

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Report 2022, HC 1323

Tuesday 9 May 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 9 May 2023.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Robert Courts; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar.

Questions 1-92

Witnesses

[I](#): Michelle Alston, Policy Director, Army Families Federation, Sarah Clewes, CEO, Naval Families Federation, and Maria Lyle, Director, RAF Families Federation.

[II](#): Lieutenant General (retd) Sir Nicholas Pope KCB CBE, Chair, COBSEO, Angela Kitching, Director of Campaigns, Policy and Research, Royal British Legion, and Julie McCarthy, Director Volunteer Operations, SSAFA.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Michelle Alston, Sarah Clewes and Maria Lyle.

Chair: Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing on Tuesday 9 May 2023. We will be looking at the Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report 2022. I am delighted to welcome Maria Lyle, the director of the RAF Families Federation, Sarah Clewes, the chief executive officer of the Naval Families Federation, and Michelle Alston, the policy director of the Army Families Federation. I do not know whether I should have done the Navy first, as the senior service, but that was the way it was listed. We are delighted to see you all again to look at the Armed Forces Covenant.

Just as a reminder, the covenant is the commitment that the Government came out with, going back to May 2011. Perhaps it is just worth repeating that the covenant articulates the view that “the...nation has a moral obligation” to members of the Armed Forces community in return for the sacrifices that they make. It states that those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, “should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.”

With that high bar set, we are now going to probe and look into whether we are actually achieving the commitment of the covenant and honouring the service of those who have served or are serving, or those who are connected by family to that environment. With that in mind, I invite John to kick us off with the first question.

Q1 **John Spellar:** Are there unique pressures that service families are facing as a result of the cost of living crisis?

Sarah Clewes: Yes, there certainly are. For those in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, who tend to own their own homes and to weekend there, the time that they get alongside their families is very precious. If they are not at sea, deployed on ships or submarines, or deployed with the Royal Marines, the time at home is precious; it is quality time to spend with family. With the cost of living, we were finding that families were not able to make the journey home, not just because of the cost of fuel but because of the money that would have been taken out of the family budget. For those people who rely on spending their time on the road at weekends, there was a definite impact on the quality of family life.

Maria Lyle: There is an interesting challenge for personnel and families in this space that I suppose is a combined challenge, but the cost of living moulds it all together. In some ways, defence families are slightly insulated from the cost of living crisis; I think they are very grateful for understanding what their salary is going to be and what their service accommodation charges will be. However, they are seeing other people getting pay rises, they are covering for MACA requests and strikes that are going on elsewhere, and they are struggling in an environment where their



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infrastructure and living accommodation sometimes is poor. All of those are linked to the cost of living, because sometimes the maintenance of that accommodation is harder as costs for materials and other things rise. That means that people's feeling of support, wellbeing, morale—whether they feel valued—is absolutely impacted. So yes, I would say there absolutely are.

Q2 John Spellar: On that, are they finding that the poor maintenance and possible lack of insulation and so on in service accommodation is disproportionately impacting them in terms of fuel bills?

Maria Lyle: Yes, absolutely. I will be honest: I have not seen quantitative data on that. Certainly, plenty of families have come to us with issues in their accommodation, citing the fact that their bills have spiked. We know everyone else's have too, but their point is that, uniquely, they are at the moment forced to live in that accommodation because they are a mobile military family.

Michelle Alston: I can absolutely echo that, from the Army family side, on the service family accommodation. Families are raising with us concerns about energy efficiency in their houses. If they own their own property, they may be able to rectify it, but they are not able to do so when living in service accommodation. I also echo Sarah's comments: we had families—particularly living unaccompanied—contacting us with inquiries related to fuel costs and their ability to visit their home.

The other thing we have seen within our families—we have been looking at the groups that might be most affected—is within the non-UK community. We are seeing that, where some service personnel may wish to take on secondary employment, some of the non-UK cohort find that more challenging. We had had some casework involving employers who do not necessarily fully understand the immigration rules and their exempt status, so we are seeing barriers there as well. Otherwise, I would echo very much the comments of Maria and Sarah.

Chair: It is an interesting point, which has not gone unnoticed by this Committee. Of course there is a right for anybody to strike and to seek higher salaries, and we have seen that, but it is often the Armed Forces that step in, through MACA requests, and of course the Armed Forces cannot go on strike. That is an important point to stress.

Q3 Robert Courts: You have put your finger on exactly the point that as a Committee we are thinking about and concerned about, in terms of pay and MACA requests. But accommodation—what you have referred to, Ms Lyle, as the living environment—is something that we are acutely aware of, so much so that we are going to be leading a Sub-Committee inquiry on the state of service accommodation later this year. That is going to be broad. We are going to cover ongoing conditions and the standard of accommodation, as well as the much more publicised lack of maintenance and lack of repairs—recently, mould and so forth. We are going to be looking at that in real detail, but what I want to give each of you a chance to comment on at the moment is whether you have seen any



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improvement since the beginning of the year in the performance of the future defence infrastructure contract. I will start with Ms Lyle.

Maria Lyle: Since the beginning of the year, yes. I asked the team for analysis of numbers month by month for the last two years to span that time period, and they are better now than they were at the turn of the year and certainly in November and December, which was a particularly bleak time for a number of families. So there is improvement, yes.

Q4 **Robert Courts:** Are you able to help us with quantitative data?

Maria Lyle: As you said, you are going to do a more detailed inquiry on this. I think that there are underlying things regardless of the fact that numbers are improving. I come from a background where I delivered big contracts back into the public sector from a private sector perspective, and I think those numbers have been driven down in ways that do not always solve the issues for all the service families. The numbers have gone down, but some of the underlying issues absolutely remain.

Q5 **Robert Courts:** So they defer the problem to another day.

Maria Lyle: Absolutely. That is not the contractor's fault per se, because they are not there to resolve the decades-long underfunding of that accommodation. That is something that we can discuss.

Q6 **Robert Courts:** It is revenue cost covering for a lack of capital investment, in other words.

Maria Lyle: Yes.

Michelle Alston: I would say the same. I have looked at the statistics from our inquiries, and we saw a significant increase before Christmas—between September and December—but since January they have normalised to what they were at this kind of time last year. Where we are seeing issues now is more in complex issues, or potentially in things such as the complaints system. There were also a lot of additional extras that families were promised as part of the contract—things such as the home hub and one-hour slots—that have not materialised yet. Otherwise, I would say we have seen an improving picture since January.

Sarah Clewes: It remains one of the top two areas of our business. Non-UK and housing are always at the top of our agenda at the Naval Families Federation, including for the Marines. The communications improvement has been welcome. There is a newsletter, and it feels as though people are being listened to. People just want information so they can make informed choices. That has been really welcome, but there is certainly a long way to go.

Q7 **Mr Francois:** Can I come in very quickly? Ms Alston, you talked about some of the things that were promised with the new contract not really coming into being yet. Historically, you have had two very big issues. One is the actual physical condition of the housing, and the second is the quality of the maintenance when something goes wrong—when the boiler breaks down in the middle of winter. There were four grades of housing,



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and I think they no longer let grade 3 and grade 4 anyway. The critical issue is not so much the physical condition of the properties, although there are still some problems, but the maintenance of the properties once families move in. Is that about right?

Michelle Alston: I think that is part of it. When we get our inquiries about repairs and maintenance, they are often more to do with how many appointments it will take to fix an issue. For instance, when we saw a high number of inquiries in the autumn, people were having missed appointments and were having to chase up for their issue to be resolved. That is partly the legacy of long-term maintenance issues, as Maria has alluded to, and partly issues with the new contract. It is a bit of both, absolutely. One particular frustration before Christmas was having to repeatedly chase up appointments when they had been missed.

Q8 **Mr Francois:** As Robert said, we are going to do a detailed Sub-Committee inquiry on this in the autumn, but I have one more quick question for now. We were told that the way this new contract was going to work was that when people reported a fault, it would be accurately and rapidly passed on and someone would turn up with the right part and fix it there and then, as a kind of one-phone-call thing. That is still not really happening, is it?

Michelle Alston: If it is a simple issue, the evidence that we have from our inquiries at the moment is that that has improved. Where you get into complex issues with follow-up works, that is where it is more complicated. Before Christmas, we saw the example of somebody who needed a radiator replaced. That had already been identified, but somebody was sent out to fix the radiator when the decision had already been made. One of the issues that the contract was facing was IT not necessarily talking to each other. That was one of the key problems that we had seen before.

Mr Francois: Thank you very much.

Q9 **Chair:** Before we leave this subject, can I just ask about harmony guidelines? We spend an awful lot of time in this Committee talking about operations, where we are going, security issues, new equipment and the capital budget, yet it seems that anybody in uniform spends more time at home, in the barracks and so forth in any year. Would that be correct? Let's start with the Navy. How much time is any person in the Navy spending on a ship versus back with the family?

Sarah Clewes: I do not have the numbers, but I know that it is not unusual for a deployment on a submarine, for example, to be eight months. That is a big period of time and, actually, I am hearing that people are happy to be at sea. That is why they joined the Navy: they want to be out doing what they are trained to do, so they are quite happy to be at sea. It is a mixed picture with regard to how much time they spend away from home, but it is also different where priorities change. The younger folk are quite happy to be at sea, earn the extra money and have all those adventures, but when priorities change, they would like to be at home and to be with family, which is different. I do not have the numbers, but when we talk about harmony, it is a really interesting topic

because it is different across the board, because priorities are different for different cohorts.

Q10 **Chair:** That is what I want to understand. You do an eight-month deployment. How much time do they then get before they are out again?

Sarah Clewes: Not long, depending on courses and things. It is a matter of months, so the balance probably is not right. I do not think it is just about the length of the deployment; it is also about the uncertainty around programme changes, ships breaking, and submarines. It is about the uncertainty as well as the length of deployment.

Chair: Can I ask the same question about the Army?

Michelle Alston: One of the things that we are trying to monitor at the moment is the impact on persistent engagement activities—those longer-term exercises overseas. If you are a family member, you might not have very much of a differential in your head between a four to six-month operational tour and a four-month training exercise in, say, Kenya. It is about trying to understand what some of those unique pressures are. That is a piece of work we are doing in a later quarter of the year so that we can try to gather some more evidence, and not necessarily just on the operational tour. What are the other absences that people have, including living unaccompanied and perhaps not seeing their serving partner so often, as you alluded to at the start?

Chair: And the RAF?

Maria Lyle: When I look at the figures and the data from things like FAMCAS, the RAF performs reasonably well in terms of separation, particularly compared with the other services. The point that has been made to us a number of times is that the difference between, as Michelle says, an operation and perhaps being overseas for training, and what comes with that in terms of allowances and benefits for the family and their being able to access support, is seen as quite divisive, particularly when you have a unit where one squadron is on operation and another is on training, and one can access a suite of support and the other cannot. That bit does not go down well, but we have not had lots of feedback over the past two or three years about the length of time that people are required to spend away overall.

Chair: That is very helpful. Let's turn to service children.

Q11 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon, ladies. I do not mind who wishes to answer this first but, hopefully, you might all have a reflection on it. The Ministry of Defence are indicating that they are supporting service children with special educational needs, so I would be keen to establish, from your perspective individually, whether you think they are doing enough, and enough of the right thing.

Maria Lyle: We had a chat about this beforehand, and we definitely acknowledge that there is progress in this area and that the Ministry of Defence is leaning in and looking at working with the local authorities



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where there is the highest proportion of service children to try to get that process, particularly where someone has an education, health and care plan, more seamless.

There are two challenges in my mind that very much still exist. One of them is when children are coming in from overseas. That is particularly challenging, and I can think of some live cases that are going on at the moment in that support, because the recognition of how they might have been assessed overseas—and whether that is recognised by the NHS, the school or the local authority—is a challenge.

The second point is around mobility in general, which is what drives the problem—that is the root cause—and that longer-term thinking about letting people step out of being mobile for a while and then step back in. Hopefully, that is being progressed within the MoD, because I would say that doing it just because you can—because, culturally, it is seen as, “Well, if you want to progress, you have to move every two or three years”—versus doing it for a very good reason, to generate the capabilities that we need for defence, are two different things. I would like the latter to be what the MoD is aiming for.

Michelle Alston: I think that for us—for Army families—it is the mobility issue as well. That is in terms of both potentially delaying assessment but also, if there is a care plan put in place, the delay there can be when they move to a new local authority.

We have evidence from families whose local authorities say they will not confirm what support will be provided to the child until they actually move into that area. That also links in with the school admissions, where some local authorities will define “in advance of”, which is in the school admissions code, as being perhaps four weeks before, while others will say 16 weeks. So when a family with a child with profound additional needs is trying to plan ahead to make sure that care is in place, it is quite a complex system. Our concern is about whether there are children being left out of school, and the impact on them, but also the potential pressure on the parent to then do non-elective—essentially home—education.

Q12 **Gavin Robinson:** Are you aware of families who have refused to move because they know that support would not be available for their children?

Michelle Alston: Part of the problem is them being informed to be able to make that decision, because they don’t know, potentially almost until the assignment and posting happens. One of the things we would call for is more local authorities to be more willing to engage on the topic of support beforehand, because then a family could potentially say, “Actually, we’re going to take a different pathway for our family to make sure we have that support in place.”

Sarah Clewes: I completely agree. The inconsistency across councils is unhelpful. For our families, the frequency and length of separation leads to a specific and increased need for support. So I completely agree.

Q13 **Gavin Robinson:** Okay. Are you all actively engaged with the MoD on the



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sort of work they are doing and suggestions for the future?

Witnesses *indicated assent.*

Gavin Robinson: Thank you.

- Q14 **Mr Francois:** Isn't one of the problems that, as we all know from our constituency casework, it can sometimes take a long while to get an EHCP? You go through all the barriers and you finally get one—say from Wiltshire, if you're garrisoned at Tidworth or wherever—but you're then transferred to Catterick, and the EHCPs are not necessarily always portable, are they?

Michelle Alston: No. That is, again, something that families have flagged to us with their evidence. They might move to a different local authority that will almost want to reinvestigate what the support is.

- Q15 **Mr Francois:** Yes. Sometimes, in the worst cases, you have to go right back to square one, and it's another two years to fight your way through the bureaucracy. Then, once you've done that, maybe you get posted again. Isn't this one of the things that maybe we should ask Johnny Mercer to look at? Sitting in the Cabinet Office, he's meant to have an overarching role, so couldn't we make these things that bit more portable? Under the covenant, you should suffer no disadvantage as a result of service life. Well, one of the things about service life is that you often have to move and you don't have a choice. Wouldn't it help if we could make EHCPs portable from one local authority to another—or at least more portable than they are now?

Michelle Alston: Yes. I think we picked that up as part of the recent SEND consultation that we all fed into. I think one of the proposals was for a kind of digitised EHCP, and I think—correct me if I'm wrong—that all of us said that could be really beneficial for Armed Forces families moving around.

- Q16 **Mr Francois:** Is that maybe something that this Committee could give a bit of a shove to?

Witnesses *indicated assent.*

- Q17 **Gavin Robinson:** I am tempted to move beyond EHCPs, because we do not have them in Northern Ireland; we have a statement of educational need and talk about "statemented children". Across the devolved nations there is probably also an issue with transportability—

Mr Francois: They used to be called statements in England but then they gave it a new name, but it is still much the same thing.

Gavin Robinson: Yes, but if there is an intra-England issue about portability, there is probably a wider issue in devolved nations as well.

Witnesses *indicated assent.*

- Q18 **Chair:** Mark has just reminded me of this, and I think it is perhaps worth asking the question. Nobody has made more noise about wanting to



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upgrade the Executive's—the Government's—approach to support to veterans than Johnny Mercer. He has made it his life's ambition as a parliamentarian. He is now in Cabinet; he has the position he sought. Veterans are represented—as are you, in an indirect way. Do you feel that the new structure we are now operating on is working better, or worse? Have you seen any benefits from where we are now?

Maria Lyle: I welcome that appointment and the fact that that position is now back in Cabinet. What I would say is that the needs of those two cohorts can sometimes be fairly different. Two of us here are veterans ourselves, and it is the mobility of service life that often drives the challenges for service families. They are a much smaller cohort—that serving group—so getting their needs understood by service providers can be a challenge. Veterans are a much larger group, by their nature; therefore, while I would not say that the ability to provide more stable services and argue their points is easier, as it is still an uphill challenge—it is a more fixed point in time. At the moment, if I am honest, I would say I have yet to see a change, but that does not mean it could not come about over time. There are some changes that have been made in the background as to how the covenant is governed—the governance process—and that is at the very early stages, so we could yet see some fruit borne from that.

Q19 Chair: On councils and local authorities, there was this idea—we certainly went down this route in Bournemouth—of allocating an Armed Forces champion: a single individual in the local authority to whom you can go and say, "You, local authority, have signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant. You are either bronze, silver or gold accolade. Make this happen. I have a child who has moved because the parents have moved from one garrison to another, and they require support. Please make sure they are not disadvantaged according to the covenant." Is the Armed Forces champion concept working? You touched on it by saying that you perhaps get different levels of support depending on the local authority. Michelle, you are nodding.

Michelle Alston: It is really helpful to have the Armed Forces Covenant champions. The issue sometimes is whether that then translates down to the frontline workers who are interacting. It is about making sure there is that joined-up element within the local authority and they are able to understand the unique pressures that service families face and can provide that support.

Sarah Clewes: We have some really good experience of working with our Armed Forces champions. I think they provide another network to spread communication and help us with our messaging, which is really useful. However, they are stretched—one person looking after a huge area of geography is limited. So yes, I think the idea is great, and certainly they have provided that communication network, as I have explained, but it is a big role for very few people. Even so, it is welcomed, and we have some great relationships across the country, so in terms of geography and reach, absolutely.



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Maria Lyle: What I would add is that it is early days, but the NHS has introduced the single point of contact in some areas, which can absolutely pay dividends—I am thinking of a rather complex case that my team were dealing with literally within the last fortnight. We all know how complex the NHS set-up can be; if you are trying to navigate that as a forces family having come in from abroad with a child with some quite profound needs, having someone to help you to do that, to make your case and to explain what the Armed Forces Covenant means to other NHS workers, speaking their language, is very powerful. The more of that that we get—they can help veterans as well; that is their aim—the better.

Q20 Chair: When I was responsible for this as a Minister in the MoD, I wanted to grade them. I wanted to celebrate the top local authorities that did the most for the Armed Forces and then highlight those that perhaps were less supportive of them. Is there any framework to rate them and publicly recognise that somebody is doing extremely well? I know of some councils, such as Staffordshire County Council—the National Memorial Arboretum is there; it is often where there is a connectivity—and Portsmouth, which do particularly well. It is local authorities that perhaps do not have a historic connection with the Armed Forces where they may not do as much.

Michelle Alston: I think any sharing of best practice among their networks—sharing where they have provided fantastic support with other authorities—is positive.

Chair: That is really helpful. Sorry that we digressed a little bit.

Q21 Richard Drax: Good afternoon to you all. Before I ask my question about wraparound childcare, can I add an observation on the SEND issue? In Dorset, we have a major problem with, first, the expense, and secondly, the lack of provision in special cases. In many cases children are being sent out of county because the requirement is so special. I assume that is also a major issue for mobility, because not only might you not get it in, say, Catterick and nearby, but, certainly in a foreign posting, you have no chance at all of getting that sort of provision. I assume that in the specialist cases there is simply not enough provision for that.

Maria Lyle: No, there is not. It very much depends on where you are in the world. There is a supportability process that families go through before an overseas posting, and often they will not get posted if their needs are of a nature that the MoD feel cannot be supported in that location. Of course, people have children while they are abroad and people have children who perhaps develop signs of additional needs while they are abroad, and they are the ones who end up needing that specialist support and struggle sometimes.

Q22 Richard Drax: I have a comment on wraparound childcare. The Families Federation has highlighted two examples: one was the lack of support for those overseas who are not eligible for the wraparound childcare scheme, and the second was the disparities in Government childcare funding across the devolved Administrations. Those are two issues. Perhaps you



can expand on those, Michelle, and see if there are any more.

Michelle Alston: On wraparound childcare, we did a survey at the end of last year. Part of the survey asked about views on the scheme. I think that—certainly for Army families—the key issue was really that wraparound childcare was not necessarily the top priority for our families. What the evidence told us from our survey was actually that the early years space was a key priority for childcare provision, but also the holiday care as well. We saw some qualitative evidence from some families saying perhaps that the non-serving spouse took a role that was school-hours only, and what they were therefore looking for was cover in the school holidays.

You talked about overseas postings. Yes, we have definitely seen in our evidence frustration from families about it not being available overseas, but we understand that the Ministry of Defence are currently looking at that and at what provision they might put in place instead. That is something they are looking at at the moment.

I do not think it is just the overseas cohorts: we saw other cohorts who were ineligible for it being frustrated. I think we have all had a cohort of people who are doing a work placement—perhaps they are training to be a doctor, nurse or midwife—and so they are working alongside, as part of their degree, but they would therefore not be eligible because they are doing a degree. I think there is definitely some frustration in that space. The other thing is provision—I do not know if you both want to comment a bit more on that element.

Maria Lyle: For us, the biggest amount of evidence we have had on the provision and the lack of availability in some areas has been in Scotland. Obviously, the RAF has a significant footprint at Lossiemouth, and the accessibility of childcare up there, particularly out-of-hours care, has been raised with us by a number of families. For a service that hopes to support a wider number of dual-serving couples, many of whom will have children, that is an operational impact. Part of that is down to the way that the Scottish system delivers that care and the use, or not, of schools for that care. I know the Scottish Government are in conversation with Moray Council on that, but it is something that has been raised by a significant number of families up there, who are saying to us, “My partner cannot work,” or, “My partner now wants to leave and leave me here unaccompanied because we cannot access childcare.”

Q23 **Richard Drax:** That is the problem, but what is being done about it? Are you happy that action is being taken to resolve these things?

Maria Lyle: I am not close enough to know where the Scottish Government have got to with Moray Council in talking about this. I do know they were very well aware that there was a significant issue. We were hoping there could be a different view taken on using local schools to accommodate after-school clubs and wraparound care in the way that it is done in settings in England; whether it has got to that point, I do not



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know. What we cannot magically do is provide trained childcare assistance overnight, because that is the other part of the challenge.

Sarah Clewes: Just to add the reservist perspective, some of our reservists can mobilise for over a year, or up to a year, and then not be entitled to wraparound childcare. There is some really—

Richard Drax: They are not?

Sarah Clewes: They are not entitled. There is some really interesting feedback from sponsored reservists, or reservists who may deploy for a significant period of time, and they are not eligible.

Richard Drax: So this deployment to Iraq, for example, did not get it.

Sarah Clewes: No.

Richard Drax: Or Afghanistan.

Sarah Clewes: I absolutely understand that there will be a cut-off in terms of budget and all the rest of it, but it is interesting that we have quite a few calls from reservists asking the question. All of one company does not apply for wraparound childcare.

Q24 **Richard Drax:** Again, what is the answer to that? What is being done?

Sarah Clewes: We have certainly raised it. We have asked the reservists to come back and give us some evidence around this so that we can raise it as an issue. We need some perspective around this—how many people are we talking about?—but we certainly had calls into the office about where reservists sit in this.

Richard Drax: That is something the Committee could raise and maybe help you with, among other issues.

Sarah Clewes: Thank you.

Q25 **Mr Francois:** Ladies, there have been a number of reports in recent years about why people leave the Armed Forces. I led on one of them, but there have been a number. The biggest reason seems to be the pressure of service life on family life, but a number of subsidiary reasons feed into that overarching reason, one of which is the high cost of childcare. On the back of the "Stick or Twist?" report, the Secretary of State went to the Treasury and, I am told, got a fair amount of money to invest specifically in that issue, both to provide new or upgraded creches and nursery facilities at military garrisons, air bases and ports, and to try to improve wraparound childcare. This was all happening about three years ago. Can you give us some practical examples of where that money has been put to good use? Michelle, perhaps you could go first.

Michelle Alston: I don't think I can comment on the individual bases and so on. My understanding is that that has gone into the wraparound childcare scheme, which, like I said, has been welcomed by those who are eligible to use it. But certainly for our cohort of Army families, the



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evidence they are telling us is that the wraparound element is not their priority; the early years element is the key bit. Otherwise, I'm not sure I can speak to the rest of it.

- Q26 **Mr Francois:** There are some very big garrisons, such as Tidworth and Catterick. Can you give us any practical examples from some of the big garrisons of where the money has been spent?

Michelle Alston: That is not a level of detail that I have today, but I would be happy to go away, look again at our evidence and write back to the Committee.

- Q27 **Mr Francois:** We would just like some reassurance on where the money has actually gone. That is what I'm driving at. Sarah?

Sarah Clewes: I agree with Michelle. I haven't got any figures but we can certainly have a look at that and find out some more information. I know there are nursery facilities inside the naval bases. The contracts and the uptake around this issue are being looked at, but I haven't got any evidence that I can provide.

- Q28 **Mr Francois:** We went to a very upmarket creche at Portsmouth—I'm afraid I cannot remember the name of it, but it was three or four years ago—and it had very good facilities but cost £1,200 a month, so they were nearly all officers' kids because they were the only ones who could afford it. I'd just like some reassurance—I think we all would—that the money has been well spent. It is a bit concerning that neither the Army nor the Navy, off the top of your heads, can give us some concrete examples. Maria, how about the Royal Air Force?

Maria Lyle: My understanding was that that budget was mostly for the revenue spend on wraparound childcare, as opposed to capital spend on facilities. The RAF has been going through a programme of re-letting each of their nurseries at the large stations. That flings up the commercial complexities and perverse incentives, shall we say. We should be looking to remove barriers and make it as easy as possible for cost-effective childcare to be—

- Q29 **Mr Francois:** The Royal Air Forces Association run most of them now, don't they?

Maria Lyle: They don't, no.

Mr Francois: I thought they did.

Maria Lyle: They have nine nurseries, whereas there is a lot more than nine frontline bases in the RAF. Most of the provision is provided either by private companies or by charitable means. Where RAFA have taken over, after that period of churn there is often a cheaper and certainly better-value service at play. Any money that they make from that process is going to a charitable end. I'm not saying it is the only model in town, but it is a model that I think could be learned from and developed elsewhere.

Mr Francois: To save time, perhaps you could all drop the Committee a



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brief note on where that money has gone and how effectively you think it has been spent. We would find that very helpful. Thank you, Chair.

- Q30 **Chair:** Mark, thank you very much indeed. Can I move on to dentistry now? I think some of you have commented on this before. In a lot of cases it's the NHS dental system that we are leaning on if they don't have the same provision in the garrisons. Can you say how that is actually working? I am also particularly interested in the devolved Administrations and whether there is a difference in the offering depending on where you are in the country. Sarah, do you want to go first?

Sarah Clewes: We don't have much evidence on this, but it is certainly an issue for dual-serving couples. Their dental care may be looked after by their appropriate garrison, but it is a completely different matter when they have children and they have to try to find a dentist for them. Therefore, for dual-serving couples, it is certainly an issue.

Again around mobility, it is perhaps not made any easier by people moving and retaining their places. I learned from a family who are now based in Exmouth, at Lympstone, but who have retained their dentist in Portsmouth because they do not want to give it up, knowing that they probably will not get another one. So that is not helpful.

- Q31 **Chair:** So they are having to commute every time?

Sarah Clewes: They commute, yes. A three-hour journey each way is planned in to make sure that the family can access dental care. That isn't helpful, because they are now probably blocking the space for somebody in the local area, but they aren't give up that space. So that is what we are learning from our families: they are actually making lengthy journeys, and children are a big factor here, as well as the parents who may be dual serving or not.

Chair: That is very helpful. Maria?

Maria Lyle: I don't have much more to add on that. It is a national issue, and our families have had to learn not to leave an NHS dentist, if they have one, and to make that commute, because the—

- Q32 **Chair:** So the unwritten rule now is, "Just hang on to what you've got; it doesn't matter where you move to"?

Maria Lyle: Yes—"Just make the journey."

Michelle Alston: Which, of course, is not straightforward if you're coming from an overseas assignment and do not have that option. I would say that that is the other cohort uniquely affected. If you're returning from an overseas assignment, you cannot retain your dentist in Cyprus, for instance.

- Q33 **Chair:** Maybe there should be an internal broker that can do the swaps depending on where you are in the country, so that everybody can all work it out. However, that is certainly something that we will take away. From a devolved Administration perspective, is it any different in



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Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland?

Michelle Alston: No, I don't think so. Because you don't register, essentially, with an NHS dentist. It is about having a dentist and a programme of dental care, because you could, for instance, be in Arbroath and then move to Plymouth, and you could theoretically retain your dentist. We are not seeing any families raising that with us.

Chair: That is very helpful indeed. Let's move on to broadband.

Q34 **Robert Courts:** Broadband is one of those things that is now an utterly essential part of modern life. It was raised with us last year, so much so that we took it up with the MoD and DCMS, and they tell us that a project to address internet connection for family accommodation has been launched. I want to ask a twofold question to each of you. First, have they engaged with you on that? Secondly, if they have, will that project resolve the issues we have seen? Perhaps we can start with Ms Clewes.

Sarah Clewes: No, I haven't heard of the project. We haven't been engaged in the project, but I don't know if others here have. This is not so much of an issue for us because most of our naval families live in their own properties. However, obviously, we do have people in single-living accommodation. So, no, it has not been raised. I certainly have not been engaged in a broadband project, but I have only been in the role for 18 months. However, I do not think that there is one under way.

Maria Lyle: I have been made aware of a project that is under way, but we have not been approached to engage in it. To be honest, if we had been, we would have had limited evidence to offer anyway. I have had a back brief on that project, because I was aware that I was coming here and that we might be asked about it, but we have not been engaged in the ongoing work that it is undertaking.

Michelle Alston: Yes, same here. I think that we are aware of the kind of localised work happening in Aldershot, which is a longer-term project with Openreach that I think is supposed to be delivered by next year but, in terms of a specific project under the auspices of the family strategy, that is not something that we have been briefed on in detail at the moment.

Q35 **Chair:** What more could be done to improve this? There is absolutely a changing standard, isn't there? You graduate from school, and there is an expectation that there is going to be internet everywhere, yet we receive messages from MPs saying that their garrisons still do not have the necessary broadband. Also, is there an aspect of this operationally, where those who are serving are able to keep in communication with their families while they are on operations, when they are allowed to?

Maria Lyle: The programme that I am aware of, which is under way, includes looking at links into single-living accommodation. That is just as important as service family accommodation when it comes to reducing isolation, and people's access to that is hugely important. I cannot comment on any developments in access to comms for deployed personnel and how that is progressing; I don't know.



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Q36 Chair: But there have been no complaints from those who are serving? I remember being on one of the Type 23s when the message went out that the main broadband machine—whatever it was—was broken for 24 hours. The morale of the ship suddenly changes immensely because people are then not able to do their daily emails back to their families. That's from a naval perspective. If you're posted abroad—if you're in Estonia right now, for example—you are relying on your Inmarsat or whatever it is to be able to communicate. Are we doing enough to make sure families' morale is kept up by keeping those comms open?

Michelle Alston: I am not sure that we have evidence on that element specifically, but the greatest level of inquiries we get on broadband is probably related to spousal employment—the ability of the spouse or the partner to maintain their employment when they move. It tends to be that angle that we receive evidence from families on, rather than the deployed angle.

Q37 Chair: That is an important dimension, given that we can now work from home. The spouse or partner wants to be free to do that wherever, so they need access to high-grade broadband to make that work viable in some form. Have any studies been done to map the grading of broadband across the three services?

Maria Lyle: That is what that project has done. The project that is under way at the moment has basically set a standard that says, "This is the standard we aim to meet in terms of a decent level of broadband." It says—I am quoting them; this is not my data—that 97% of SFA meet that standard. That has allowed them to narrow down the number of SFA that don't and to start putting in place plans to work with the best internet service providers in those areas.

Q38 Chair: And this is of a standard meaning that somebody who is working from home can work? I mean, I can get broadband on South Western trains but I wouldn't be able to do any serious work on it; that is simply not possible.

Maria Lyle: They are talking about 24 megabits per second of download. To my knowledge—I did a little bit of IT in my last job—that should be enough to support Teams calls and that sort of thing.

Chair: That's a very important aspect of this.

Sarah Clewes: Going back to ships, I know that the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity was involved in some funding for improving—

Chair: That rings a bell.

Sarah Clewes: I am not sure where we are with that, but it was probably alongside Greenwich Hospital. I remember some work being done.

Chair: You are absolutely right. I raised my eyebrows at that because it seemed a bit odd that you needed to lean on a charity to provide that standard of comms for people on duty to be able to talk with their families. I am pleased it was done, but it did require Greenwich to step in in one

form or another.

Sarah Clewes: As I remember, that did happen.

- Q39 **Mr Francois:** Obviously, when you are talking about comms, there are sometimes some security considerations, depending on which theatre you're deployed in. I am sure that staff and families understand that, even though it can sometimes be frustrating.

There is a bit of a trend here, which is that we get these sweeping statements from the Ministry of Defence, saying, "We're sorting this out. We're really getting stuck into that. We're really making progress on x." But from the tenor of your testimony, it is often quite patchy and it all seems to take longer to get rolled out in practice than the MoD briefing would have us believe.

Quick quiz question at the end: if you had to pick one area each, as opposed to five or six, what would be the one where you'd really like them to get cracking more than they are at the moment? Let's start with the senior service.

Sarah Clewes: Support to non-UK families. That is so complex; it is not only the visa and immigration process but, once the families are here, the diversity and the cultural differences. There is a lot there. We have a fabulous caseworker in our team, and we lead into the Army, who have the policy lead on this. But there's certainly more work that could be done for non-UK families, although they are doing a great job: the Cobseo cluster is doing very well and the Armed Forces families strategy has picked this up. There is great work being done. However, if I was asked to pick one, it would be support to non-UK families.

Mr Francois: For the record, Cobseo are nodding behind you. Let's go to the Royal Air Force next, please.

Maria Lyle: I couldn't possibly choose one, so I will have to go for two. The first is accommodation. The other, which we have not mentioned yet, is spousal employment, particularly in an overseas context. If you are in Europe now as a military spouse, you cannot work. It is not achievable; it is not legal. Previously, you were working there under your rights as a resident of Europe. Now you are there as the dependant—I use that legal definition—of your military spouse. Under the SOFA, you cannot work. That is a profound challenge that means that lots of people do not want to take that posting, and the people out there are not happy with their ability to maintain or progress careers, when remote working has upped their hopes that that should be available to them.

- Q40 **Mr Francois:** So we need to look at the Status of Forces Agreement.

Witnesses: *indicated assent.*

- Q41 **Chair:** If you are deployed overseas but not to the EU—let's say, to the United States—is the spouse or partner allowed to work?

Maria Lyle: They still need to get permissions, so there is a process to go through. In some ways, ironically, it is more achievable the further away



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you get. Depending on what you're looking to do, yes, there are some opportunities to work in the States.

Chair: But if there are no opportunities, as you say, maybe the person who has asked to move in the first place may turn the move down for that reason.

Q42 **Mr Francois:** That is an important point. When you said accommodation—it is a big issue, so this is partly for Robert's benefit as well as the rest of us—which bit of accommodation would you like them to speed up on?

Maria Lyle: If I am going to be really specific, I would like the complaints process to be given a complete overhaul. When I say accommodation, I am talking about single-living accommodation as well as service family accommodation. With the potential introduction of FAM, we might have more people in single-living accommodation, not less. The way that it is maintained and the way people's complaints are managed should be looked at for both those cohorts.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** FAM has been ongoing—it's a bit like "Waiting for Godot"—but okay, that helps. What about the Army?

Michelle Alston: I am going to sound horrifically unoriginal, because they have both stolen my sandwiches! I would have said non-UK, and spousal employment overseas. Spousal employment overseas is our largest area of inquiry now, but our absolute top one would be support for non-UK families, particularly around the minimum income requirement. The covenant report talked about a medium-term review. We would be delighted to hear more about that and the timeframe for when it might take place.

Mr Francois: You have given us lots to get our teeth into. Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you very much. Kevan Jones has just joined us. Anything from you?

Mr Jones: No.

Chair: May I say thank you very much to the armed services federations? You do an absolutely fantastic and critical job, and we are always grateful for your contribution. You are welcome to stay for our next session, but that brings the first panel to a close.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lieutenant General (retd) Sir Nicholas Pope, Angela Kitching and Julie McCarthy.

Q44 **Chair:** Welcome back to this Defence Committee hearing, where we are focusing on the Armed Forces Covenant. A huge thank you to the families federations. We now welcome Lieutenant General (retd) Sir Nicholas Pope, who is chair of Cobseo; Angela Kitching, who is director of



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campaigns, policy and research at the Royal British Legion; and Julie McCarthy, who is director of volunteer operations at SSAFA. We have two of the big charities here and Cobseo.

Can I begin by asking you, Nick, to explain what Cobseo does as an umbrella organisation? For those unfamiliar with it, are you the Countryside Alliance, for example—are you the body that links together and provides support? How are you managing to encourage charities that have important agendas that are sometimes complementary but sometimes competing, given the pressures that all charities are facing today?

Lieutenant General Pope: Cobseo is the service charities federation, and there are about 2,000 service charities, which is 1% of the charity sector in the UK. We represent around half of those charities, and the job of Cobseo is threefold. It is to try to align views from across the sector to ensure that we co-operate, collaborate, cohere and communicate effectively. It is a chance for the organisation to represent a voice of the sector, with public sector provision, and it is a chance, in many respects, to act as an advocate and to act as a challenge to public sector provision.

Q45 Chair: Okay. I asked the question because when I was a Minister in the MoD, I was introduced to what Cobseo does, and it is incredible work. In my time, there were 400 service-facing charities, which is a lot. You say that there are now 2,000. If we were being provocative, we might say that there should perhaps be a Dr Beeching moment, to nudge those together. That, of course, goes against the grain and perhaps the ethos, particularly when it is a very small charity that may have been set up by some parents who have devoted their lives to raising money for the loss of their son or daughter and who are doing amazing things in their local patch—you would never want to destroy that. It is more about making sure that all these charities can work together and mutually support each other, not least with back-office functions, which is why I made the light-hearted analogy with the Countryside Alliance, where legal support is offered, ideas are shared and so forth.

Lieutenant General Pope: I used the figure 2,000. You could slice that figure up a different way. Of those 2,000 charities, 300 are service charities funds—in other words, regimental or charitable provisions. Another 400 are heritage charities—museums and monuments. We do not tend, historically—although arguably we might—to represent the heritage communities. Around 700 or 800 are branch associations, be that of the Parachute Regiment, the Royal British Legion, SSAFA branches or whatever, which technically are individual charities, arguably.

If you take those out, you are coming down to a figure that is not too far away from the one that you gave me. It is probably in the order of 500 or 600, and those charities come and go. Some stay forever. Blesma, Blind Veterans UK, SSAFA and the Royal British Legion have been around for 100 years. Some are very much new kids on the block—drop-in centres and charities that, as you say, form because somebody's spouse or son

sadly died on operations, and a young person's memory needs to be retained, and people feel passionate about it.

In terms of turnover in the sector, about 40 charities fold a year, and 40 or 50 arise each year. The job of the community is to bring them together and to corral them, and to provide a sense of commonality. The back-office function is one that the broader charity sector is facing right now. I speak to Orlando, the chief executive of the Charity Commission, and he would absolutely talk to what you are talking about, which is back-office functionality. What we cannot do as a sector is get around the fact that each charity has its own trustees and its own objects and is answerable to the Charity Commission.

- Q46 **Chair:** Understood. On your committee, there are arguably just less than a dozen biggies. We have two here represented in the room today, SSAFA and the Royal British Legion, which are household names. There is also Help for Heroes, Combat Stress, Blesma and so on. You then quickly move down in scale and size. How do you make sure that those smaller charities are represented on your committee? Are there spaces provided for the smaller charities?

Lieutenant General Pope: My analogy would be the UN. I have eight permanent members of the 17 executives who hold me to account and nine members who turn over every three years. Within those nine, we ensure that we have at least a couple that are small charities, and by "small", I mean less than £1 million a year. Right now, for instance, the War Widows Association is one of those on the board, and the Women's Royal Army Corps Association is also on the board. We get some sort of equality of distribution in that way.

The other way that we ensure members get adequate representation is through running a cluster system. We were talking earlier about service families. There is a families cluster. There is an employment cluster. There is a non-UK cluster. There is a casework management cluster. That gives charities that are output-driven the ability to have their voices represented.

Chair: That is very helpful. Unlike the United Nations permanent Security Council, I hope you are all still talking to each other, which is very important indeed.

Lieutenant General Pope: On occasions.

- Q47 **Mr Francois:** Because there are so many people doing so much good work in the charitable sector, it is perhaps invidious to pick out any one name, but we recently saw the passing of Bryn Parry, who did incredible work with Help for Heroes. He described himself as a maverick, and I think anyone who knew him would not argue with that. He was an incredible force for good, and our thoughts are with his widow, Emma, and the whole of the Help for Heroes family. We should take the opportunity to put that on the record, without in any way disadvantaging anybody else.



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What has been the impact on services for veterans of the new duty for certain public bodies to pay due regard to the principles of the covenant? Can you point out any particular examples of best practice that have arisen from that?

Lieutenant General Pope: I can start from an organisational perspective and then let Angela and Julie pick up on beneficiaries, because I do not deal directly with beneficiaries. I want to return to the conversation you were having earlier about advice to local authorities. We now have the duty in law. It is very, very early days to say whether the impact has been felt. One of the areas I am very interested in, in the relationships that we have with our colleagues in government, is working out how we are going to evaluate and assess this issue on a collective basis. It has happened at the same time as a reorganisation of NHS England from 300 clinical commissioning groups down to 42 integrated care boards. We need to start thinking about champions at local authority level, at ICB level and at GP level—1,500 of the 7,000-odd GP surgeries now have veterans champions. That is a long way gone but a long way to go.

I am really interested in how we start to ensure that we spread best practice, and to look at your point, Tobias, about how we look at who is best and who is not so good, and raise standards across the piece so that you get the same service up in Blackpool as you would down in the south-west of England, and then the same across the devolved Administrations. We do not know right now—it is early days—but we should now be putting the systems in place so that we can raise data to get after evaluation and impact.

Q48 **Mr Francois:** To your point, and then I would be interested to hear from your colleagues, this is partly anecdotal, but the evidence that the Committee often gets is that it is very patchy. In some cases, and in some areas of the public service, a lot hangs on whether you have a particular councillor who is really passionate about this, or a chief executive of an integrated care board who feels strongly about it. Those are not necessarily people who have served, by any means, but a lot of it often comes down to local leaders and whether they really get it, for want of a better phrase. I wonder whether some of your colleagues could tell us whether we are broadly on the right lines about that. Julie?

Julie McCarthy: I think that is absolutely right. It is absolutely personality driven, where somebody is completely invested in it. All too often, sadly, the Armed Forces champions are double-hatted. You get really good individuals. We work a lot with veterans in the criminal justice system. A particular success has been veterans in custody support officers in prisons, but they will quite often be double or triple-hatted, so it will be a secondary duty for them and will not take priority. We see that all too often across local authorities and across the NHS as well.

Mr Francois: Jim Davidson ran a charity—

Julie McCarthy: He ran Care After Combat, yes. He is not involved in that any more, but he did, yes.



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It is absolutely down to those people. As Nick said, it is too early to see the impact of the duty, and I think we probably have difficulty understanding whether something is an impact of the cost of living pressures on local authorities, and on the NHS, in terms of funding, or whether it is particularly a disadvantage. Is it that you are disadvantaged because, actually, the whole populace is and anybody would be challenged in certain circumstances?

What we have qualitative or anecdotal evidence for is that when a local authority knows that someone is a veteran, it will immediately suggest that they contact the military charities, because it knows they will help, particularly around disabled facilities grants, adaptations and any other support—care support and things like that as well—so that people get support. If that is the way that we help them, then that is fine, but that should not overtake statutory responsibility.

- Q49 **Mr Francois:** We have already had an example from the families federations about special needs provision and the difficulty in portability of EHCPs—education, health and care plans—from one local authority to another. In terms of where this really makes a difference, as opposed to warm words and statements of intent, some local authorities, in their housing policies, give more points—or the equivalent, like bandings—to veterans than to others when they are awarding public sector housing. But, again, it seems very patchy. There is no consistency. What is your evidence on that?

Julie McCarthy: We tend to refer into the Legion for housing support, or Citizens Advice, so I will pass to Angela for that one.

Mr Francois: Maybe you could pick that one up, Angela.

Angela Kitching: I will speak to the broader point to start with, if that is okay. I think that the place in which the duty puts us is ultimately different because it means that, right across statutory services, there has to be more of a framework approach. Because you have a duty now to ensure that there is no detriment, we are seeing systematic reviews in some local authorities of the processes that touch people's lives—in housing, in education, in healthcare—to say, "Can we demonstrate no detriment?" In other places, they are waiting for those challenges to come.

Part of the challenge is that the statutory guidance is permissive rather than specific. That then means that it can be interpreted—completely legitimately—differently in different places. The difficulty with that is that it relies on a veteran to take the case, or on an individual to push very hard to try to demonstrate that they are being treated less favourably than a member of the general public.

- Q50 **Mr Francois:** Forgive me, but the word "review" can mean either, "We really want to change this for the better," or, "We just want to make sure that we're copper-bottomed against potential criticism."

Angela Kitching: Yes, and I think we are seeing both taking place. In some places, there are really ambitious, well thought out and thoughtful



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processes under way, with covenant boards looking right across joint strategic needs analysis, looking across their healthcare, their housing and their education systems. In other places, they are saying, "What is the statutory minimum here, and could I better understand it?"

We are seeing the MoD covenant team reaching out. They have published a useful toolkit; they are doing online webinars. There is a high take-up of information from local authorities at the moment. We think awareness of the new duty is probably quite good, but it is when we can really see changes in the systems that you will begin to see it bite. As I understand it, the covenant team are looking at implementing an annual review.

- Q51 **Mr Francois:** Other colleagues will come in, but I think what the Committee is reaching for are concrete examples of where veterans can say, "Yes, this thing called the covenant really helped me. It helped me get a flat. It helped me when I had mental health problems. It really made a difference, and it wasn't just motherhood and apple pie."

I have one more question and then I will hand back. On the NHS side, we have TILS. In theory, we have this specialist pathway for veterans who have mental health problems, and it is better than a few years ago, when that did not exist. But, again, you hear it is very patchy, and you hear stories of veterans being referred and re-referred, with different consultants. They have to keep going through the same journey again and again, until they get to the point where they think, "No one is really interested in me," and they give up. Sometimes that can result in tragic outcomes. In terms of the NHS, how are they doing on this?

Angela Kitching: The Veterans Covenant Healthcare Alliance publish good-quality frameworks on this. Where they are very active, and where there is great local leadership, it is effective. For example, there are veterans' passports, which mean that people tell their story only once in the system, and then are able to make that portable across the different elements of the system.

There is certainly very good practice in that area. The challenge is: what about across other areas—for example, social care, or for someone who is transitioning and moving on into their family life? What about trauma-informed care within the wider NHS system? There is certainly evidence there that it is not consistent.

- Q52 **Mr Francois:** Perhaps Nick wants to come in. In terms of physical rehabilitation—prosthetics and things like that—with Headley Court and now the DNRC, I would argue that we are probably world class. In terms of the Genium prosthetics and all of that, I think we are probably as good as anyone else at it. But in mental health, there is still a lot of ground to be made up. Nick, is that a fair statement?

Lieutenant General Pope: This is a really interesting area right now, in the way that we configure ourselves. You have Op Courage, which picks up on HIS and TILS and the other programmes, to deliver what is in the covenant—we are spending £20 million a year on the veterans' mental health pathway. That is part of the story.



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Indeed, the one area that is quite effective, in the way that the third sector and the state come together, is mental health service provision. You have £20 million of Government money flowing through into mental health services. You have match funding from the charity sector, most notably Combat Stress, but also Walking With The Wounded, PTSD Resolution, Icarus and others. So there is more money flowing in, and actually, the provision of pathways from one to t'other, and the commission of services both ways, works well.

You then have the Veterans Trauma Network for physical health conditions. The last time I talked to a doctor, most physical health conditions come with a mental health issue, or vice versa. Arguably, we have to figure out whether our current provision of services is holistic, or whether we can think about the Veterans Trauma Network and Op Courage differently. That is at a very early stage of conversation, but it is certainly something that I am interested in.

Going back to the more broad point about the covenant duty, given that there are 200 or 300 local authorities, 42 ICBs, and educational providers, there is not a common point of reference across those administrations. We have to figure out a way systemically to say, "When you talk about a region, what do you mean by a region? Is it the north-east? Is it the local authority? Is it the integrated care board, or what?" Then we can get an holistic picture of what is going on across the four nations.

Mr Francois: Thank you. Colleagues will have more detailed questions. Hopefully, we have set the scene.

Q53 Mr Jones: In terms of the onus on the public bodies, one of the problems, which we raised when we were discussing the Bill, is that unless you have teeth behind it, frankly, you are going to continue the patchwork. I don't know whether there would be implications if someone took out a test case, but that is one thing I raised, and I was disappointed with the way it was framed. If you look back to the Green Paper I did in 2010, that had teeth. There is a problem with this. It is well meaning; don't get me wrong. It is the right move in the right direction, but without teeth we are going to continue with this patchwork.

On the mental health side, I think you are right in that progress has been made, but the thing that concerns me is that veterans are still not visible in the health system in terms of veterans tracking. Again, it was agreed in 2010, but never implemented, that you flag up people in the veterans community. Is that something that the Government are looking at?

Lieutenant General Pope: There are two aspects to that that I would bring to the table. One, rather like FAM, is taking quite a long time to come to the table—Programme CORTISONE.

Chair: There is a question about that later.

Lieutenant General Pope: Okay, we will park that until later. The other aspect here is veterans' identification. I do not know whether we are bringing that up later or not, but there is a particular issue. Over the past



five years, we have issued an ID card to veterans. I have one. Others around the table might have one too, but the cards are not very useable or useful. I know that, right now, the Government and the Ministry of Defence are looking very hard at a veterans' card that is more useable in the sense that if you were going to a local authority or the national health, it would give you an immediate tag. That is a start. The charity sector would say, "Make sure it's got Army, Navy, Air Force or even Tribe on it, so we can use it as well." But we are going into the—

Mr Jones: There is an easier way of doing it.

Lieutenant General Pope: Perhaps, but it is starting to happen. It gives us a tool to start to identify veterans, which we just don't have right now. We need this to come into place desperately to get after what you are trying to do.

Q54 **Mr Jones:** I had a battle in 2010 with the Department of Health about why, when someone left, they could not just tick a box and say they wanted to get on to the system. The first problem was that people would have to opt in. I said fine. The second was that it could not be done technically, but when I spoke to GPs, I was told it could. The system exists; I think I agreed it in 2010 with Mike O'Brien, who was a Defence Minister. It has been lost.

I cannot understand why this is not being pressed. The easiest way to capture those people is when they leave, so on the thing the GPs have in front of them, there is a little marker that says, "This person has served." That is doable, I will tell you that—or it was in 2010; I will say that. I cannot understand why people are going round trying to reinvent the wheel when this just needs implementing.

I accept the point you are making about the veterans' ID card. I do not want to score another point, but that would have been solved by a national ID card. The idea was to have a special veterans' edition of the national ID card, but that was scrapped.

The big movement forward to get visibility in the health service for veterans—new veterans, and possibly old ones—is a new cohort going out automatically being flagged up on the system. Okay, some people might not want to opt in, but they can be asked to opt in. You know as well as I do that when people leave, they will tick the box if a form is stuck in front of them.

Julie McCarthy: I would make a plea as well to ask whether someone is part of a veteran family. If spouses and children have been subject to mobility, they will not necessarily have had consistent care, and it is just as important. GP surgeries are getting much better—lots of health professionals are getting much better—at saying, "Are you a veteran?" However, I do not think I have ever been asked whether I am part of the Armed Forces community. Having moved around for 28 years, that is probably relevant to my health as much as to my husband's. It is that wider piece as well.



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Angela Kitching: There is an additional point. As well as for the individual, the census data would now allow us to identify the number of veterans in any given area down to a very small population degree. So, if you were doing it at the level of planning services and looking at likely additional needs, you could plan those now using the data from the census.

Mr Jones: I just think that the health service needs to get on and do the veterans tracking, because it is doable, unless something has radically changed in the last 13 years.

Q55 **Chair:** Okay. Just to finish on that one, what progress has been made on the review of extending to national Government and the devolved Administrations the new duty for certain bodies to pay due regard to the principles of the covenant?

Angela Kitching: We were discussing it before we came in. We all received a letter last week to tell us that the consultation is opening on the question of whether the duty should be extended, and whether it should be extended to national bodies; and then separately looking at MoD and the devolved nations, and what evidence we had to demonstrate that it would make a difference to veterans. I imagine we will all be responding to that in due course. We have around four weeks to do so.

Q56 **Chair:** You don't want to share? Or give us a hint as to what might be contained in your letter?

Angela Kitching: Oh, absolutely; we absolutely think it should. There is no question for us. There are two strong things here. One of them is that veterans really don't understand why, if the Government is making the promise it makes in the covenant, it should not apply to the arms of Government. There is a fundamental question of fairness and parity there. On a practical level, even within health, education and housing—the current areas within scope—the Government holds many of the levers of power.

If you wanted to change something around education, health and care plans, it would be the national Government that needed to do that, not any given local authority. If you wanted to do something on mobility of access to services across the NHS system, you would need to agree that at a national level, not with each ICB individually. If you wanted to change something in financial services around eligibility, all of that is retained by the national Government. We need to be aware that devolution means that that would equally apply to the devolved Administrations, particularly in the areas contained within the scope of the covenant.

Q57 **Mr Francois:** Just to reinforce your point, the decision to bring in TILS was a national decision, which the NHS at local level had to implement. That is not something that came so much bottom up—it was mandated top down, wasn't it?

Angela Kitching: Absolutely. I just mean that, in some ways, the Government is tying its own hands in achieving the outcomes that it



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wishes to achieve for veterans because it has not retained its own responsibilities in duty terms to veterans.

Q58 **Mr Jones:** It was raised on the Committee.

Angela Kitching: I am sure. That is the evidence that we will be giving.

Q59 **Chair:** I know that Ben Wallace and his team watch our proceedings very carefully indeed, so we have saved you a postage stamp. Nick, would you concur?

Lieutenant General Pope: I agree with Angela. I make two points. The first one is that, picking up on your comments earlier, the difficulty for Government is going to be on evaluation, assessment and holding to account, and how we give teeth to that particular process.

The second point I make, which has got nothing to do with extending who comes inside the current scope, is a broader one. Is the current scope the correct scope anyway, and what process is in place to think about where we go next with the covenant? After 11 years, we are kind of running out of things to do within this current framework.

Q60 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Julie, anything to add?

Julie McCarthy: I would just add, as Gavin had to leave, something about the challenges for veterans in Northern Ireland, and a particular recognition for that cohort that we know are—

Chair: It is a different scenario.

Julie McCarthy: Absolutely. It is particularly challenging to support them and even make them visible.

Chair: I visited a couple of the charities over there and they made it very clear. It is a tough gig, so hats off to them.

Q61 **Richard Drax:** Good afternoon. As a former veteran, can I thank you and the previous panel for all you do? I have lots of friends and so forth who served, who are very grateful for all you do. Thank you very much.

On the cost of living, what has been the impact on your beneficiaries? General Nick, perhaps you can start.

Lieutenant General Pope: Thanks, Richard. Is your brother Charlie?

Richard Drax: He is, yes. He is a Royal Green Jacket. He made the fatal mistake of joining the wrong regiment, but that is not his fault.

Lieutenant General Pope: I know—he was in my company at Sandhurst. It's a small world.

I will leave my two colleagues to talk about the beneficiary effect, because I do not deal directly with beneficiaries, but I want to talk about the potential impact on the sector and why it therefore has an indirect consequence on beneficiaries. We have done two member surveys on cost of living at the individual charity level, and the evidence we are getting



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back is, "It depends." The charities that are wealthy, bigger or structurally well configured will probably weather the cost of living storm, but smaller charities—particularly those that have depended on funding streams from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, the Veterans Foundation or the benevolent funds—are going to struggle. To pick up on a point made earlier about sector reform, it may be done by dint of money, which is not a great reason for doing reform. I think the sustainability of the sector is one of my biggest concerns.

Julie McCarthy: We have seen a definite increase in the number of people coming to us, as well as a change in the demographic of those coming to us. There are many more people in work—in employment—who have run through savings because of covid and what have you, and who therefore need more support, as well as those with priority debt and needing immediate crisis support. We have set up voucher funds to provide support with immediate food needs in crisis and fuel; those two come hand in hand.

We are also looking particularly at digital poverty, to help people to be able to stay online, which is significant. We talked earlier about broadband, but it is also about mobile data. Everything is done online now. You want to register for your benefits—have a look online. You want to have a look at something—have a look online. We find that a lot of that digital poverty is impacting on people, so we have been providing support with particular communities around that. We have seen an increase in calls to Forcesline—our confidential support line—in terms of people not being quite sure, and an increase in the number of people saying, "I've never sought help before. I just need to find out what to do." I know that RBL, in particular, has much better stats on that than we have.

Angela Kitching: RBL responded to a significant uptick in inquiries from the community as cost of living pressures began to really press on people, so we have opened a cost of living grants programme that gives us quite accurate data on what people are asking for and what they are using that money for. In about five months, we have seen requests from around 5,000 families who need immediate support and can demonstrate significant financial need. About 88% of those who receive an award do so to help with energy costs, and around a quarter of those applicants have priority debt, which is debt that would put them out of their house or in very significant difficulties with energy providers or others.

On the other issues we are being approached for, people need support with food, debt relief, household items and school clothing. These are the basics of everyday life. Around 90% of the people we are awarding this money to are of working age, which shows, if you think about the demographics of the veteran population—around half would be of working age and half would be over 65—that we are seeing a significant spike towards younger people, mostly within families, requiring our support in this area.

There are some features of the veteran population that probably mean that, although the cost of living is something that affects everybody, they



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are particularly affected by it. That includes the high number of veterans who are carers; veterans are much more likely to be carers than the general population when you adjust for age. It also includes the high numbers of veterans—around a third—who have a disability. There is therefore a significant number of people who might need to leave the heating on, either to support somebody else or if they themselves just need a bit more support. There are also some problems around the interaction within the benefits system locally and nationally. If you are in receipt of military compensation, that is not disregarded when you think about applying for means-tested benefits, so their household income may actually be suppressed by the fact that they receive military compensation for injury during service.

Those are three areas where there are differences in our population. Generally, we would say that the cost of living is clearly something that affects the whole of the UK population. We can certainly see that impact on the poorer members of the Armed Forces community, whether current serving or veterans.

Q62 Richard Drax: How much of your money are you spending on supporting those families currently?

Angela Kitching: We think that we will commit over £10 million this year in the cost of living grants programme.

Q63 Richard Drax: What do you get annually?

Angela Kitching: In terms of individual grants, that is probably in addition to about £33 million that we would make in individual grants. Those can be to organisations as well to individuals.

Q64 Richard Drax: The second part of my question is this. Is the Armed Forces Covenant Fund being used to good effect? Perhaps you will pick up on that, too, Angela.

Angela Kitching: The themes that the fund has picked on feel like the areas of significant need for the community. I think that the Armed Forces Covenant Fund is particularly good at identifying the areas where there needs to be more research, or where there is an inadequate level of provision at the moment, and at plugging those needs. For example, it is running a serious programme of work on female veterans and on improving support to them. Another area is where RBL, Royal Star and Garter and the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust are working together to establish a good framework for supporting veterans in social care to try to make sure that there is a model that the rest of the non-specialist sector could work to that would allow them to support veterans better. Those are individual examples, but those are areas where there are significant gaps, and I think that the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust is really good at spotting the gaps and identifying the needs.

Julie McCarthy: I absolutely agree with Angela. We work with the fund in two areas in particular, one of which is its One is Too Many programme addressing suicide. That is a particular area where we have needed that



focus. It has been really interesting to be able to take that time, and to look at what provision is there—at how we best refer out, handle our referrals well and make sure people are looked after while they are getting the support that they need, either through Op Courage or other areas. There is also its VPPP programme—I always get this the wrong way around, but it is Veterans Places, Pathways and People—which is really good. In terms of bringing together community organisations—in particular smaller ones—and tackling those real on-the-ground issues in local areas, that has been really effective.

Lieutenant General Pope: I must declare a conflict, because I am a trustee of the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, by dint of being an ex-officio member, so I would say that it is a fantastic provision, wouldn't I? Over the last two or three years, we have supplemented the £10 million a year of LIBOR money that flows through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. Last year, we discharged the family strategy money; we discharged money through the NAAFI; and we spent money through the OVA resources for Afghan veterans, mental health support and others. Last year, I think the trust fund discharged about £25 million to £30 million. That is great, because it is a catalyst for broader activity across the public and third sectors. The third sector spends £1 billion a year on military charities, so you might argue that £30 million is a drop in the ocean. It is not, because it leverages support and is very transformational in approach. That is the benefit you get out of the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

Q65 **Mr Jones:** You have already mentioned women veterans. Last year, this Committee did a major report, under the chairmanship of Sarah Atherton, on women in the Armed Forces. What are the reflections of the Office for Veterans' Affairs on delivering their part of the women veterans strategy?

Angela Kitching: The OVA has announced that it is intending to develop one. There are areas that are currently not well researched and that are under-addressed, which I am hoping that the OVA will be able to focus its strategy on.

We have to bear in mind that most female veterans go through and have a positive experience of the Armed Forces, as most veterans do, and that is a really important part of this narrative. But we can certainly see that there are increasing levels of reporting of harassment and assault. That has lifelong implications for veterans, so we need to look at what more could be done in those areas.

There are some increased difficulties for some female veterans in finding employment. That is borne out in the statistics, and in a higher likelihood of musculoskeletal issues and other kinds of healthcare concerns.

The key thing is that if the OVA can continue that focus on women veterans, hopefully that will increase everybody else's interest and research in the area. We have a quarter of a million female veterans who have served, and we need to make sure that we can see their stories



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threaded through everybody else's research reports and evidence. At the moment, that is not there.

Q66 Mr Jones: What is the biggest issue that has come to SSAFA for women veterans?

Angela Kitching: In terms of the profile of beneficiary requests, at the moment it tends to be the same kinds of cost of living pressures that other people express. In certain areas, we find that people are asking for social care and home adaptation support. They are more likely to be looking for family support than for individual support. We see that, as well as slightly lower levels of debt than we see among our other beneficiaries. That is what our data shows.

Q67 Mr Jones: Are you feeding into the work that the OVA is doing on women?

Angela Kitching: Yes, we hope to. We speak to the OVA regularly and will raise those issues of concern. Also, we are hoping that, in the work being undertaken by the MoD in the welfare review, they will have a particular view on the experience of female veterans.

Julie McCarthy: We would reflect that as well. We see very little difference in the concerns or needs being brought to us for support from female and male veterans. We are seeing a steady increase in the number of female veterans coming to us. In 2019, we had 67 women use our mentoring service, and it was 170 last year. We are seeing a steady increase.

Looking at our casework this year, about a third were female veterans. That is good, because it means that people are becoming more aware of us and know that we are there for them. As much as anything, it is about the portrayal of a veteran that we all see sometimes, which is not a female veteran. Actually, some male veterans would probably say that they do not recognise themselves in some of the portrayals of veterans. It is about portrayal, and making people understand the need and ability to access help.

Lieutenant General Pope: I think we need to be careful in terms of governance as we think about the next year. The clue is in the title. When we talk about women veterans, you could arguably say that there are chunks of women in service: women who have yet to enter service; women in service; women who have left service who are not members of the WRNS, the WRAF or the WRAC; and then women who are in those three organisations. There are different groups that we need to try to think through. Part of it is about causation and consequence. What is it during causation in service that sometimes has an issue in consequence terms when you get into the veteran space?

We have got a lot going on in terms of research across Government, as well as through the OVA, other research centres and the charity sector, to get after issues to do with women veterans and women members of the Armed Forces community. Indeed, one of the Armed Forces Covenant



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Fund Trust's transformational grants a couple of months ago provided £300,000 to the WRAC Association to bring together an analysis on this. The work that Johnny Mercer set off through the OVA is great. We need to ensure that it is aligned with other stuff going on in the sector, so that we provide an aligned output.

- Q68 **Mr Jones:** Can I raise a general point about that? It is interesting what you have just said, because we have a Minister who seems to announce a lot of things. How joined up are they with the other strategies that are going on? Some of the announcements seem to be headline grabbing, rather than being followed through on or having joined-up policy work between what yourselves, and other sectors, the OVA and even the MoD are doing.

Lieutenant General Pope: We align in terms of both announcements and delivery. I will give you some case examples. The announcement of money that was going to come into supported housing at Christmas was extraordinarily welcome, and it was actually based on work done by the sector, most notably by Riverside, STOLL, Alabaré and Launchpad to demonstrate that there was a need for funding provision. The announcement happened on 24 December, which led to a discharge of that money through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust back into the sector, into not only the big four but smaller care providers. It does align. Sometimes one just needs to ensure that we have that alignment process set out from the get-go.

- Q69 **Chair:** Thank you for your thoughts and reflections on the annual report for the Armed Forces Covenant. I am interested to ask you—and you have made comments on this in your submissions and so forth, but I want to put it on the record: what is missing? What do you think should be included in here that currently is not? Angela, do you want to kick off?

Angela Kitching: It is clear to us, and this has been clear for many years, that there are significant veteran needs in the area of social care. Yet again this year, there is no mention of social care or any mention in the strategies that either the OVA or the MoD have around veterans that meet the needs of veterans in relation to social care. That is a really significant omission. It is an area that Cobseo's social care cluster and the sector have brought up repeatedly, and we do not see any progress on this.

- Q70 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Nick?

Lieutenant General Pope: I made a point in my notes about two parts of Government coming together with two different outcomes: from a covenant perspective, for veterans not to be disadvantaged—and, in some areas, to be positively advantaged, by the way; we need to ensure that that is never forgotten—and, from an OVA and veterans strategy perspective, to be the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2028, which is rather more ambitious than a "not disadvantaged" statement.

I think aligning those two outcomes requires us to think about what we are talking about, both in ambition and in cause and effect. This is a rhetorical question: is service a net positive or a net benefit? Does service



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produce valued and valuable veterans, or mad, bad and sad veterans? Why does that matter?

In the work that you have done, Mark, in terms of filling the ranks, I want an output where veterans are perceived as valid and valuable. Why? Because, from a gatekeeper's perspective, they come back and they allow their sons and daughters to join. I want it to be valid and valuable because from an employer's perspective, you will get a net value added back into employment. I want the sector to say, "When somebody falls in need, we provide a positive pathway back to being valued and valuable." That consequence of service, and the causes that happen in service, are areas that the covenant could start to think about.

Chair: I am going to move on. Kevan, do you want to come in here or should we take Julie?

- Q71 **Mr Jones:** I will just come in on Nick's point. I think you have hit the nail on the head. My concern is that there are certain people—you certainly do not want to ask the Veterans Minister—who give this impression that joining the Armed Forces is something that is damaging, and everyone comes out damaged. Actually, we all know—and you all well know—that that is not actually the case. It is a positive experience for many and, in many cases, it is life-changing, but I agree that if people have served, we owe them the debt that we should actually support them. How do we get that back? How do we get that narrative right?

Making a statement like "Being the best place for veterans in the world," is fine, but over the last few years the veteran population has been changing radically, hasn't it? I do not know what the current figures are, but you have the second world war and Korean dying and a new population. Where are we at now?

Lieutenant General Pope: We know in England and Wales; in Scotland, we will find out at the back end of next year. We were at 1.84 million veterans declared in 2020 in England and Wales and, as Angela said, one half of those are above 65 and one third of those are over 80.

- Q72 **Mr Francois:** Was that from the census?

Lieutenant General Pope: That's the stat from the census. You know, in the next decade, that the size of the veteran community will reduce by around a third.

- Q73 **Mr Jones:** I used to have that map on my wall where it just shows you where it goes to, like that. That goes to certain challenges, and not only in terms of what Julie or somebody said earlier on about perceptions. I always found that the second world war veteran generation, plus the Korean ones, still considered themselves veterans. I am not sure that the modern person who leaves the Armed Forces, even if they have served in Iraq, considers themselves a veteran of that type. Will we not have to really think about how we not only procure services, but actually address them?



Lieutenant General Pope: It is a Winston Churchill moment, isn't it? "Veteran is the worst word out there, apart from all the others." We have tried to figure out whether you are just a person who once served. We may end up coming up with a different term downstream; I do not know. We have got what we have got on the tin right now.

You're right. It actually puts some of our hard-to-reach communities—the LGBT+ community, the non-UK community and the female community—off, sometimes, from coming forward for help.

Angela Kitching: To be fair, most of the charities refer to the Armed Forces community, so our beneficiary group is much broader than veterans alone.

Q74 **Mr Francois:** General, you touched on an important point. For the record, all the evidence shows that the vast majority of people who go into the Armed Forces come out at the other end better, in many ways, than when they went in—they are trained, often with a trade. I think it's important that we reaffirm that.

That said, because the public and the media quite rightly get exercised when people who have served their country come out with a problem, be it a mental health issue or a physical ailment, and they quite rightly want to know that those people are being properly looked after, those issues sometimes are blown up quite a lot. You could say that that's quite right in a way.

But I think that the tone coming out from a lot of this evidence that you are giving is that where we provide services for those people—the minority who have come out not in great shape—it's still very patchy provision. Certainly there is still a big postcode lottery in terms of how we look after those people, and often, for the quality of care that they get, a lot depends on whether, at local level, people's heart is in it, be they in the NHS, the local authority or wherever else. Is that a fair summation, Nick?

Lieutenant General Pope: I think that is fair. As I said earlier, when we get into getting some hard data on the statutory duty provision, we will be able to reaffirm that. But I certainly think the anecdotal evidence would support that statement, yes.

Q75 **Mr Francois:** Does that mean that we need more, as it were, national standards for local integrated care boards in the NHS or local authorities in relation to housing? Does the Cabinet Office or the Government in some way need to lay down at least basic minimum requirements, so that we have a floor if not necessarily a ceiling? Is there an argument for that?

Julie McCarthy: I think the danger is that people reach for the bottom, not for the top, if you do that—if you have a minimum standard. I would like to see more consistency—I think you're right—and if a minimum standard is the way to go, perhaps there is. But I would be concerned that actually it stops people striving to be the best, because they have reached the level they had to be at. That would be my concern.



Q76 **Mr Francois:** I get your point, but my counterpoint is: how do we get much better consistency, then?

Julie McCarthy: Absolutely, and that is what we need. I don't know what the answer is. People are encouraged to talk to each other. It is great that the Local Government Association does its best to bring people together. And there is best practice. But again, it comes back to my point that this is quite often people's secondary duty; they are doing it on top of another job, the day job. And it's down to personalities rather than to a framework of what they are working to.

Angela Kitching: To that point, a framework is perhaps part of the answer. If you were consistently measuring and sharing information about the extent to which—if you had better data and therefore were able to consistently share information, on a transparent basis, against an ambitious framework, you would get a sense of where people were along that track. At the moment, we don't have any of that information.

Q77 **Mr Francois:** Just one last question. Leaving aside the data—you said “against an ambitious framework”. Is the framework ambitious enough?

Angela Kitching: At the moment, the statutory guidance is permissive, not prescriptive, so it isn't, but you could choose to measure it that way. There are decent frameworks out there about what a good standard of living would look like against the general population. FiMT, the Forces in Mind Trust, has published a framework that you could choose to adopt. The point really is that if you could get data against it, you would understand how different areas, local authorities and ICBs were performing. At the moment, that information isn't there.

Mr Francois: The PAC looked at the performance of ICBs and said—well, it was early days, but from memory I think the report concluded that it was patchy at best. I need to check the exact wording, but that was the spirit of it. Anyway, thank you, Chairman.

Q78 **Richard Drax:** I will make one tiny point, if I may. I was speaking to a chief inspector in Dorset police the other day. Traditionally, as we know, a lot of ex-service personnel went into the police. It was a huge recruiting ground for them, and they got young men and women who were trained, disciplined and all that sort of stuff. When I asked about this, they said that that has tailed right off, because people go down to a salary of, say, £18,000 and spend two years on the beat. They simply cannot afford to do it.

I should imagine that in other public sector roles, that is also an issue. They are going from a salary in the Armed Forces that is, let's face it, not brilliant, and it is even lower when they have families and children to support. Maybe that is an area the Government could look at—for example, to make provision for soldiers to go into the police.

Lieutenant General Pope: Employment is a really complicated area; it is an hour-long conversation in itself. The statistics show that people who go through the career transition pathway do very well at getting a job in six months. We do not have data about what happens subsequent to that. I



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am gasping for data here. I know that a lot of service personnel leave and get valued and valuable jobs either in the private sector or the public sector, but I do not know the numbers, because we do not have the data on it.

I would love to know whether people are going into the appropriate jobs based on the skills they have acquired during their service and then how successful they are in those jobs. That is brilliant data. If we can get into that territory, we can have some feel for valued and valuable and net worth to society. We just do not have the data. In the veterans strategy action plan, the Government announced pathways into education, the civil service, the NHS and some into policing, but you are absolutely right to say that the numbers are not great. It does not mean that veterans are not being employed; they are just not choosing to go into the public sector.

Richard Drax: That is very interesting; thank you.

- Q79 **Chair:** It is a very powerful point, and I think it would be worth the Government investing in exploring this data, because it would help recruitment if it could be proven that the skillsets you learn—the diligence, the grit, the tenacity and so forth—enhance your ability to get a job post your service career.

Lieutenant General Pope: I will give you an example. In January this year, we recruited 204 Gurkha personnel into the Armed Forces. There were 20,000 applicants—100 to one. Why do they do it? Because it is an opportunity to get a life-changing skill. If you can take that model and place it back into UK society, showing that it is a life-changing skill, you will get people queuing for it.

Mr Francois: Could you get someone to go and work for Capita?

- Q80 **Chair:** Before we go down that rabbit hole, I have some quick-fire questions, and they came up in the service families discussion that we had earlier. First, do you have any thoughts on where and how Programme Cortisone, the digital Defence Medical Services programme, is going?

Lieutenant General Pope indicated dissent.

Chair: You are shaking your head already.

Lieutenant General Pope: We just need some timelines, because this thing is drifting from a charity sector perspective.

Angela Kitching: It is causing significant detriment, including to families, as people have transitioned out. In some cases where families are overseas, they have received their care via Defence Medical Services, and therefore we have patches of families data that are missing when they go back into the NHS.

- Q81 **Mr Francois:** You want a timeline. When Deborah Haynes was the defence editor of *The Times* and used to regularly terrorise the



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Department, I remember her writing acerbic articles about this, and that was years ago. Do any of you know where we actually are on this?

Angela Kitching: No.

- Q82 **Chair:** Okay. That is one for us to pursue. The minimum income requirement, which was touched on earlier, means that families cannot accompany those who are coming from overseas. What progress has been made to try to square this circle?

Angela Kitching: At the moment, we believe that it should be removed for non-UK serving personnel. It is a significant impediment to non-UK serving personnel having an equal experience of serving in the Armed Forces. Certainly within our beneficiary numbers, RBL is still spending significant amounts of money on supporting immigration issues for families of non-UK serving personnel.

- Q83 **Chair:** As I was just reminded by Mark, Professor Simon Wessely does so much work on making sure that the experience in the Armed Forces is seen as equal to, if not competitive with, those of civilians. It is always tragic when someone in the Armed Forces is affected by alcohol, marriages falling apart or suicide, but it is no more likely to happen because they have served in the Armed Forces. He has been very clear on that.

Having said that, there is the newly published Armed Forces suicide prevention strategy and action plan. What is your reaction to that? Is it serving a purpose? Is it helpful?

Julie McCarthy: I think we welcome it. At SSAFA, we run a group for military families affected by suicide. I think anything that reduces suicide has to be welcomed. I would like to understand it in the bigger round. Also, the concern for us would be those out of service—the veterans—and whether it would properly support them. Actually, it is much more about access to things like Op COURAGE and getting the mental health support people need that is the issue.

Lieutenant General Pope: I would reinforce that. I think it is a document for the MoD, not the veterans' community, so it is getting that coupling bridge between serving, through transition and into life after service and getting the resilience skills in place. Yes, the veterans strategy action plan is going to address that, but it doesn't really. It kind of drops off the peg when you get to the veterans' community.

You are absolutely right to say that the evidence coming from KCMHR studies is that there is no great difference, apart from in certain particular areas, particularly when you are talking about post-traumatic stress disorder. But the understanding we have on suicide across the veterans' community is not as good as it could be.

Chair: Still more to learn. That is very helpful, indeed.

- Q84 **Robert Courts:** On a different topic altogether, I want to ask about the veterans' recognition ID card. Of course, the Government said they are



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going to roll them out to those who left service before December 2018. Can you give us any insight on why it is taking so long?

Lieutenant General Pope: The glib answer? It is an IT programme. That is probably also quite true. The MoD is trying to stage its way through the testing to ensure that it gets this one correct, so we are going through the alpha testing, the beta testing across subsectors to ensure that the information is there.

As a technophobe, I have been looking at this and saying, "Golly, this should be the work of a week or two", but I understand there are practicability issues that are driving a staged layout. As I say, from the charity perspective, I want to have a card that is usable by the charity sector and therefore to have single service aspects on it. From an MoD perspective, I understand why, from a public sector territory, having the ability to link into local authority, national health service or education outcomes is where Government will go first. But the more we can do to support the needs of the third sector, that would be very welcome.

Q85 **Robert Courts:** Yes, we will need to get it right. We need to make sure it has the functionality and the outreach that we will need. It is an IT problem, I see that. Is it a resources issue? Do we need to push for more to be put into it? Is it a prioritisation issue?

Lieutenant General Pope: It is neither. We recognise the timelines the Government have put in front of the third sector. It will be nice to have it out within the next financial year, so by April 2024. That is when—my expectation is—we are going to start seeing something.

Q86 **Robert Courts:** Do we think we will see it by then?

Lieutenant General Pope: Whether we see what I would like to see downstream, which is a single service card, I don't know. Whether it is phase 1 of "You are a veteran" rather than "You served in the Army", the Navy or the Air Force, I don't know at this stage—too early to say. We keep pushing for the latter.

Q87 **Mr Jones:** Will it be a physical card or a digital card?

Angela Kitching: Both.

Lieutenant General Pope: Digital. Both, yes.

Q88 **Chair:** This is something I pushed, again, when I was a Minister, and that was a while back. Weirdly enough, I still get emails from veterans saying, "When is my ID card going to turn up?"

Mr Jones: If you hadn't abolished ID cards, you would have had it straightaway.

Lieutenant General Pope: I will take you into an area to think through for the future. As we start to blur the boundaries between people who have served, then go out in the gig economy and come back, or who come back in at a higher rank, because that is very much the 21st century



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model, a card that enables you to remobilise quickly is going to be tremendously important.

- Q89 **Chair:** Here is a question and, again, I pushed this: when you get a new passport, they clip the old one on the side and hand it back to you. Do we do anything to clip the old ID card—your MoD 90, I think it is called—to then retain that? Some pizza outlet says, “Half price for vets”. This is proof that you served, isn’t it?

Lieutenant General Pope: The ID card that has been issued over the last five years in theory gives you that same level of—

- Q90 **Chair:** But I am still asking about the MoD. For anybody who has served, there is something very personal about that card. That is partly because you get in so much trouble if you lose it, but it is also your identity; it is your connection. It is something very personal indeed. Having it removed from you is quite emotional, actually. A lot of people just claim they lose it, in fact, for that exact reason. Did you do that?

Lieutenant General Pope: I couldn’t possibly comment!

- Q91 **Chair:** We can edit that bit out. The point I am trying to make, though, is that it is a simple way of allowing people to hang on and prove that they are veterans.

Julie McCarthy: Can I just add something, Chair? I would welcome any sort of ID card, particularly those saying single services, but they can’t be the solution for everything. We still need to look at how we verify service, and how we support really vulnerable veterans who aren’t the people who will go and get an ID card; they will have no paperwork. My concern is that if we concentrate too much on the card solving everything, we will disenfranchise—

Chair: I fully understand that. But this is also a simple win, as was my suggestion when I was a Minister of having a “V” put on your driving licence when it is renewed. You raise a very important point about those who have no identification whatsoever. But for some people—for example, a doctor—knowing that somebody served in the past would be quite helpful.

Mr Jones: There is a simple way of doing it.

Chair: May I finish the point? Some of those people no longer refer them as veterans, as we touched on before, because it has been a while, so a doctor may not even know that they did serve. So there are various aspects of this, and you mentioned a very important part of it.

Mr Jones: There is a simple way of doing it. When people leave, you flag up on their NHS records that they have served. That is doable, or it was 13 years ago. I accept that the veterans card can come as an add-on to that, but that would certainly pick up Julie’s point about those people who are not ever going to apply for a veterans card. A doctor or a GP, or anybody who comes into contact with them in the NHS, for example, would know. They would certainly say, “Wait a minute, they’ve served.



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What's the rest of it?"

Mr Francois: You have got the Committee going on this. You have three former Ministers here, all of whom tried that and all of whom were up against the bureaucracy.

Mr Jones: I succeeded, but you stopped it when you got elected in 2010.

Chair: I called in British Airways to ask whether we could have a lounge for veterans in Heathrow airport, as they do in America. That sort of gathered momentum and then it fizzled away. There are so many ways in which we could do more.

Q92 **Mr Francois:** There is an irony here—and anyone who has served in the Armed Forces will understand this: the reason this is now delayed is because of an IT problem. There is a sort of irony in that. Bearing in mind that we have a whole system for giving people an ID card when they join, it surely shouldn't be beyond the wit of man to give them an ID card after they have left, should it?

Lieutenant General Pope: You might ask that question.

Chair: You are going to have to tune in next time as we continue this discussion. As Mark said, you are opening up a whole Pandora's box here—something that should have been solved under our ministerial time, but today as well.

I thank Angela Kitching, General Nick Pope and Julie McCarthy, and also our federation representatives who have been very patient and stayed to listen in. It has been a really informative session. There are many questions for us to pose to the MoD and to the Veterans Minister. That concludes our time. Thank you to the Committee and to the staff.