happened to be in a meeting the other day where they had nice branding, with a little house with Families First there. If that is an indication of a change of culture and mindset on defence housing, it can only be positive. Everything that we are seeing so far looks like it is heading in the right direction. However, housing and homes are a little wider than simply the Defence Housing Service, and certainly when it comes to the single living accommodation, we remain concerned.

**Andrea Devlin:** It plays to that point. The Defence Housing Service is positive, and we are very optimistic about what it is doing. It is changing the concept of the family and recognising the long-term relationship situation. It is not just that someone must be in a civil partnership or married. It is definitely going towards that long-term relationship aspect, or those people who only have their children so many days a year and have shared parental responsibilities.

What I hope as it moves forward, and as MOD becomes part of the Covenant as well, is that it does not lose sight of single living accommodation. We get a lot of evidence about single accommodation that never does feel like your own home, and for some people it may be their only home. That single cohort—people who live in a shared mess facility—is still very important.

So, yes, the Defence Housing Service is going in the right direction, and we are very positive, but I hope that it does not lose sight of that issue as the MOD comes into the Covenant as well, and that it starts focusing on the single cohort as well as the relationship cohort.

Q25 **Chair:** Thank you for coming to give evidence to us. Is there anything our questions have not covered that you would like to get across?

**Andrea Devlin:** I think we would like to leave with the fact that language is so important in this. If we could leave with one message and nothing else, it is that when you talk about the Armed Forces Covenant, the



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language must include serving personnel and their families and the bereaved, and not to lose sight of that as a definition.

**Rebecca Lovell:** I completely agree with Andrea on the language, and I know Collette supports that too. It is really important that the families themselves understand the Covenant, so they are empowered and when they go to these services and are experiencing any challenges, they are able to use it, know that it applies to them and how, and what they can do if they have any problems that need redress.

**Collette Musgrave:** We heard in the previous session about due regard. That is a very nebulous concept to a family seeking to get a SEND assessment, a school place for their child or continuity of healthcare. Due regard is quite a challenging thing to have a conversation about with a family at crisis point. That is something that I think leans to both the language and the inclusivity. It is going to be really important not only to support the awareness levels of service providers and other Government Departments of what the Armed Forces Covenant and the extension of its duty means, but to be doing that other half and supporting serving personnel and their families in understanding that.

**Chair:** Does any other Member want to come in?

**Pam Cox:** If we have a moment, Chair.

**Chair:** We have a few moments, but I now have a forest of arms raised.

Q26 **Pam Cox:** Many of our serving personnel and their families come from overseas, from outside the UK, and make a fantastic contribution. How do you think the extended Covenant will improve their experience of service life, veteran life and family life?

**Collette Musgrave:** I am going to be optimistic about that. Again, I go back to my point about much of the friction for serving personnel and their families coming from the application of wider policies and processes that sit within other Government Departments, predominantly in that case the Home Office, but also the DWP and access to healthcare, education and employment. I am hopeful that the extension to Government Departments will give us more levers across Government to be able to advocate for and support non-UK personnel and families. They are not necessarily in the same family unit sometimes, which adds to the complexity of it.

At the moment, there does seem to be a little concentration of "This is a Home Office problem; it is a visa and immigration problem" or "It's a problem for the MOD to sort out with the Home Office." It is not. If you are a family member and find yourself on a maternity ward without the right documentation and are presented with a bill along with your baby, that is not a very good space to be in. Our levers at the moment are largely reliant on us as families federations, with the support of some of the charities, going in with a very long screwdriver and explaining it to people.



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I am hopeful that, by extending the Covenant, we will have more mechanisms to be able to do that, but that goes back to the point around escalation and redress. When it comes down to it and you have two Departments, who is going to adjudicate? I have referenced it before, and it is not non-UK, but we have another issue where the DWP and the MOD have been talking for years with no resolution. In the meantime, we still have disadvantaged families there. My concern is that we do not end up in that same situation for that particular cohort.

**Q27 Rachel Taylor:** You have given some very clear examples of where problems might happen. What do you think we could do to address those better, and is there an education programme with families, as opposed to the serving personnel themselves, that we need to look at?

**Andrea Devlin:** Families are sometimes a really hard cohort to communicate with. We can all recognise the family that sits on a base, and that is how we always used to communicate. The challenge we have now is that there are much more dispersed families, who may or may not choose to engage with the armed forces. There is that difference there. They are the hard cohort to develop that understanding with. Often, they have no concept of what we can do to help them until, as Collette said earlier, they are in crisis. There is an education piece for sure.

Where we have seen good practice on that has been in some of the local authorities, where they are producing literature that really includes service families and explicitly mentions them, with a specific, "This is what we can do for you." There is a lot of good practice out there; it is about making that more consistent across the whole of the UK and building that education. One of the ways of doing that is through the service person, because you have to educate the service person to have any chance of educating the family. It is a combined approach across all levels of messaging that needs to go out. It needs to be resourced, rather than being something that somebody does because they are interested; they should be fully resourced to broaden their understanding of the armed forces community.

**Rebecca Lovell:** This is a slightly different angle on what you are asking, but sometimes it is about meeting the families where they are. I know there has been work under way, for example, with the Best Start family hubs. We see that as a potential opportunity: families may come in, and you cannot overestimate the value of somebody saying to them, "Are you an armed forces family?" and understanding what that means. I am not saying that they need anything special, but it is a different understanding. That is another way that we can really improve the education in this respect.

**Q28 Ian Roome:** I keep banging on about this point—thank you for the service that you do, by the way, and thank you for the last evidence you gave to the Defence Committee—but no one should be disadvantaged as a result of their service. That is what we are all here for, basically. I have a big garrison in my constituency—1,100 personnel at Chivenor. Through my mailbag, I get to know some of the issues, particularly around SEND. Do



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you think that due regard is strong enough? If it is not, what would you like to see? The previous panel talked about how it is in the guidance, but guidance can be followed or not followed. What are your views on mandating this due regard bit, particularly around SEND? Do you think we should be stronger? Will it cause you less work and hassle when you are doing negotiations with local authorities?

**Collette Musgrave:** If we look at it from the perspective of the serving person and their family, I can absolutely understand. They feed back to us on a fairly regular basis with, "What does due regard mean? I have been told that there has been due regard, but it doesn't feel like it to me." I absolutely understand the challenge and the importance of statutory guidance but, on behalf of serving personnel and their families, you cannot but say that due regard does need some strengthening, in very simple language, to explain it both to the service provider and to the service person and their family and to boil it down to some quite simple but impactful statements about what it is and what it is not. We will all spend a lot of time working with our colleagues to make sure that the statutory guidance is absolutely appropriate, so that it is strong and can be used.

We also have to be mindful that it is likely to be used by people who are not on the frontline of providing those services. They will also be the people who are most likely to be under pressure, such as resource pressure, because they will have a lot of people coming through the door to them. Trying to understand this particular community and its needs is tough, and I completely understand that; I used to work in a call centre in my youth, so I know how challenging it is. I actually worked for a precursor of DWP, as it turns out. It will be essential to strengthen the understanding of due regard at the level of the frontline person who is engaging directly with the service person and their family.

Q29 **Juliet Campbell:** Thinking about the extensions in social care, employment support or SEND childcare, what do you think has the most potential to deliver for serving personnel, their families and veterans?

**Rebecca Lovell:** We have particularly suggested a range of policy areas, including immigration, housing, education, employment and childcare. I will take the example of employment, which I know was talked about in the previous panel.

We have talked about employment from both sides. It is about families understanding what obligations employers might have under the Covenant. Particularly when families are moving overseas, they tell us that they have a lot of questions and it is very difficult to find information about that, as it is very complex. They might be asking, for example, "Can I take my job abroad?" or "Can I remote work?", and at the moment the level of understanding and support for families is not there in some cases.

Similarly, thinking about the UK, it may be that families need a temporary period of time—with the caveat that the period might be quite extended—where they might want to change their working pattern, for example, or have reduced hours. We think that has a real potential to have a positive



impact. We know that spousal employment has a significant impact on family wellbeing, which in turn supports retention. We think that is a particular example of an area that has real potential for positive change.

**Q30 Mr Foster:** I will be brief, Chair. You mentioned earlier this ongoing issue with the MOD and the DWP that is negatively affecting families in the forces. What within the Bill that we are looking at today will resolve that issue?

**Collette Musgrave:** First, the Covenant now applies to DWP, so there is something more, potentially, to name and shame in the Armed Forces Covenant report or to raise elsewhere. However, without a mechanism of redress and holding to account, it is a bit challenging to see how some of these longer-term, quite baked-in issues might be resolved.

**Q31 Mr Foster:** Would you agree, then, that due regard is not necessarily appropriate?

**Collette Musgrave:** In this particular case, I have to say that both the DWP and the MOD feel that they have given due regard.

**Chair:** That concludes this evidence session. Thank you very much for taking the time to give evidence to us this afternoon. We really appreciate you coming along.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Andy Cole, Caroline Cooke and Chloe Mackay.

**Q32 Chair:** Good afternoon. Thank you very much for coming along to give evidence. This is our third panel of the afternoon, and we have one further panel after this. I will leave it to you to introduce yourselves, and we will then get to the questions.

**Chloe Mackay:** I am Chloe Mackay, the chief executive of Combat Stress.

**Caroline Cooke:** I am Caroline Cooke, the head of policy at the Forces in Mind Trust.

**Andy Cole:** I am Andy Cole, and I am the chief executive of Royal Star & Garter.

**Chair:** We have been using first names—is that okay?

**Andy Cole:** Of course.

**Q33 Rachel Taylor:** Thank you all for the amazing work you do for the armed forces community—it really is appreciated. I want to start by asking quite a general question. How would you describe the current effectiveness of the Covenant for the people your organisations work with?

**Chloe Mackay:** We deliver mental health treatment and support, so we are very much working under the healthcare provision of the Covenant—it is an area where the Covenant has already come into being. There has been a lot of progress. We see the Armed Forces Covenant affecting the

commissioning of services, and we see particularly successful accreditation schemes with both GPs and NHS trusts. They are quite simple, and there is good take-up of those in England.

What we do not necessarily see is the parts of the system working together. While each individual part of the system might have a scheme or initiative, there is not the join-up for a person who is travelling through the pathway in some of the connections. For example, if somebody comes into a service for their PTSD and, through an assessment process, understands that they have a more serious psychiatric disorder, a transfer of that individual into secondary NHS healthcare is very challenging.

I would open it up by saying that it is great to see the progress, and we really want to hold on to it, but there is much more to do even in the established area of healthcare.

**Caroline Cooke:** The Forces in Mind Trust is an endowed trust set up and funded by the lottery for a period of 20 years with the aim of improving transition from military to civilian life for serving personnel and their families across the UK. Since 2011, we have delivered our mission by funding the generation of evidence—primarily research evidence—into what works. As a result, since 2016, we have funded a series of research reports on the Covenant and its effectiveness in practice.

Our last research report was published in October, which was based on research done over two years by Shared Intelligence, Rand UK and Meri Mayhew Consulting, and we have been taking its findings out to local authorities. We have had really good appetite and engagement with it, which I think already shows something very positive.

Briefly, the things that the evidence has shown are very encouraging. Yes, there are things that do not work so well, but the evidence also shows that the Covenant has played a key role in helping to legitimise the prioritisation of the armed forces community at a local level and a national level. In doing so, it has provided a framework for a shared language, which we have seen in the case studies in the research.

For example, in Cardiff, the health board chairs the Covenant partnership group, and just bringing that working together across different issues is something that the Covenant has enabled. It has also really helped to improve the referrals process, and it has given an impetus to the funding of dedicated roles within local authorities—or, where there are not full-time roles, people have had it as part of their job. Where there has been buy-in at a leadership level and council leaders are armed forces champions, it has made a real difference throughout the authority.

In a whole range of ways, the Covenant, and particularly the introduction of the legal duty of due regard, pushed it up the agenda. However much we debate the value of the term “due regard”, just having public authorities know that that duty exists has already improved policy and practice.



**Andy Cole:** Royal Star & Garter is a social care provider. We are one of the major providers of care homes and other social care services to the veteran community. The very simple answer to your question is that social care has been excluded from the Covenant up until now. We are delighted to see it potentially on the list for expansion. To open up the question, some of the accreditation schemes and programmes that have run in health—our closest allied area—have been incredibly positive. They have driven on variation in practice and have pushed areas of work around integration. Those are all very important areas that we would see naturally fall into social care as well.

At the moment, there are artificial boundaries. If we look to move an individual from a GP to a hospital and then potentially to a social care service, there is a gap—a divide. Even the same commissioning body—a local authority or an ICB—may say, and have said, “We can only take it this far,” in terms of the veteran status. To pick up on what Caroline was saying, we have wonderful examples where people have gone through that and the healthcare teams or council armed forces networks have picked up the individual, ignored the artificial boundary and said, “Of course.” We just had a gentleman move into one of our homes who was in a hospital in Milton Keynes. He had been bouncing in and out of that hospital for several years, and it took an inspired individual to join the dots up and give us a call to say, “Can you help?” to which, of course, the answer was yes. There was no natural pathway. We are very hopeful that this change will put that pathway formally in place.

Q34 **Sarah Bool:** I want to ask a bit more about how well the Covenant is understood among the forces community. Do you think there is an equal application of everyone not understanding, or do you think there are pockets that do understand a little bit better? If not, which ones are those?

**Caroline Cooke:** I would base some of my answer on our recently published research on transition and how it is working in practice by QinetiQ. It is clear that there is not as much awareness, knowledge and understanding at an early stage in service as we would like there to be, and that there is more work to be done there.

Q35 **Sarah Bool:** There is the national transition event next Monday—2 March—at Silverstone, which is in my constituency, and I will be attending. I know there is a big focus on trying to help. I know that you were there last year, Al. That is where I feel that there is greater knowledge, but as you said, perhaps not at the early stage.

**Caroline Cooke:** I would also add that, when it comes to families’ awareness and understanding of the Covenant, and the effect that “no disadvantage” has on transition, it is difficult. As colleagues from the federations were saying, getting that engagement is difficult.

At the moment, we are working with an organisation called Thinks Insight. We are funding a project on behavioural insight, looking at different ways of communicating and engaging family members in understanding



transition in as holistic a way as possible, which means also understanding the Covenant too. A lot does come down to communication rather than it all being dependent on the individual to go and find out. It is also part of the wider life skills piece, and the level of education, awareness and understanding that happens when you are joining as well as throughout service and when you are leaving.

**Q36 Ian Roome:** To expand on what you have said, Andy, on the social care aspect, what real challenges does the armed forces community face in accessing social care, and how do you think the Covenant's new perspective will help that situation?

**Andy Cole:** There are a couple of elements to that. The key one is that good social care is person-centred; it understands the individual who it is trying to support. Social care is rarely trying to fix a clinical issue. We might well have—as we do—high-quality nursing care where we are looking after long-term conditions, but if you do not understand the individual, you cannot provide good-quality social care.

We see this particularly in dementia care, which generally focuses on older-age residents. For good-quality care plans to be put together, you need to understand that the individual has served, and the type of service that they might have had. We have people in our homes who have done the whole journey. We have had people who did national service and were very pleased to leave. There is a spectrum, and we have to be able to tailor that care. You cannot deliver particularly high-quality dementia care without knowing about that.

We had a wonderful example the other day: there was an individual living with dementia in one of the homes we recently accredited through the veteran friendly framework. The local staff could not understand why he felt he had to carry cutlery with him all the time. He was a Navy veteran. He was living in a moment where he thought he was about to be deployed, and he would get very agitated if the cutlery was taken away from him. That has adapted his care plan; you would not know that was the case unless you had been specifically asked on admission to the care home, "Did you serve? Did your loved one serve?" There is a very basic side of this, which is if we do not ask and we do not know, we cannot adapt the care we provide.

The other side is about advantage, so making sure there is a wider range of services. You heard from RBL earlier—how does a local RBL group wrap around its care home to ensure it is supporting its veterans? How do the health services, with so many excellent opportunities to engage, know that they have someone to engage with? It should not be, as we sadly hear all too often, "If only I'd known my veteran father, mother, brother, or daughter could have been involved in this, then it would have been better for them", and the regret that comes from that. A lot of this is also additive.

**Q37 Ian Roome:** I think I read somewhere that 46% of your clients have dementia.

**Andy Cole:** Yes.

Q38 **Ian Roome:** And when those clients are accessing dementia care from social services—who most probably contact you to ask whether you have a position, or a void that someone can take—do their assessment forms include a mandatory question asking whether the person has ever served?

**Andy Cole:** Generally, no.

Q39 **Ian Roome:** As an ex-housing officer, I would have—

**Andy Cole:** I was briefing a local council armed forces network a couple of weeks ago, and the answer was no for that council—and I think that is quite possibly London-wide, because it was a London borough.

Q40 **Ian Roome:** Chloe and Caroline, have you anything to add on the social care aspect?

**Chloe Mackay:** Our linkages through to social care would benefit hugely from having identified veterans champions, so that there is somebody there to link into. When we are making referrals for a case or linking into a social work team for communication and updates, it is quite hard to follow who is in the system and to speak to somebody who consistently understands the armed forces background and case. The armed forces champions model has been successfully rolled out in other areas; if that could be rolled out within the social work environment, it would be hugely beneficial.

**Caroline Cooke:** When it comes to thinking about the likely impact of extending the scope to social care, something that we do not know, when it comes to data and information, is the personnel who are still serving—who may have family members who are users of social care—because they are not mapped. We do not know the levels at all. We do have awareness and knowledge when it comes to older veterans, but there is a different cohort to think about too.

**Andy Cole:** Absolutely. I echo that it is important to remember that social care is for all ages, including children. Our work is primarily on older-age veterans, but our youngest veteran is in his 30s—he is an Iraq veteran. Over 50% of veterans are over 65, and a third have some type of disability. There is a cohort there who will need some degree of social care support, even light, at some point in the near future.

Q41 **Ian Roome:** Can I ask the same question about the armed forces community and some of the challenges they face around employment that you may have come across?

**Caroline Cooke:** Using the evidence that Forces in Mind Trust has funded, particularly when it comes to families and extending the scope to employment, we know at the moment that frequent relocations mean that it is difficult to maintain a consistent employment record, and a lack of employer understanding of that is an issue for families' careers. It would be brilliant if, as a consequence of the Covenant, there was some awareness and understanding of the unique impact of service when



employers screen CVs. That would mean people would not be screened out immediately, just because they happen to be part of a service family.

When it comes to other elements of employment, such as the underemployment of certain groups of people who have served, including female veterans, people from ethnic minorities, and disabled and older veterans, there is evidence again, through the research I mentioned earlier on transition and experience of that, that people are transitioning into employment, but not at a level that really uses their skills as much as possible. Knowing what the Covenant did regard, when it was introduced—it was introduced in three areas, to increase awareness and understanding of the unique impacts—I want to be optimistic about the potential lever that the Covenant extension could be for employment.

**Q42 Ian Roome:** Let me give you a golden moment now. Are there any other policy areas that you think the Select Committee should be aware of that could be improved?

**Caroline Cooke:** Forces in Mind Trust is really happy with the breadth of the extension. Rather than thinking only about the specific issues, because it is reasonably comprehensive and we are content with that—I know RBL talked about some additional areas—I think one of the golden opportunities is the extension to central Government Departments and the devolved Administrations, and the way it is adopted, communicated, and, dare I say it, resourced. That will be key, as will the capacity of MOD, at a time when it is under pressure, to be able to do the communicating and engagement alongside all of us. Everyone working in the sector has that desire to do all we can across all those areas. I do not want to be pessimistic about that either, because there is already so much good work going on in a lot of different Government Departments.

My colleague Isabel and I have a meeting with the Ministry of Justice on Thursday. We know that the work in the whole justice system has been very positive, and there is a lot of good will and a lot of hard work on identifying veterans in the criminal justice system that has happened, even before we have the duty extended to central Government. I could give lots of other examples that apply to other Departments.

**Andy Cole:** I think I agree with Caroline. The breadth is positive to see, and we were obviously very pleased to see that social care is mooted to come in, even as health and social care; if that mirrors the name of the Department, so be it. However, social care is commissioned, operated and run in a different way—it is not the NHS. That is something we need to make clear. It is very disparate, less top-down, and it is a very multifaceted sector. In its own right, it has over 1.5 million staff, but most of those are 20 people operating a small service, so it is a very different beast that we are dealing with.

The key, which I think is really important, is the greater breadth of the organisations that this will cover—getting into all the different council, regional and mayoral structures. Because for us, the commissioning of health and social care is slightly varied between all those structures,



seeing any gaps would be problematic. We could end up with an unintended variation where it is in a council's remit but not in a county council's remit. Those gaps would be important to see. We talk to councils quite a lot, and they sometimes struggle to see why there is an artificial boundary when they are signatories to the Covenant but only half the services they provide are covered by their duties. There needs to be clarity there that will, as we have been talking about all afternoon, show that sort of joined-up working.

**Chloe Mackay:** We welcome the extension to enable connectivity across different Government Departments. We would also like to see health continuing to develop rather than the existing areas becoming static and stopping where they are. The journey has started in health, but it needs to continue.

One of the points that was picked up earlier is that the roll-out—the join-up—can be driven by increased awareness in the armed forces community that the Covenant exists. If people are asking for the services, that will stimulate them to change and grow. That demand from the armed forces community probably is not happening now, so all of the work and effort is within the services, spreading the communication within the people delivering them rather than the people who are accessing the services.

Q43 **Christian Wakeford:** As part of the legislation, the Secretary of State will have the power to issue guidance, which is an incredibly powerful tool when you think about how it is cross-departmental, across layers of Government and across society. In the last panel, part of the concern was about how the Covenant will be applied consistently. What would you want that guidance to say to make sure that consistency is key in this element?

**Caroline Cooke:** There is a really fine balance between being prescriptive because we want things to be consistent and having guidance that promotes good practice but is flexible enough to adapt to the local environment. I would refer again to our latest research, because it specifically looked at the different contexts that the Covenant is delivered in, and the guidance will need to take account of that. The case studies included Greater Manchester as a combined authority, but they then looked at unitary authorities of Glasgow, Cardiff, the Vale of Glamorgan and East Riding, and the different characteristics of Covenant delivery in unitary authorities, as well as looking at Oxfordshire as a two-tier authority.

Even as I say that, it begins to unpack the complexity of having guidance that promotes consistency but places the onus on those who are delivering the Covenant to think about what the guidance means in their own context. There is no getting away from needing guidance that enables those that are delivering—local councillors, if you are looking at a local authority—to really think through what disadvantage means in their particular area.

**Chloe Mackay:** The consistent use of terminology will be really useful. There is a strong use of the term “armed forces champions”—I think that



is used across lots of different organisations. Promotion of that consistent language would be helpful. When it comes to accreditation schemes, different terms are used: "veteran-friendly" and "veteran-aware" and some other terms as well. Some sort of promotion of a consistent set of words would help the people accessing the services to understand what is being achieved and that it should be the same across the different services and locations.

**Andy Cole:** I agree with all the above. The other area I would love to see focus on is third-party delivery. There should be a duty, if you are commissioning services through a third party, to make sure that that service is then given due regard. In our written evidence earlier this year, we gave the example of something like funded nursing care; that is NHS money ending up in social care funding, but there is nothing in the contract, as far as we can see, that says there should be any sense of due regard given to that, even though you are clearly commissioning nursing care, in a care home or another situation. There are multiple examples of that. Whether it is private or not-for-profit organisations being commissioned, let's be consistent about what we mean and make sure that they own the Covenant, as well as the commissioner.

Q44 **Christian Wakeford:** Thank you. I was going to push Andy on a comment he made in response to an earlier question, but I will apply it to you, Chloe. It was about "don't ask; don't know." Obviously we see that in quite a few areas, but, with regard to your work with Op NOVA, how could that be applied more vigorously, and applied in some of the guidance coming forward, so that we are always asking first, "Have you served?" or "Are you from an armed forces family; do you have some sort of link?" From the work that you have done, obviously 60% went on to mental health services, and they were probably at crisis point already, so what can we be doing to bring that intervention level even earlier?

**Chloe Mackay:** I think across all of these services, asking the question, "Have you served?" is very powerful, and people who do that well can now ask it very well. The universal credit system has that question embedded in it, and it is asked in a very neutral way, around employment experience, which I think will encourage people to answer it. As that becomes the norm through services, I think armed forces veterans will be more willing to answer it because they will understand why it is being asked. They will understand that it is being asked in order to tailor the services to their needs, not to put it into some other database that might exist. So the "Have you served?" question is very powerful and a really important factor across all services.

Q45 **Christian Wakeford:** To feed into that, I think 22% of personnel responded that they knew quite a lot about the Covenant. What more can we be doing, as parliamentarians, in the Department or throughout civil society, to make sure that people understand that, if they are being asked that question, there is a particular reason for it, and that it is actually trying to be helpful?



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**Chloe Mackay:** I think that awareness of what public services are trying to achieve and why the questions are being asked is really important. More can be done through awareness schemes and advertising, and through information provided to serving personnel, because then you know what is going to happen when you leave. The more that can be done around that, the more take-up there will be, which will drive the success of the Covenant.

**Andy Cole:** And once we have the answer to that question, it is about making sure it is singly recorded—so the long-mooted single health and social care record, which we are very supportive of. If you catch that information at GP level, we do not need to ask again; we know it. It should be coming through to us, and then we really can be on the ball about this. Getting some shared data records in is an important step.

**Christian Wakeford:** I think that might be a separate conversation for a separate day.

**Chair:** That concludes our questions. Thank you very much for coming along and assisting us in our inquiry this afternoon. The next witnesses are giving evidence virtually so there will be a little hiatus while we check the connections and so on. I am going to use that as a coffee break.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lieutenant Commander (Retd) Susie Hamilton, David Johnstone and Colonel James Phillips.

Q46 **Chair:** Welcome back, everybody. We have had a slight hiccup with communications. We are still trying to connect with one of our witnesses, but to the two of you who can hear me, welcome, and thank you for taking the time to give evidence to us this afternoon.

I will leave it to the two of you to introduce yourselves. We will go to Susie Hamilton first. *[Interruption.]* Oh, right—we have another communications problem. Are you on mute? That is the classic question.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** Okay, that's fixed it—it was the host blocking me, so thank you for unblocking me. Good afternoon. I am Susie Hamilton, the Scottish Veterans Commissioner.

**Chair:** Thank you. I hope you heard me earlier when I thanked you for coming to give evidence. *[Interruption.]* I am starting to lose the will to live here. David Johnstone, can you hear me?

**David Johnstone:** Good afternoon, Chair. I am David Johnstone, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner.

**Chair:** James Phillips still cannot hear me, but we will crack on with our questions. Thank you again for taking the time to give evidence to us.

Q47 **Gerald Jones:** Welcome to you both. It is fair to say that there is patchy coverage and awareness of various aspects of the Covenant. What are



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your thoughts on the extension of the Covenant and how that can improve outcomes for veterans? I am particularly keen to hear about the Welsh dimension—I see James Phillips is back with us, which is great—but I am also keen to hear about Scotland and Northern Ireland.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** In principle, the extension to greater policy areas is a good idea and will benefit the veteran community. In some of these policy areas, it will have more impact and value than others. I am particularly pleased to see the extension to benefits and welfare, and also to the justice system. I think it is also important to extend it to the devolved Governments themselves, which will lead to better overall control and hopefully to better collaboration. In areas such as transport, I am not sure how much impact there will be. Personal taxation is one area where it will potentially introduce more complexity than anything else for the serving population.

Overall, as has been said by just about every participant this afternoon, the key is implementation. Regardless of the number or breadth of policy areas, the key will be the quality of the implementation and the monitoring of that implementation and practice.

**David Johnstone:** Like the other participants, we in Northern Ireland welcome the extension. I think it is extremely positive, and the Government deserve credit for bringing this legislation forward.

Yes, I welcome the addition of new areas to the key areas that have always fallen under or been focused on in the Covenant. I think the extension is very positive, and it is great to move into a wider breadth of areas. I suppose the challenge is delivery, as Susie has mentioned. It is perhaps better to deliver very well on key areas than to deliver not very well in a range of areas. It is about getting the balance.

But overall it is very welcome. The wider we can extend the Covenant, and the wider the duty extends, the more it will let veterans feel that the promise or the pledge of the Covenant is being delivered. I am all for extending it as far as possible, as long as we do not hype it to a point that it creates frustration. The expectation levels for delivery are important.

**Colonel Phillips:** It is nice to be joining you. I reiterate what the other commissioners have said. Broadening the remit is very welcome. I congratulate the Government on pushing to achieve that. In many areas, as Susie said, it will assist in preventing inadvertent disadvantage by making people more aware of the sacrifice and the problems of service and the impact on the armed forces community, particularly after service for veterans.

We have seen from those key areas that have already been subject to due regard—health, education and housing—that awareness is great. Good will is nearly always there, particularly in Wales, in terms of implementation, but without the resources or the system and services themselves working well, such as health and adequate housing supply, the Covenant can have only a limited impact.



Q48 **Gerald Jones:** Could you talk about the particular challenges that veterans face in each of the devolved nations?

**Chair:** Who would like to go first? Let me select one of you. David, would you like to go first?

**David Johnstone:** That was a great choice, Chair. I could keep you for about an hour and a half on this one.

Within Northern Ireland, as everyone will know, we have unique challenges. Sometimes the challenges are overplayed, as we have moved on from the conflict. We are now almost 30 years on. When it comes to matters of the Covenant and Northern Ireland, for too long it has been an easy option for Westminster to say, "That's Northern Ireland. That's different. That's a poisoned chalice. We're not going to touch that." Thankfully, that mindset is changing. I am glad to be positive with the Committee today and say that in the past 12 months, since I have come into the post and understood the challenges, we have made some real and significant progress.

The devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland is not the same as in Wales and Scotland. It has an extra layer of complication because of the troubles, but just in November, the Stormont Assembly voted to adopt the Armed Forces Covenant. Departments are now instructed to have an armed forces liaison officer. That has led to real, tangible delivery to veterans in the key areas of health, housing and education. The challenges are obvious, but we are seeking to get over those hurdles. They are not insurmountable and we want to move towards normalisation. We want veterans in Northern Ireland to feel that they are equal with veterans throughout the rest of GB. I think we are moving in a positive direction on that.

**Colonel Phillips:** The challenges in Wales are shared challenges with the wider population. There are social and economic challenges and the cost of living, and there are particular challenges in the areas of health and housing. Supply of affordable housing is difficult, and the health service faces long waiting lists for issues that particularly affect the veteran population, which are musculoskeletal, or orthopaedic, and mental health-related. Mental health has its own pathway, but on the orthopaedic side we are seeing waiting lists of up to two years for knee replacements and hip replacements.

Musculoskeletal degradation is something that a lot of veterans suffer. We have veterans who are relatively young, in their 50s, who really need their joints replacing. They are not able to contribute to society economically, or they are suffering mental and physical health problems because of the injuries they have sustained through service, but they cannot get it rectified through the national health service in Wales without waiting for 18 months or two years for surgery.

**Chair:** Susie, can you unmute yourself?



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**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** It keeps stopping me from unmuting—apologies.

**Chair:** There is a glitch in the system, clearly.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** I am not reading anything into why I keep getting muted.

With the devolved nations, because services are different and things are set up differently, I hear from veterans quite frequently that what they see happening in one part of the country is not accessible to veterans in Scotland. The needs are not necessarily particularly different, although we have slightly different geographies—we have more veterans in remote and rural areas, which causes its own challenges—but we see inconsistencies in what may be provided. For example, justice support is provided for veterans by NHS England, but there is no equivalent in Scotland. There are lots of areas in which there is no equivalency. That is confusing and difficult for veterans, because they have all served in the UK armed forces and all expect to get the same level. Sometimes what is provided in Scotland is to their advantage and sometimes not, but it is very confusing, because there are different services.

Anything that can be done to level out those inconsistencies would be very helpful. Expanding the Covenant duty to those other areas can only be helpful, because it means that service providers and policymakers will at least have to look at what is being provided and see whether any disadvantage is being conferred.

Q49 **Pam Cox:** We have been talking about consistencies and inconsistencies. You have half-answered this already, but do you three meet regularly and swap tales of consistencies and inconsistencies? Are they logged somewhere in a handy table that the Committee might look at?

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** We do meet. We were due to meet this afternoon, actually, but we postponed it because we would rather be with the Committee. We do not compile a log, and we do not hold that data as commissioners, to my knowledge, but as individual commissioners we probably have a good understanding of where these inconsistencies occur.

Q50 **Pam Cox:** It would be helpful to the Committee, and certainly to me as a member, if we had a better understanding of the inconsistencies between the groups that you represent. The bigger question is how you think the Covenant will work to eliminate or eradicate inconsistencies, as far as is possible.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** It will have a limited effect. It is about process and policy, not about outcomes. When I am looking at veterans' issues, I am usually looking at outcomes. Some of the inconsistencies are because England has a probation service, for example, whereas Scotland has 32 different justice social work services. There are structural differences that go far deeper than just veterans' issues. The fact there will be a requirement at least to consider the impact on the



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armed forces and veteran community in policy should at least prompt consideration. I do not think that it will mean a definite change in outcomes.

**Colonel Phillips:** Difference is inherent in devolution, and that is what people voted for. It is difficult when most of the key services that impact veterans' lives are devolved. Without a UK-wide veterans service, it will look and feel different. A lot of veterans will ask why we cannot have something like in the US, where a veterans organisation provides healthcare as well as other services across the country.

You must judge whether a veteran who lives in Wales is being disadvantaged against a non-veteran peer when it comes to housing or health. It is very difficult to make that comparison with a veteran living in England about how quickly they get a knee replacement or other devolved outcomes. We have VALOUR coming in, which is welcome and it will be UK-wide, but again that service will have nuances depending on which devolved setting the service sits in. I am not sure that there is an easy solution, or whether devolved Administrations would want an easy solution.

**David Johnstone:** As has already been alluded to, the key is that there is a huge disparity and diversity not only across the different regions of the UK but within each region, depending on its location. That, in itself, makes it very difficult to get consistency into delivery.

For me, the key things going forward will very much be education and communication. That is the education of local governments—in our case, the local councils—on exactly what the Covenant duty is and their responsibility within it. There is also a need to educate the armed forces community and veterans so that their expectations are not too high. I still bump into veterans who have this mindset that the Covenant means they will be bumped up waiting lists, for instance, or they will get a house more quickly than somebody else. Of course, that is not what it is; it is about not having disadvantage. I think that education piece will help to bring the consistency and the value of this extension.

On top of all of that is simply communication. One of the real benefits of the Bill is that it puts this topic into public discussion—it is in the newspapers and it has been talked about at various events because the Bill has put it front and centre. That, in itself, brings value, because it again highlights and spotlights this pledge or promise that exists between those who serve and society and the Government. I think it is about highlighting it initially and then, over time, delivering.

- Q51 **Mike Martin:** Thanks for delaying your regular meeting to be here with us this afternoon—it is much appreciated. I have the same question for all of you, and it is about each of your respective devolved Administrations. The new Covenant laid out in the Bill, when it becomes law, will be expanded in scope and there are extra duties there. How ready are your devolved Administrations to cope with the extra scope that will come into force with this new Bill?



**Colonel Phillips:** There is a huge obstacle between where we sit now and the implementation of the Bill as an Act: the Senedd elections. With the current Administration and the officials who will provide that continuity, there is an awareness and an understanding, and they are planning for the widening of due regard and the fact that the Welsh Government will be subject to the Bill. Obviously, we will have the hiatus of the election in between, and then the setting up of the new Government or Administration.

We will then have to see whether they will have a veterans lead and an armed forces portfolio, and how they will take that forward. I have engaged with the current Administration—I had my latest meeting this week with officials who sit in the armed forces branch—and they are working closely with Whitehall, the Office for Veterans' Affairs and the MOD on what the Bill will mean for Wales. Again, we will wait and see what the Government will look like and how they will take that forward.

Q52 **Mike Martin:** Irrespective of the Government, are you confident at the civil service level in Wales?

**Colonel Phillips:** In the Welsh Government itself, yes, and of course we then have the local authorities. We are fortunate that we have the Armed Forces Covenant liaison officers who sit in clusters with local authorities—they are charged to deliver on the Covenant understanding and training. They have been working hard at the local level to ensure that the awareness is there, and from my engagement with the armed forces branch of the Welsh Government and the officials there, I am confident that they can take it forward.

**David Johnstone:** Surprisingly, I think the devolved Assembly at Stormont is in a really good place to provide delivery and to deliver on the extension. Part of that is the circumstances: the Ministers who hold the most relevant Departments to the armed forces and veterans happen to be Unionist and, therefore, are very keen to see the extension and the Armed Forces Covenant delivered.

Tangibly, I can point out to the Committee that, just last Thursday, we had 120 veterans in the room. Minister Gordon Lyons of the Department for Communities was the guest speaker. At that event, he announced a special telephone text service for the armed forces and veteran community to contact his Department around areas of employment, health and benefits. So that is a very tangible, welcome and positive development.

Of course, there still are those within the community in Northern Ireland who have a challenge with the armed forces, given the conflict, and who would not want to see the Armed Forces Covenant extended. However, I do think that, with the passage of time, there is the realisation that to demand and continue to want a section of the community in Northern Ireland not to be treated equally, to be disadvantaged just because they wear a uniform, is not a defensible position in 2026.



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I often say, when I meet nationalists and we have this conversation, that it is unacceptable in 2026 for any political party to have a policy that wants to disadvantage any member of our society, but particularly members of the armed forces community. I am pleased to say that I am very heartened, and I think Stormont will move forward at pace, where it can, to deliver the extension. Certainly, of our 11 councils, six have adopted the Covenant as well. Hopefully we will move forward positively within our society.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** As commissioners, we have had an update meeting with the MOD Covenant team, and it was pleasing to hear that they have been engaging with officials in the Scottish Government in some of the affected Departments outside the veterans unit, so some of that work is happening. Again, we will have an election, so we will have some disruption in terms of Government.

When it comes to other bodies, particularly local authorities and those such as Social Security Scotland, because the guidance has not been issued yet, I am not sure how high awareness is at the moment. Considering that this duty will start in 2027, and that people will need to plan for the 2027–28 budgets, I am not wholly convinced that that activity is happening at the moment. It is probably a real necessity to get lots of engagement and to get the guidance out as quickly as possible to make sure that that can happen in a timely way.

**Mike Martin:** That is really helpful. Thank you.

Q53 **Al Carns:** Thank you all very much for your support for veterans all over the country. I really appreciate all your hard work. I have spoken to the representative Ministers within your devolved Administrations. I suppose this is focused on you, David. Do you foresee difficulties in applying the Covenant duty in Northern Ireland, given the political and security context? I think it would be useful for the panel to understand some of the nuances that you are obviously dealing with in Northern Ireland.

**David Johnstone:** Thank you, Minister. Yes, there will continue to be challenges, without a shadow of a doubt. I think one of the biggest challenges is around veterans themselves wanting to acknowledge and highlight the fact that they are veterans. If they go to visit their GP, particularly for their mental health but in some cases for their physical health issues, and questions immediately start about their background, there will still be veterans who are absolutely not comfortable disclosing the fact that they are veterans. Therefore, the diagnosis and the treatment are not going to be adequate. That is a challenge, and it is difficult to get over. It is only, I suppose, the passage of time that will help with that. That is one tangible example.

Politically, there is still a divided society. There are different views on the troubles. Very often, the armed forces are used as a political football. If one side is seen to be winning, the other side does not like that, and therefore you end up with a bit of tit for tat. Too often, the armed forces community is caught up in the middle of that. It is real and tangible.



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As you will be aware, Minister, from our various conversations with the commissioners and veterans on your visits to Northern Ireland, the current troubles Bill has put a spotlight on those complications. We hope that there may be some positive amendments down the line, as the Prime Minister alluded to, but currently, veterans in Northern Ireland have huge concerns about the trajectory of the Bill. That affects all services. People's mental health is being affected by the thought of what might be coming down the line with the Bill. Problems exist, but we have to try to find solutions, be positive and see how we move forward.

**Q54 AI Carns:** Do you think there should be an English veterans commissioner?

**David Johnstone:** Yes, absolutely—100%. I think my colleagues share that view. It is, in some ways, surprising because if you put all the veterans from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales together, we probably would not come near the number of veterans in England. From a representative point of view, although a lot of the issues are the same, I am strongly of the view that each country should have its own commissioner to articulate the individual needs of those in their own country. Collectively, they would be able to represent to the Government in a much more complete and holistic way.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** I certainly think it is bizarre that there is not an English commissioner. That is 85% of the veteran population, while the other 15% have three commissioners to represent them. I would certainly support that.

**Colonel Phillips:** The advent of the Armed Forces Commissioner makes that gap even more pronounced. We can engage with the Armed Forces Commissioner as three, but there is no one to represent the English cohort. We have written on various issues as a three, but it seems strange to address collective issues that affect veterans across the United Kingdom and speak only as the three commissioners from the devolved nations. It is a gap.

**Q55 Mr Foster:** You just answered a query I was going to ask about where the English commissioner is. We might want to look at that through the Bill. I want to go back to David and something rather delicate that you raised—the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. We always mention that the whole purpose of the Covenant is to prevent disadvantage to a veteran. Do we not run the risk that there will be conflict in legislation? Veterans in Northern Ireland are going to state that they are being disadvantaged by the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill through the courts. This is a real challenge for us, is it not?

**David Johnstone:** I absolutely agree with that line of thought. It is a challenge. It is one that takes up a lot of my time and that of my fellow commissioners, because the troubles Bill affects not just veterans who live in Northern Ireland, but many who came from the rest of GB—nearly 300,000—to serve in Northern Ireland. There is definitely a feeling among some veterans that there is a disadvantage in the troubles Bill, and yet the



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Armed Forces Covenant is designed to ensure that there is no disadvantage, particularly, and I suppose poignantly, when you consider how terrorists have been treated in the past.

That was the past, and they were special circumstances, but veterans feel very strongly that they have not been treated fairly and that they are at a disadvantage. They feel that they will be exposed to what they would deem to be endless years of lawfare at an incredible cost to the taxpayer and to society, as we pick over the scab of the troubles, and veterans in their old age will not be allowed to move on into retirement. They are constantly living out the past because they have been forced to, given where we are with the Bill and the discussions around it. Many veterans would love to be able to enjoy their old age, having served, without the fear, apprehension and uncertainty that the current troubles Bill is bringing.

**Colonel Phillips:** I certainly hear from veterans that in one Bill going through Parliament, there is a focus on the Strategic Reserve, and the link to those who have served and asking them perhaps to step forward again, but then with the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, veterans perceive that they are being thrown under a bus. There is great variance between those two policies and the requirement to call on the loyalty and service of veterans on the one hand, and discount it on the other.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** The Covenant focuses on fairness. It is not about special treatment; it is about fair treatment. There is a risk that the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, as it currently is, is not bringing fair treatment for veterans.

Q56 **Chair:** That concludes our questions. I have one last question: what is the backdrop to your screen, Susie? We are all Sassenachs here; we don't know.

**Lieutenant Commander Hamilton:** It is the Bass Rock, because I am speaking from lovely East Lothian.

**Chair:** It is a very beautiful bit of scenery. Thank you all for coming to give evidence this afternoon. We have really appreciated it.