



# Defence Committee

## Oral evidence: The Armed Forces Covenant, HC 572

Tuesday 11 March 2025

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Members present: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Chair); Mr Calvin Bailey; Alex Baker; Lincoln Jopp; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Mike Martin; Jesse Norman; Ian Roome; Fred Thomas; Derek Twigg.

Questions 84 - 155

### Witnesses

I: Alistair Carns DSO OBE MC MP, Minister for Veterans and People, Ministry of Defence; Vice Admiral Philip Hally CB MBE, Chief of Defence People, Ministry of Defence; Sarah Houghton, Director of Armed Forces People Policy, Ministry of Defence; James Greenrod, Head of Armed Forces People Support, Ministry of Defence.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Alistair Carns, James Greenrod, Philip Hally and Sarah Houghton.

Q84 **Chair:** I call to order the Defence Committee's last hearing on the armed forces covenant. I am very grateful to the fine individuals who are giving evidence today, in particular Minister Alistair Carns, the Minister for Veterans and People. We also have with us Vice Admiral Philip Hally, the Chief of Defence People at the Ministry of Defence. We also have Sarah Houghton, the Director of Armed Forces People Policy at the Ministry of Defence, and Mr James Greenrod, the Head of Armed Forces People Support at the Ministry of Defence. Before we begin our questioning, I believe, Minister, you wanted to set the scene with a brief introduction about your work with regards to the armed forces covenant, so over to you.

**Alistair Carns:** Thank you very much, Tan. It is really important, as we look at the covenant, that we do not just narrow in on it, but step back and look holistically at the geopolitical situation. As we have seen, there are North Korean troops in Ukraine. We have issues in south-east Asia. You have the Middle East, Gaza and so on, but also the Ukrainian conflict, which is causing a significant number of casualties on both sides of the line—2,000 on average a day—which in some cases is incomprehensible.

Why is that important? If we look into society at the moment and the UK nation as a whole, we see a societal defence drift. If I was to go to the panel today, your father, your grandfather, your grandmother and so on probably all have a connection with defence and may have served, but that is becoming less and less so as our armed forces get smaller. Society perhaps is not necessarily as involved in defence as it once was. That is why the covenant is so important, because we do not ask anybody else in the public sector to put their life and limb on the line for service. No other public organisation has no recourse to disobey orders or have a union. It is so very unique being in the armed forces.

Creating a legal duty to ensure no one is disadvantaged is absolutely essential, not only to be understood in society and at the local government level, but also at the cross-government level. That is something perhaps we can pick up on in a second. A societal approach to understanding and helping those who serve, those who have served and their families needs to be far more inculcated between society and defence as we move forward in this really fractious geopolitical situation that we live in. That is why this panel today and this discussion is so important.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister, for setting the scene there.

Q85 **Derek Twigg:** What are the shortcomings in the covenants and what particularly has prompted you to want to update the law?



**Alistair Carns:** That is a really important question. For eight—almost nine—months now, I have travelled the country and the devolved Administrations. It has been really clear to me that the level of services, or adherence to what we would see as the covenant, and indeed the understanding of it, is dependent on where you go. I often describe it a little like a postcode lottery on the level of services, because there is no uniformity in it. In some cases that is right because of the nuances of the different cultures you will go to, whether that be Scotland, Northern Ireland, north-west or south-east.

On the same hand, there is very little adherence to or understanding of the covenant that is standardised across the country. Bringing the covenant into the legal duty and the due regard into other Government Departments' psyche, making sure that they have to acknowledge it, will absolutely provide an element of standardisation and better services for those in service.

**James Greenrod:** To build on what the Minister has said, in my experience the issue is not that other Departments or local authorities, or whoever it may be, are apathetic or do not want to help. It is that they do not necessarily understand what it is that they need to do. Part of that is that, with all the other priorities, it is not something that they have necessarily focused on. I can give some absolutely outstanding examples of where they have. In the round, we recognise that broadening the duty of due regard, in terms of raising awareness and understanding of the sorts of challenges that can face the armed forces community, will help us in our conversations across Government and at the local and regional level to really unpick some of those knottier issues.

Q86 **Derek Twigg:** Unless I misunderstand you, you are basically saying that we have the covenant, but a lot of people have just ignored it for whatever reason. You are going to make them not ignore it and implement it. Is that what you are saying?

**Alistair Carns:** That is exactly the case. I do not think that they actively ignore it. I do not think that there is any nefariousness there. There has not been an imperative to understand it because defence may not have been high up in the priority ladder.

Secondly, no one is taking time out to educate or communicate, whether it be the local authority or indeed even across Government Departments here up in Whitehall, as to what the covenant actually means and what it stands for. That is primarily around the two principles that no one serving in the armed forces should face a disadvantage and that special consideration is given to those who perhaps in some cases need it most. The legal duty and the due regard within the covenant will make sure people will have to consider that in other Government Departments when they go through with their policy decisions or legal action.

**Sarah Houghton:** I wonder whether it is worth clarifying as well that the duty is already embedded in legislation. It covers local authorities, the



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

NHS and schools at the moment. We are extending it to other Government Departments as well and the devolved Administrations. It is creating that framework to ensure that there is wider awareness and this legal obligation that those organisations have to have due regard to bearing in mind the armed forces community when developing their policies.

**Q87 Derek Twigg:** You are saying that they have not been implementing it.

**James Greenrod:** I can point to the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS, which have embedded the covenant in their constitution and introduced things such as Op COURAGE and Op NOVA. They are really good examples. DWP has armed forces champions in its jobcentre areas. This enables us to broaden that conversation out to other Government Departments and areas that might not realise the role that they can play in helping us implement the covenant.

**Q88 Derek Twigg:** You change the law and what if they then do not do it? What sanctions are going to be put in place?

**Alistair Carns:** I would argue that at the moment it is really narrow. We are going to broaden it out to include other Government Departments. I am really clear on that one, so a maximalist approach. They will have to consider the covenant when pushing through policy or changes.

**Q89 Derek Twigg:** If they do not do it to the extent that is intended? That is my question.

**Alistair Carns:** If they do not, there is, to the far right, a JR—a judicial review. The reality is that, within defence, we need to make sure that there is a mechanism in place, I think at the local level, to ensure that local councils adhere to and consider the covenant when implementing policy and decisions. It would be on us to police that.

**Q90 Derek Twigg:** It needs a whole-government approach and it means a buy-in from the Cabinet down, and that has not happened so far.

**Alistair Carns:** Hence the reason we are going for a maximalist approach.

**Lincoln Jopp:** Minister, thank you. I would like to pick up on a couple of words in your opening remarks—"societal drift" and the principle that no one is disadvantaged—by quoting from a letter produced recently by the SAS Regimental Association: "Hundreds are ensnared in legacy processes; in many cases facing years more of uncertainty and stress after decades of the same. With seemingly endless avenues for legal appeal and continual changes in government policy on how the legacy of the Troubles should be dealt with, it is unsurprising that veterans feel unjustly hounded for doing their duty. UKSF veterans feel they alone face criminal investigation and risk prosecution for doing what they were trained, authorised, and expected to do as part of a successful counter-terrorist campaign".



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Our veterans are actually under attack; it is not just suffering disadvantage. You are the Veterans Minister. Do you think you are doing enough to defend our veterans and fulfil your obligations under the military covenant?

**Alistair Carns:** We are doing the best we can and working hard to do even more. That is why we are sat here today saying that the covenant, which is really narrow at the moment, is going to be broadened out to include far more of the cross-government architecture to ensure that not just our veterans but all armed forces personnel are protected.

On that specific issue on that letter, you may have seen my reply. You may not have. On the same hand, you will meet very few other people who have the same experience of some of the stuff you have just talked about, who understand the nuance of combat and the stress of some of the situations that, in particular, that letter points to. Therefore, you will find very few individuals who are committed to fighting and ensuring that veterans get the support they require as we move forward through what is a really complicated process. The NIO and I have met several times to discuss these issues, probably on a weekly basis. I was over in Northern Ireland last week speaking to all the veterans, whether that be from PSNI all the way through to some of the formalised military units, to make sure their views and any issues they have are represented correctly at the right level and championed by me.

Q91 **Lincoln Jopp:** Do you think the extension of the armed forces covenant is the vehicle by which you will eventually protect them, or is it going to be something else?

**Alistair Carns:** It is a combination. It is a multifaceted approach to ensure veterans and the armed forces community are represented really well. This is one angle that is broadening out much more. Part of that is about an education and communication programme to ensure that, cross-government, all the way down to the local level, there is understanding of the nuances of being in the armed forces and therefore that they are not disadvantaged in later life. That then ties into some of the veterans issues you have just talked through to ensure that nobody is disadvantaged because of their military service.

Q92 **Chair:** Minister, you have a distinguished service to the nation yourself. From some of the evidence that we have received, it is apparent that you definitely have your work cut out. One particular individual who gave evidence said, "The armed forces covenant does not seem to have affected me at all." In his words, it is "a gimmick" that has "no real substance". Another person said, in practice, it "means nothing at all" because of the inability to access dental services. There was another one on healthcare services. There are so many gaps. Would you concede that there is a lot that needs to be done cross-departmentally in order to give the level of service that our brave servicemen and women deserve?



**Alistair Carns:** Yes, 100%. Some of the issues you are talking about there are particular for veterans. Here is a rough statistic for you. In the Canadian veteran services, 3,500 people are employed to look after veterans. How many do we have in the UK? In the OVA—the Office for Veterans Affairs—we have just under 70. We have 2 million veterans. The Canadians have 500,000. I would argue that, for a long time, the Government have not taken responsibility in any way, shape, or form to the extent required to look after their veteran population.

They have actually disaggregated that and delegated it to the third sector, hence the reason we see 1,750-odd charities supporting the armed forces community. They are full of amazing and absolutely outstanding people, but the co-ordination and the coherence of the support across a billion-pound industry could be improved.

One way you improve it is by the Government taking more responsibility for how they support their veterans network in particular and the armed forces through the covenant. We need to take that on. I would argue that I absolutely, 100%, agree that we need to do a lot more and we need to do a lot more fast. In comparison to other nations, we are not doing it properly.

**Chair:** That is agreed. I now want to move on from the current working of the covenant to the Government's legislative plans.

Q93 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Afternoon, everyone. Minister, when I asked Minister Pollard in the Chamber about our last Committee's recommendations from the Atherton review and those from the Lyons review to have serious cases heard in civilian, not military, courts, the Minister said that the Armed Forces Bill would be an opportunity to get that right. Since then, we have had the awful, tragic death of Jaysley Beck, which has shown once again that the chain of command cannot and should not be policing itself and should be removed from all sexual misconduct cases. Will those recommendations be in the Armed Forces Bill?

**Alistair Carns:** When I came into this job, one of the first places I visited was the defence serious crime unit, and indeed the victim witness care unit, which is based down south. I went to look at that because I wanted to review whether the military as a whole was capable of looking at and investigating some of the most serious crimes that we come across.

To be really clear, any victim who comes out of the military with one of these issues has a choice. They can go through either the service justice system or the criminal justice system. They have that choice available now. It would be very remiss of us to restrict that choice. It is up to them. If they come through the military channel, they will get a whole suite of support that is provided, naturally. From what I have seen, it is working in a very professional and effective way.

Remember that the Gunner Beck issue, which is absolutely tragic, took place in 2021. There have been quite a lot of recommendations come into



place. We still have a long way to go. When I joined in 1998, the military had a long way to go. It is a bit like an oil tanker. It takes a long time to change. We are trying to push that as hard and fast as we possibly can. The defence serious crime unit and the victim witness care unit that we have are top of the class. We have invited people from the criminal justice system to come down and see how we are doing business.

**Vice Admiral Hally:** I think that everyone in all three services was utterly shocked to read and hear of the coroner's outcome to the inquest into Gunner Beck. It was in absolutely terrible circumstances. She was badly let down. I can say that the defence serious crime command is actively looking into investigative evaluations of everything relating to that case right now. I do not want to say any more than that, because obviously that is a policing matter that I would not want to comment any further on.

I would reiterate the point that we are also looking widely at all the other cases that have been widely communicated in social media on some prominent websites. There has not been a significant increase in reported cases as a result of that. The defence serious crime unit is pursuing active lines of inquiry into all those social media statements. I would reiterate the point that anybody who is a victim of any crime, whether they wish to report the crime, wish to have the crime investigated or just want support from the victim witness care unit, should contact either the civilian police or the victim witness care unit and defence serious crime command on a confidential hotline that is available 24/7, which is on 0800 085 0658.

It is a victim-led approach that we follow now. If a victim just wishes for support, he or she can just have support. If the victim just wishes to understand what other opportunities are open to them, what a formal process might look like and what it would mean for them, and they want to talk through the whole process before they even start, that advice is available for them. Should they decide to take it further, the victim witness care unit is by their side all the way through. That level of service that we are now providing through the victim witness care unit and the defence serious crime command is recognised now to be best in class and probably at a level that victims would not receive anywhere else.

Q94 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Is the chain of command no longer the first port of call? Is the chain of command completely removed if someone has a complaint of that nature?

**Vice Admiral Hally:** Any victim does not need to talk to anyone in their chain of command if they wish to report an incident. They can go to the civilian police, the victim witness care unit or the defence serious crime command within the Ministry of Defence crime command, which is entirely separate to the Army, Navy and Air Force's chains of command.

**Alistair Carns:** That was one of the recommendations after the Gunner Beck case in 2021, where we pulled it out of the single services to make





it independent so that people did not feel like they were hemmed in by those single services.

Q95 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** This Committee does a regular refresh of the Atherton review and we are still getting reports about cultural problems in the forces. You yourself, Minister, said, after Jaysley Beck, that the Government stepped up efforts to bring about crucial reform. What are those reforms that you are stepping up?

**Alistair Carns:** For clarity on the question, the Etherton review was around the LGBT community. The financial redress scheme is now in place.

Q96 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** No, Atherton, not Etherton.

**Alistair Carns:** Atherton—okay, got it. We have moved a long way since 2021. We still have a long way to go. I am not going to stand here and say that defence is as good as it should be. We are moving in the right direction. The creation of the defence serious crime unit was a big lift to pull everything out of the single services. That gives people the ability to go outside the chain of command. The victim witness care unit and the way cases are dealt with now, from our reports, make it far more acceptable for people to make a complaint in the first place, which creates a spike in the radar, because people feel comfortable to come forward. That is heading to the right place.

When I was still serving, we brought out the zero-tolerance policy. There is now zero tolerance when it comes to sexual harassment, but we still have a long way to go on that, in making sure it is implemented and there is synergy between all the different single services. We are looking into that as well. Just recently, prior to the next HCDC we have next week, we have a whole raft of recommendations coming through on, I would argue, relatively narrow cultural change programmes that are individually irrelevant but collectively could be significant. We are packaging them up to try to make a bigger change for defence.

Q97 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Minister, you mentioned 2021 as the date when Jaysley Beck's case first began. How many sexual harassment and abuse cases have there been in the forces since 2021?

**Vice Admiral Hally:** We should probably come back to you on that with an accurate number.

**Alistair Carns:** We have answered lots of PQs on that. We have the data, so we can get back to you with the stats. I want to be clear, though. We are doing our best to eradicate any sexual harassment whatsoever. We will never fully eradicate it. Across society, in under-16s in particular, we are seeing a large increase in sexual harassment, or sexual incidents, because of a multifaceted approach. We are seeing an increase in young people. With the demographic we are pulling on, we have to then re-zero or balance down some of the social demographic we get and retrain them in line with what we would class as our standards,





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

which takes some time. We are seeing this bump as they come into the military, until we get the standards and levels of rules and regulations around them.

Q98 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I think that the general perception out there is that there is a cultural problem. A lot of families who are bereaved think, "We have heard all this about change and reform before and yet tragic cases such as this still keep happening". There is a lot of work to do. It is not just about changing the structures; it is about changing culture. It seems to be quite embedded in some areas of our forces and that links to your original opening comments, Minister, when you said that there are fewer and fewer people joining up.

**Alistair Carns:** I agree. There are actually lots of people wanting to join. The process of getting them through the door is one of our biggest problems.

Q99 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I do not think that this helps.

**Alistair Carns:** I completely agree with the cultural issue and we are looking into it in detail.

Q100 **Chair:** Minister, can you also update us on the progress of the Government's legislative plan in general? Where are we with that? Do the Government still plan to use the Armed Forces Bill as the vehicle for this change? When will that be introduced, please?

**Alistair Carns:** We are thinking of the Armed Forces Bill in 2026, hopefully. It will be early 2026 and that will bring the covenant legislation into place. Do you have any further detail on that?

**James Greenrod:** No, it is exactly as you said, Minister.

Q101 **Chair:** Definitely early 2026 is when we are expecting that.

**Alistair Carns:** It is definitely 2026. We will try to get it early. It depends on the parliamentary timetable.

Q102 **Mr Bailey:** Thank you, Minister, for your time today. The Treasury is failing our service families by not considering the impact of service on being an owner-occupier under the stamp duty rules. The DFE fails our service families by not recognising the impact of moves between local authorities and devolved Administrations or the EHCP system. The Home Office fails our non-UK service families by imposing immigration status during service that removes access to work or benefits. The NHS is failing our service families routinely in almost every regard. As we know, I could go on.

Minister, you are not responsible for any of these failings, but the plan to extend the covenant legal duty to central Government will not just throw a spotlight upon them, but create potential for a legal challenge. What work is going on in advance of the Armed Forces Act to ensure that all departmental policies are in line with the covenant from the start and



what work has been done with the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations in this regard?

**Alistair Carns:** Thank you very much for that question. I will leave the specifics to the rest of the team. Broadly, we are in consultation now across Government. That consultation is taking place. I have already met several of the Ministers. There is a lot of work to do between now and 2026 to work out each one of those Government Departments—we are going really broad—and what sits below them when it comes to some of the changes we could put in place that make sure that no armed forces personnel, or indeed service personnel, are disadvantaged. We are going pretty broad; it is going to be a lot of work. There is going to be a raft of changes that sit under each one of those. We may not get them all, but it will definitely be a step in the right direction.

**James Greenrod:** To pick up on some of those points, we are absolutely engaging with other Government Departments, both as officials and at ministerial level. We are having conversations about the four examples of where we, as defence—recognising the other pressures on those Departments—see that there are shortcomings in some of the provision. We are already seeing some movement and I think that is in part because they have seen the manifesto commitment and know that this is coming.

One that you mentioned was DFE and the ability to move care plans for children with special educational needs. DFE has clarified its guidance on that, but does everybody know that the guidance has been clarified? This is part of the importance and strength of what the new legislation will enable us to do. Exactly as you said, it will enable us to put a spotlight on that and say, “The policies have changed in a good way”. We now need to make sure that, at both the national level and the local level, everybody understands what those changes are. That is why, as part of the work that my team will be doing over the course of the next year, we will be working up training materials with other Government Departments and looking at some of those specific policies where we think a practical and pragmatic change for the better can be made.

**Alistair Carns:** A lot of the willingness and movement to change will be based on understanding, and understanding the impact, which you know only too well, as do some others on the board, of being in the armed forces. For example, in a 20-year career, your average family will move seven to eight times, if not more. That has a whole ripple effect for children’s education, spousal employment and just the bare administration of living and surviving as you bounce around the country, devolved Administrations, or indeed abroad. The individual in service is on call 24/7, which means they also have a problem when it comes to spousal employment and having that normal life. That is just a very small section of it.



Making sure people understand the difference between other public service roles and the armed forces, and then why the covenant is so important, is where we really need to get to. I mentioned earlier on that, across Government, we can work that as Ministers and policy officials, but down at the local level there is a requirement to ensure that local governments understand that implication as well, especially for those areas that have high-density armed forces moving through their region. I would like to see how we can educate and communicate that more effectively at the local level.

**Sarah Houghton:** As I said, we have been engaging very widely with other Government officials in other Government Departments, the local authorities and the devolved Administrations. There will be statutory guidance available to guide them about the kinds of things that they could look at.

Q103 **Mr Bailey:** I will not explore any of the areas because I know some of the other Members have framed and set out some of the areas that should be considered. Do you get a sense that there is a conscious acceptance that this is going to be coming from the other Government Departments? Do you also sense that they are prepared to take the burden of the costs? There is a danger that we identify areas and they just drive this back into defence, when actually this is a societal cost that those Government Departments should be bearing themselves.

**Sarah Houghton:** On the whole, everybody is generally supportive of it. We have been engaging with them and it is not a new thing for them. It is not a new challenge for MOD because it has been under the policy constraints right from when the covenant was put in place. All throughout this period, they should have been looking at and having a view to the armed forces community. This will obviously give them those legal constraints. On the funding, clearly it is difficult to anticipate at this stage what the costs will be in having this due regard from the duty legislation. That is something we will have to work through with them. We need to have flexibility about how they apply it in their particular areas going through. Yes, on the whole, they have been generally supportive.

**Alistair Carns:** You mentioned conscious acceptance. Speaking to the Ministers, a lot of people accept and agree with it. We now need to work with those Government Departments to work out what sits below that. What actual changes are we going to put in place? That has to balance the cost and need across broader society in conjunction with the need of the armed forces. There is a balance in all of that and a sweet spot. That will differ depending on where you are in the country and the demand on local services. You have my word that we are going to push that really hard across Government and try to get the best changes in place for the armed forces, because it underpins the moral component of fighting power, why people want to join the armed forces, and why and how they fight.

Q104 **Mr Bailey:** Lastly, I would thank you for what you said at the beginning



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

about being conscious of service during wartime and the exchange to the peace dividend that we have enjoyed for so long, which was enshrined in the welfare system by our Labour Government post war, and the fact that we may have to go through an unconscious process to buy ourselves back in.

**Alistair Carns:** That is really important.

**Mr Bailey:** That is a very important conversation.

**Alistair Carns:** It is easy to be conscious when you are at conflict. You remember, at the height of Afghanistan or Iraq, our armed forces were on the news everywhere. Everyone understood it. Then you hit an element of peace and slowly things start to get pulled away perhaps. Then you are called upon again and everything is built back up. We need to accept that there must be continuity through the system and—I go back to the postcode lottery—to ensure there is a level of standardisation of care and support, so that those serving, those who have served and their families, who are often forgotten about, get the support they require.

Q105 **Mike Martin:** This is just a quick one, picking up directly off that point. Do you think that there are things that we could learn from other countries in terms of the relationship that their Governments have with their veterans but also service personnel? An obvious example is America, where there is all sorts of legislation and support, and a very close relationship between that Clausewitzian trinity of the people, state and forces.

**Alistair Carns:** It would hardly be a debate without Clausewitz coming into it, so really well done. There is a lot we can learn off other nations. I mentioned the Canadian veterans service sitting at about 3,500. We have 60 in the OVA and maybe a couple of hundred in defence, but we are nowhere near that. There is a government responsibility to deliver more, in particular for our veterans.

Also there is—I would not say a cultural reset—a cultural bond back. We have to bring that societal drift from the way it is to coming back together between defence and society. For example, if you go to America, as a serviceperson, people will stop you in the street and say, “Thank you for your service”. They are really proud and understand that, without your armed forces and security, you cannot have a prosperous economy, the welfare state or anything that sits below it. It is the first principle of any Government.

We have to think about that—not just ships, aircraft, guns and bullets, but people, basing, accommodation, the soft functions and access to services. I absolutely agree that we can learn and we are doing that now. A lot of the policy team have been out and about, whether it be to the Canadians, the Australians, who are slightly more similar in size, or the Americans, to work out where we can pull lessons back. There are plans



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

afoot to change some of the structures, which over time will help to change that culture.

Q106 **Mike Martin:** That sounds about right: lessons and structures. Is there a leadership role that the Government can play, particularly Government Ministers such as yourself, or perhaps MPs—I do not want to use the words “educating the public”—in terms of bringing the importance of these issues to the public. Perhaps the fact that the geopolitical situation is getting much worse is also part of that conversation. Could you comment on that leadership role?

**Alistair Carns:** There absolutely is a leadership role. That leadership role is based around a clear articulation of the threats that our country faces. Too often, we think that it is inconceivable for threats overseas to affect us here. If we were to tally up the cost of the Russian conflict in Ukraine and what that means for us here, it would be in the billions. Whether that is fuel costs, oil and gas prices, or the price of food because of the blockage of grain coming out of Ukraine, the economic impact on a global scale is huge.

That debate is often lost back here in the UK. It is a product of being an island nation and of having, although not in all cases, quite a high standard of living. It is a Government’s prerogative to highlight and make sure that there is a clear understanding of those threats and then make sure that we and the leadership prioritise those areas that can reduce those threats and increase, hopefully, our economic security over time, and therefore our prosperity and all the services that we can provide the nation.

Q107 **Mike Martin:** I would like to zoom in now from the grand strategic to the devolved Administrations. One thing that has struck all of us throughout this inquiry has been, as you mentioned in your introduction, this postcode lottery of the different geographical application. There is something specific about the devolved Administrations in terms of government competencies such as healthcare, social care, childcare and so on and so forth. There is different service provision in the different nations.

We have heard of examples where someone starts a course of psychotherapy, for instance, in one and then is posted to a different devolved Administration where that service is not offered. Perhaps you could comment on that specific example and whether this new legislation will treat that, but also in a more general sense. How are we going to synergise, synchronise and, I guess, level up, to use a phrase, between the different devolved Administrations and services that are provided to our service community and veterans?

**Alistair Carns:** I will maybe take it in reverse. I have visited Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and there absolutely is a difference in the provision of services, not just to veterans but to armed forces personnel. People transiting between the two on a two-year or three-year draft have



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

significant problems. I am in constant discussion with my devolved counterparts. We try to make sure that devolved nations are briefed up on any policies that we are bringing in that may be bounded within England or any one of the devolved Administrations so they can track it, understand it and replicate it if they need to. We cannot necessarily force them to.

Particularly as we are looking at new proposals as we move forward with support to veterans and the establishment, enablement, communication and education of the covenant, we are making sure that that is being aired really widely with the devolved Administrations. Hopefully they can integrate into that network and we can provide a semblance of standardisation. Will we ever get to that panacea? I do not think so.

**Vice Admiral Hally:** In terms of the specific example there, the whole principle of the covenant is that the armed forces and their families should not be in a position of disadvantage as a result of their service. We have to recognise that different things are available in different places. The armed forces cannot get something that is not available where they live because it is available somewhere else. Your specific example was where a member of the armed forces was getting something where they had been posted, say medical treatment that was available where they are currently posted, and we post them to somewhere else where that medical treatment may not be openly available. I would see it as a covenant issue that they are able to continue their treatment in the place that we send them to, even if they could not start it.

Q108 **Mike Martin:** Is that a commitment under this new legislation that they would be able to continue that treatment?

**Vice Admiral Hally:** Yes.

Q109 **Mike Martin:** Okay, that is great. Thank you very much. I have a very short one on Northern Ireland. There are particular obvious issues in Northern Ireland. Many service personnel do not want to advertise their service, for instance. We have heard that the Northern Ireland Executive do not necessarily prioritise the covenant in the same way. Could you comment on that and whether this new legislation is going to standardise things in Northern Ireland, or maybe run us through any conversations you have had with the NI Executive on that issue?

**Alistair Carns:** I was in Northern Ireland just last week for two days to get a ground feel of some of the issues facing both veterans and those in the armed forces. There are real nuances to Northern Ireland, particularly around the security threat and those who have served. Will you ever get a standardisation? If I was to be honest, I do not think that you will as long as that security threat exists. My ministerial responsibility is to ensure we air and shape best practice within Northern Ireland to give the best services for those in the armed forces, those who served and of course their families.





**James Greenrod:** We have to recognise the uniqueness of Northern Ireland. We have done the Veterans Welfare Service in Northern Ireland, which is an MOD-owned statutory body that offers, for example, certain medical healthcare provision that is not offered elsewhere in the UK because elsewhere in the UK it would be offered by the NHS. It has to be a slightly different approach.

More widely into the devolved Government space, we do not want to say that we need to have uniformity, because that does not work in a devolved system. We want consistency of outcomes. It is recognising that Wales has armed forces liaison officers, which is a network that works fantastically for Wales. It happens slightly differently in different bits of the United Kingdom. That is absolutely fine and as it should be, so long as we are taking an armed forces-centric view of what the individual needs are and whether they can be met.

**Alistair Carns:** It is worth jumping on that to say that we can also learn off the devolved Administrations, because the armed forces liaison officers in Wales work really well. The Veterans Welfare Service distributed and regional teams work really well in Northern Ireland. I have gone around. We looked at best practice and now we need to pull it back and see whether we can provide an element of standardisation here in England, Wales, hopefully Scotland and Northern Ireland.

On top of that, we need to ensure we get data as well. There is a lot of support out there. It is our prerogative to ensure that that support is focused at the right place at the right time for the right people. In some cases, it is not data-driven, and I mean that in particular in the veterans space. We have to build up our datasets to ensure we know how to help people in the best way.

**Sarah Houghton:** We also hold annual conferences with the devolved Administrations and the local authorities, which are forums where we can share best practice of what we are doing. What they are doing in Scotland, for example, could be shared with the rest of the nation as well.

Q110 **Mike Martin:** Is there going to be a covenant team within the MOD whose job is to drive that through?

**Vice Admiral Hally:** There already is.

**Sarah Houghton:** They are all here.

**Alistair Carns:** That is absolutely our focus. If we can make one change, Tan, it is to get this covenant and legislation through in 2026. It is not the goal and it will not be the goal, but it is a stepping stone towards ensuring that every Government Department takes the armed forces into consideration when it is pushing policy through, at either the national level or the local level, which is absolutely critical.

Q111 **Lincoln Jopp:** The admiral used the case of medical treatment, but also said, I think, that because things are different we cannot level up in the





way that Mike is asking. When we visited RAF Lossiemouth, one of the issues, meeting the people there, was access to free childcare and the different thresholds in age. Under anyone else's normal use of the word "disadvantage", it would feel to me like I was being disadvantaged if I was getting free childcare at my home station, and someone posted me to Lossiemouth and all of a sudden I could not. That sounds like a disadvantage to me. It sounds like you are steering some sort of course between medical treatment and access to free childcare, in as much as one would be considered a disadvantage, but the other one would not, and that would be made good through defence funds. Do I have the definition right?

**Alistair Carns:** I will let Admiral Phil come in in a second. I also visited Lossiemouth. That same issue came up and I immediately spoke to my devolved counterpart about that issue to see whether they could help to resolve it. Phil, could you comment on the difference between the two?

**Vice Admiral Hally:** Wraparound childcare has been incredibly popular and well received across the Ministry of Defence. It provides armed forces personnel with up to £3,400 per child of childcare in the early mornings and late evenings. It has allowed our people, particularly those who are in dual-serving couples, to manage the pressures of service life with the pressures of family life, which very often, as I am quite sure you know, is one key reason why people leave.

We are trying to look at how we can expand that further. One key constraint on the wraparound childcare that we brought out 18 months ago now is the local provision of access to childcare facilities. The constraint is not actually anything to do with the scheme itself. It is that, nationally, we need to invest more in childcare facilities so that everybody can participate and make use of them. Going further, just in January this year we have rolled out access to the same level of wraparound childcare that is available in the UK to those who are posted overseas. I was out in Cyprus just last week. That is an incredibly valuable and hugely retention-positive benefit, which is keeping people in service and in a position where they can continue to serve the nation.

We are looking at the variations that exist between devolved Administrations. All I would say at the moment is that we are actively looking at understanding how we can expand the scheme further in an affordable way. The really important thing also is that we wanted to do it in a way that does not create any tax implications for the individuals who are receiving the childcare itself. It is an area that is constantly under review and we are looking to make it better.

Q112 **Mr Bailey:** Directly on that, Vice Admiral, we may be able to write off the childcare issue and assume that that is a policy thing, but you have finished on tax. Scotland is the only place in the world where our service personnel suffer a differential rate of tax, which for anywhere else would be considered a SOFA—a status of forces agreement. If you serve anywhere in the world, your wraparound childcare, service, taxation, all



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

those things, are exactly the same, except for in Scotland. How do you get after that?

**Alistair Carns:** When I got back from Lossiemouth, I brought this up with my devolved counterpart. We need to make them recognise the value of defence and the benefits it has, and make sure that we can standardise some of the support mechanisms that we have. I cannot promise a short-term fix to that.

**Sarah Houghton:** You may be aware that we provide retrospective financial mitigation to those service personnel who are based in Scotland, who therefore have to pay higher rates of Scottish income tax.

**Alistair Carns:** Your premise is absolutely right.

Q113 **Ian Roome:** On that point as well, it is not only the service personnel. A point that we picked up on our visit was the spouses and the families, who are also disadvantaged. I know that we are talking about compensating serving personnel. Let us not forget about their families, particularly the spouses, who have no choice but to accompany their partner to these stations. I do not know whether you have anything you can say on that.

**Sarah Houghton:** It is always important to consider all the allowances in the whole. I think that that is what you were talking about as well. In Scotland they have different things. Service families resident in Scotland receive free healthcare prescriptions, free dental check-ups and free eye examinations. All families, regardless of whether they are working, receive 1,140 hours-worth of childcare between the ages of three and four, which is different from what we receive in England. It is quite difficult sometimes to compare like for like across the devolved Administrations. As Admiral Phil was saying, we are looking at ways in which we can try to standardise things as much as possible, but we might have to bear in mind the tax implications for that.

**Alistair Carns:** Ian, to your point that it is not just the serving individual, when the individual is serving the whole family serves. They get dragged through the same rigours as the individual who is serving, so I completely agree.

**Chair:** Good. Let us now move the conversation on to extension of new areas of policy and service delivery.

**Jesse Norman:** Minister, am I right in thinking that this is your first evidence session in front of a Select Committee?

**Alistair Carns:** It is.

**Jesse Norman:** May I say what I would say to any member of this Committee, which is that we thank you for your service?

**Alistair Carns:** Thank you very much.



Q114 **Jesse Norman:** We also thank you for your putting that service, as with members of this Committee, to the benefit of this nation. That is a profoundly important thing to put in the record.

My colleague the Member for Spelthorne mentioned the legacy issues with veterans. You will understand that in my part of the world that is a very sensitive issue indeed. You have looked at this hard in the last eight months. Can I take it that you are going to give this the hardest possible push within Government? It is a very serious issue.

**Alistair Carns:** Yes, 100%—110%. You have my word. I am going to push this as hard as I can for the simple reason that there is a moral and ethical component of it. There is the fact that, if we do not ensure that our armed forces personnel are protected through the system, we cannot expect them to join. I would argue that we must also have a broader narrative that is positive and looks through your whole life from the moment you sign up. You serve all the way through your life until the day you die. I am a firm believer in that, whether that is psychological, physical impacts, or indeed just the fact that you will probably sign back up should there be an issue. You are on call to do so in some cases anyway. You have my absolute word.

Q115 **Jesse Norman:** One of the effects of the covenant, as you have described it, is that it is going to be extended into central Government Departments. Will that include the Treasury?

**Alistair Carns:** At the moment we are in consultation. I do not want to go into detail. I always say, "Go big or go home," so we are going big and maximalist.

Q116 **Jesse Norman:** It would be your ambition, if you like, to have the Treasury.

**Alistair Carns:** We are going really broad.

Q117 **Jesse Norman:** I can say this as a former Treasury Minister. Bringing that particular part of central Government into a deeper understanding of what is going on is pretty foundational, not just to the success of the policy, but to its being effectively funded, which inevitably must be an issue. You will know, in terms of new policy and service delivery, that I am obsessive about new forms of higher education. There is this new institute we have in Herefordshire that is very much focused on defence and security employment and employment skills, as opposed to education for families and stuff, and transition. Could you talk a little bit about how you see that from a ministerial standpoint and whether we can expect change in that area?

**Alistair Carns:** To take a step back, defence is one of the best organisations for skills enhancement and, in particular, apprenticeships. Our three services are in the top five nationally and it is a fantastic catapult for individuals who come in maybe not with the best educational qualifications and can leave with some of the most sophisticated



qualifications, whether that be as an aircraft engineer, a nuclear engineer or all the way through to teaching skills.

What we have been really clear on, and had a lot of positivity around, is the new career transition pathway, which takes people when they leave all the way through to two years post leave. I always say that we are trained to join the military. We are not trained to be civilians. That CTP primarily trains people to reintegrate into civilian life, but also on employment. The statistics on employment straight after service are that over 80% of veterans go straight into employment. They are highly employable and highly skilled. They bring a whole set and suite of skills, which are often not necessarily realised. I always say that veterans have done two amazing things. First, the No. 1 role of Government is to protect the nation, and now they are going to let the economy prosper because they can add real value into any company or enterprise.

**Q118 Jesse Norman:** I very strongly echo that, but there are also cases in which veterans are not able to take the full benefit of their own capabilities developed within the forces, perhaps because they have not had the academic finishing or the kind of credentials that might allow them to succeed elsewhere. You will know that the Government have delayed the lifelong learning entitlement. That is quite an important thing, because it would allow veterans to chunk up and take in succession towards the end of their careers, perhaps in the course of their service, a degree, which then means a very much shorter period of requalification or final qualification afterwards. It is something we see in other countries where they take those kinds of additional skills very seriously. Israel would be a classic example. I wonder whether this is something you might be able to pursue with other Ministers, because the delay means a disproportionately negative effect in the armed forces, I would suggest.

**Alistair Carns:** That is a really good point and I will definitely look into it. There are two things I would come back to before perhaps handing over to the team. The lifelong learning and education people go through, depending on their time in service, is difficult to quantify. A career course of private to corporal, corporal to sergeant, sergeant to colour sergeant, warrant officer, and indeed in the officer space as well, accumulates probably to years of leadership, command and team-building training. On top of that, we have the enhanced learning credits. I will hand over to Phil or one of the team if we have any detail on the specific subject.

**Sarah Houghton:** We have something called the pan-defence skills framework, which we are hoping to roll out later this year. We are piloting it at the moment. The idea with that is to translate, essentially, the skills that service personnel are gaining through their service into more recognisable civilian-type qualifications, which then they will be able to use to help them gain employment after they leave as well. That is something that we are looking at.

**Q119 Jesse Norman:** I would be very grateful if you could send me or direct me to something in that area. It would be very helpful.



**Vice Admiral Hally:** We can do. The key thing in terms of overall ambition, which is very relevant to the covenant and legislation, is that we want to build more of a skills-based organisation. The armed forces are an ever more skilled business: digital, cyber, engineering, communications. We need ever more skilled people. We need the same skills in the industry that is supporting defence and the wider economy that is generating the prosperity, which in its turn supports defence and the nation as a whole.

We want to have better recognition of the skills that we give our people so that they can translate into the civilian world. We also want to understand the skills that the people in the civilian world have, so that we can bring them in at an appropriate level, which is not necessarily the bottom. We can bring them in at the side, into key skilled roles. Really importantly, we can move beyond a single-use construct where everyone joins at the bottom and leaves after a few years, to get into zig-zag careers where we welcome more and more veterans back into the armed forces, either as reserves or on short-term contracts. With the Armed Forces Bill we intend to include legislation that will provide that employment flexibility that breaks down the barriers between regular and reserve service, and creates more porosity for people with skills to move in and out of the armed forces into wider industry.

Q120 **Jesse Norman:** We can expect that in the Armed Forces Bill early next year.

**Vice Admiral Hally:** Yes.

Q121 **Jesse Norman:** Can we move on to other areas that you think will be subject to the covenant legal duty apart from the one we have just touched on?

**Sarah Houghton:** As the Minister said before, we cannot talk in any detail at this stage because it is subject to writing around Government Departments, but, as he has also said, we are taking a maximalist approach. We are engaging. We have engaged with over 150 organisations, including some that have given evidence at this committee already, such as Cobseo, RBL, the families federations et cetera, to take into account the areas that they think would be helpful in terms of the extension of the Government duty. We think that there will be roughly over 10 new policy areas.

Q122 **Jesse Norman:** That is very interesting. There is always a danger in security and defence that people lead with the budget; they do not lead with the need. Can I take it that you guys are focusing on the need and are going to allow the rest of the issue, as it were, to follow that?

**Alistair Carns:** Yes, 100%. It has to be effects-based planning, i.e. "What do we want as an outcome?", and then work back from it. We have to accept though that there will be a balance between some of the geographical requirements, depending on where those local authorities are, all the way through to the broader national requirements.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

On your education piece, I launched Op ASCEND two weeks ago on Monday, which was about helping veterans come through that career transition pathway and then getting them into employment, but also highly skilled employment. That has already worked really well and we have lots of people taking that operation up. On top of Op RESTORE, Op FORTITUDE and all the other operations that we are running—and we have taken on some of those—we are now building out more.

**Q123 Jesse Norman:** That is not just apprenticeships or the equivalent but genuine skills-based higher education.

**Alistair Carns:** Absolutely, yes. It is heading in the right direction. We can provide a briefing on that in due course. To elaborate on one more point, as Admiral Phil brought out, in Ukraine we are seeing a change in character of conflict. I always describe it as a machine gun moment for the Army, a submarine moment for the Navy and a jet engine moment for the Air Force. We need different types of people in defence. We need different skills as we move towards a different type of warfare.

That is why we have to look more broadly. If there are any rules and regulations in place that reduce our ability to get the best talent into defence, we need to start stripping them away. That is why the Secretary of State has already stripped away 100 different out-of-date medical requirements and implemented a 10/30 rule of giving people offers really early on to get people in. Importantly, as Fred will know from some of his APPG work on new technologies and start-ups, how do we pull them in to defence?

**Q124 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** This is just a quick question from me, Minister, in relation to other Departments that the covenant relies heavily on. What representations have you made to DWP on behalf of veterans in relation to the proposed £5 billion cuts and freezes to benefits and PIP?

**Alistair Carns:** We are in discussion with DWP on a regular basis. The consultation on the covenant in particular has been in circulation now for weeks. We are almost at completion. We will keep you posted in due course when that comes back.

**Q125 Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Have you said anything in particular to DWP about those cuts and freezes to benefits?

**Alistair Carns:** We have been really clear that nobody in the armed forces or who has served in the armed forces should be disadvantaged.

**Q126 Lincoln Jopp:** Minister, you mentioned the 10/30 rule. When that was announced, I thought, “Wow, good luck with that”. It is incredibly demanding. I genuinely did mean “good luck with that” because it would be fantastic. It may not be your bag, but could you give us an update on where we are with the implementation of that new rule?

**Alistair Carns:** The 10/30 rule was a provisional offer in 10 and then turn up on 30 days.





Q127 **Lincoln Jopp:** That is days, yes.

**Alistair Carns:** Days, not weeks, yes. We have already had some people run through that. It is very difficult to implement and we are now trying to shuffle and make sure that the regulations bend to fit that direction. If there is increased risk or issues, that is to be brought to the Minister responsible. Between me and the Armed Forces Minister, we own that portfolio. The definition of madness is doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome. We have to really look at how we do recruitment differently. We have lots of people interested to join, with lots of different skills. It is our ability to get them through the door and into the trained ranks that is proving difficult.

**Vice Admiral Hally:** I can add a bit more to that. We have looked really hard at all our processes. One key thing that we have seen is the fact that there are plenty of people who want to join the armed forces. We are not able to provide a lot of the people who want to serve with the answers that they wish to hear before they go off and get an offer from someone else. Out of every 100 applications for the Army, we were getting about six soldiers. Most of the fallout in that process happened in the first eight weeks, where we, frankly, were not being good enough at responding to good people's interest in the armed forces. They were probably looking at five or six other employers, and they were snapping up the great candidates quicker than us.

We recognised that it was taking about 320 days, on average, to get people into the armed forces. A lot of that was down to the fact of a heavily paper-driven process. People were having to bring their passport into a careers office to be photocopied, when actually, if you get a driving licence, your photograph comes off your passport on to the driving licence. We were not connected in the same way.

People were having to put a wet signature on a consent form to go to their doctor, which had to be posted back and forth, and sent in the mail to the doctor. The doctor then had to put the medical records in another envelope and send it back. That was taking 49 days for the medical records bit. We are trialling a system now for digital signature and digital transfer. It is taking between one and two days. That has taken six weeks out of the process, just looking at medical. Between eligibility checks for nationality, checks on criminal records, checks on medical health and checks on educational qualifications, digitisation is taking a lot out of that.

A great example of where we are getting it right is that we are already doing, in a small number of areas, the conditional offer. The single services are all managing to do this for pilot cohorts. One good example is the new cyber pathway that the Secretary of State announced last autumn. The adverts went out for that last month. We will be sifting through them in April. The first cohort will join in the summer, just after Easter. The training pathway for those new cyber warriors will be three to five weeks, instead of 10 to 12 weeks. By the autumn, they will be





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

straight into cyber training. In the time that some people would still be in the application process, those new cyber warriors will be in the trained strength.

It is an iterative process, but I think within a few months we will have a clear plan as to how we get to that 10 and 30. A big step was the announcement a few weeks ago of us contracting with Serco for the follow-on contract support for the tri-service recruiting model, to get rid of the 17 contracts and support contracts we currently have across the three services into one tri-service model. That is digitally enabled and has armed forces people at the front of the office meeting the candidates and mentoring them through the process, with digital experts in the back offices providing world-class support.

**Q128 Lincoln Jopp:** Sitting in those seats last week were defence industry representatives, who reminded us that if you sign a contract with SpaceX it is six pages long, and if you sign it with the Ministry of Defence it is 70.

**Alistair Carns:** We are absolutely cognisant of that. We want to cut away the bureaucracy. I am sure that you will remember from when you joined, you turned up to the armed forces, did a couple of pull-ups, were slapped on the back, had a medical and away you went. I am not saying that we need to revert to that, but there is a balance.

**Lincoln Jopp:** I signed up when Centurion was a rank, not a tank.

**Chair:** I am sure that the scrutiny was a lot more intense than that for Mr Jopp. Let us move on to now the consistent application of the covenant.

**Q129 Fred Thomas:** Minister, can we talk about the private sector? We have covered some of the areas of Government that the Armed Forces Bill may extend the covenant to. All of you have also mentioned the changing character of warfare and the changing requirement for skills. You spoke, Admiral, about a kind of porosity and this idea that people can move between private sector and military employment.

Currently, my understanding is that, if you are a company operating in the UK, you can voluntarily sign the armed forces covenant. You therefore become a signatory and qualify to be a bronze, silver or gold employer as part of the employment recognition scheme—the ERS—but all of this is voluntary and no one is required to do it. We on this Committee have had, and personally I have also had, companies that are on this scheme—bronze, silver or gold—saying that they do not really know what they are supposed to do. They are not really sure what the benefit is, aside from some kind of optics. In the Armed Forces Bill next year, are you going to legislate so that companies have to act differently from how they are acting now, or will it still be voluntary?

**Alistair Carns:** We need to be very careful about legislating for every company to act differently. That would be a really broad piece of legislation that may have second and third-order implications that we



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

have not necessarily thought about at the moment. I am a big fan of the armed forces covenant scheme that brings businesses in. It creates a mutual level of understanding, specifically with the major businesses that we have regular engagement with. It docks them into not just armed forces personnel, but veterans transition—the career transition pathway in particular but also the charitable sector—so it has a lot of benefits.

There is a tightening we could do. I would agree that we could be slightly more demanding of what is required from those individuals who have signed up, but not too much to the point where they perhaps would not want to sign up.

**Sarah Houghton:** We have a defence relationship management team in place that does that account management with those private sector organisations. I think that it is very clear in terms of the levels you talked about: bronze, silver and gold. Bronze is for those organisations that make that commitment and that have pledged to the covenant. The silver is more about making a real change in their organisation. The gold standard is about acting as a real advocate among other organisations as well.

There is more that we could do with that, but there is work being done anyway by that team to engage on a regular basis. We are not policing what these organisations are doing, but we check in and make sure that they are adhering to the principles of the covenant. If they are not adhering, we obviously need to address that. We get a lot of feedback from the charity sector as well, which is very good at letting us know when things are not running as it thinks they should.

**Q130 Fred Thomas:** The Committee has come back recently from a trip to Finland and Estonia, where there is a whole-of-society defence culture that permeates from the public sector and the Government well into the private sector, which does not happen in this country. Minister, you have made comments previously that we might need to adopt something along these lines. Personally, my belief is that we have to and that that looks like a bigger reservist force.

Companies often have to act in their own interest. They have shareholders or different strategies behind them. They have to go and try to make money and yet we, as a country, are going to need these companies to let us have their skilled employees. Like you mentioned before, the changing character of conflict is going to require those skills. We need them. Thinking theoretically, what are some things that the Government could ask companies to do in years to come specifically to increase the fighting capability of our forces? Aside from asking them to offer better employment schemes for veterans, but specifically to help our fighting force, what are some things we could do and require of the private sector?

**Alistair Carns:** To take the question back a bit, Finland and Sweden obviously were not in NATO until relatively recently and therefore had to



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

rely on themselves for defence, primarily, against the threats they faced. Nevertheless, their whole-society approach is definitely worth reading and looking at. It is on a different scale.

I would also absolutely agree with you that we require defence in depth, and that defence in depth means our ability to mobilise the nation if we required mass for a sustained or prolonged conflict. Our adversaries, whichever way you look, are designed to fight an attritional conflict and attrition can be decisive. Therefore we need to think about what it would be like to be caught in a longer conflict that was not necessarily over in a short space of time, with a high attrition rate in both people and materiel. That is where industry really comes into it.

Within that defence in depth model, you have your regular force, your reserve force and a strategic reserve. That strategic reserve is in excess of 400,000 people, veterans who have left who are under 55. A lot of those individuals work in the defence sector you are talking about. We need to be careful because, if you mobilise that strategic reserve, you rip the heart out of the defence sector.

There is a commonality between the two, and you see this in Ukraine, where those reservists with the skills and understanding from the industrial base dock in. They bring the industrial knowledge with them and have this symbiosis where they pull the two together, so you end up in an innovation cycle that is faster than ever before, but it has taken a conflict and a crisis to make that happen. I am not going to prejudge what is going to come out in the strategic defence review, but I would argue that industry and innovation will be a critical component of it.

**James Greenrod:** Building specifically on the point around what some of our asks of private industry may be, currently to get the gold award you have to have signed up to giving your reservists two weeks' additional paid leave a year to fulfil their reservist duties. While, as you have rightly said, these are voluntary pledges, they are public pledges. You can go and look up which companies have said that they will do what under the terms of the covenant. Therefore there are mechanisms where we get phone calls from individual X saying, "I work for company Y and it is a gold scheme holder, but I have just been told that I cannot go and do my reservist training". We can pick up the phone and have a quiet conversation. That does happen.

I know that the Minister is keen to ask, "Can we give a bit more teeth to that?" and that is something that we will keep under review. Certainly at the moment the standard for gold and silver is that active support and advocacy for members of the armed forces community working within those organisations.

**Sarah Houghton:** From a tactical point of view as well, lots of private sector organisations are already doing some brilliant work. Mobile phone providers have committed to removing disadvantage to the armed forces community by allowing suspension of UK mobile contracts when armed



forces personnel are moved overseas, for example. It is the same with some of the UK's largest banks that are signatories, such as HSBC, Nationwide, et cetera. They have committed to allowing armed forces personnel to rent out their homes without facing higher mortgage costs or having to change their mortgage when posted overseas. Those are some of the things that they are also doing to support armed forces personnel at the more tactical level.

**Alistair Carns:** It is not my portfolio, but I would argue that, from the private sector, we need to see a far closer relationship between defence and the smaller startup companies and subject matter experts, who sometimes have the best innovative ideas. There are some great examples in the US of SOFWERX and other places where they use defence as an incubator or a trials and development system to enhance what I would call critical national technologies that sit in the UK, so those technologies that are critical to our national defence.

Q131 **Chair:** I want to explore that further. We received a submission from British Veteran Owned, according to which businesses often sign the covenant without meaningful follow-through and thereby completely reduce its credibility because there is a lack of accountability. According to another submission that we received, various companies with bronze, silver or gold do not appear to always abide by its principles. What is the MOD going to do to hold people to account?

**Alistair Carns:** That is a really good point. I go back to Lincoln's point about the bureaucracy and the processes in the way. I will take that point on board and we will go back and review to make sure that gold, silver and bronze are held to account to abide by those principles. If we need to add a bit more teeth, we will absolutely do that.

**Chair:** We definitely cannot have people signing up to something, benefiting from having that accreditation and using the logo et cetera, and then not having any knowledge of those principles, or not acting on it. They are failing not only our veterans but the country as well. I hope that Ministers will take that evidence into account.

Q132 **Ian Roome:** Thank you, Minister, for your attendance today and your service, and all the panel for the work that you do to support our service personnel and veterans. I want to get into the inconsistency around the covenant and how it is applied. We receive submissions from local authorities. One went top to bottom, thought out the duty through and through, and is applying it consistently. Other local authorities have said to us, "In the absence of any particular funding to support the covenant, we are doing the absolute minimum." Will the new legislation include measures to ensure better and more consistent application to the covenant?

**Alistair Carns:** I will absolutely agree with what you have just said. I have visited probably in excess of 10 local authorities. I have briefed and spoken to 30 at a covenant meeting that we had a couple of months ago.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

How the covenant is implemented is absolutely dependent on the council. There is also a requirement on the Ministry of Defence to educate people on the covenant at the local level so they are better informed as to what the covenant stands for and the principles that they need to follow.

A council or local authority turning round and saying, "We are doing the absolute minimum" is completely and utterly unacceptable, because it misinterprets the requirement and the acknowledgement that the armed forces protect us all. To say they are doing the absolute minimum is atrocious. On the same hand, I have also gone to other councils that are doing an amazing job and have properly implemented the covenant across the country, north-east to south-west.

**James Greenrod:** You absolutely get those councils that do the bare minimum. We also find that there are councils that have a whole raft of other pressures and priorities which come to us and say, "It is not that we don't want to help. It is that we don't understand." We have worked over the years to do toolkits and training material. There is the *Our Community—Our Covenant* report, which contains, "These are the sorts of things you can do as a local authority. By the way, here are some pots of money that you can apply for." There will be some more work coming out in the next few months, which takes case studies of different local authorities and local authority groupings across the UK and the different ways in which they are implementing the covenant.

Again, it comes back to the consistency of outcomes point, rather than the uniformity of approach. There are a number of ways in which you can set it up, depending on what your local demographics are. Certainly for us, we find that if we can say, "This is what good looks like", more often than not we get the traction. That is despite the other pressures that those local authorities are under.

**Alistair Carns:** They will have to have considered the principles. As we broaden it out, those different bits of those local councils will have to consider the principles, in particular with veterans and armed forces personnel. If they have not considered them, they are breach of the duty.

Q133 **Ian Roome:** Following on from that, some of the evidence that we have received as a Committee criticises the language of "due regard". For example, Air Vice Marshal David McLoughlin stated that the legal duty of due regard was weak and could easily be ignored, explaining that, at the most flippant end, he had been told that due regard means giving the issue a short period of thought and that the answer to a request would have been no because they would have just considered it. Do you feel that there should be a stronger definition of due regard and what it means for authorities to look at it?

**Alistair Carns:** We have to consider this in the broader spectrum. Take housing, for example, which is a continual issue that we deal with. We try to make sure that all armed forces personnel have housing, from families and single-living accommodation, all the way through to veterans. There



is a huge housing shortage in the UK and everyone around this table will have had multiple people come to them about a lack of council housing. If a veteran also comes to you with a lack of housing, that due regard will ensure that that local council must consider it, but there may be a higher priority than that individual. It could be a single mum with children. It could be a family in desperate need.

We have to be very careful of imposing rules and regulations that disadvantage others, but make sure that the right parts of local authorities and the Government consider this in detail before they go through with any policy changes. We are on a journey. Because we are going really broad, this is a step in the right direction. Is it a reflection of the end state of where we want to be? Probably not, no, but I think it will get better over time.

**Sarah Houghton:** We have made it that way to ensure that it is deliberately flexible. We are not trying to police it as such and we see it as an actual positive that we are putting it this way. We see it as drawing parallels with the public sector equality duty. In the same way, organisations have to have due regard to that, so we think you could bring it in and look at it in the same way as that.

On your previous point about local authorities and the standardisation, MOD is a co-chair of something called the covenant community action group. That is a forum where you bring together all the local authorities and can share best practice. It is an opportunity for people to learn and understand how they should be applying the armed forces covenant.

Q134 **Ian Roome:** I have been part of a local authority and leader of a local authority. For the actual meaning of what it means, it is very good to say, "We signed the armed forces covenant", but putting it into action is a different thing. That is why I am asking whether it is inconsistent using the words "due regard" when it is saying, "Show us on the metrics what you have done to ensure that you have given this due regard".

Coming back to another one, we have received lots of submissions around actual serving personnel not understanding or even knowing that there is a covenant. I am sure that you will be able to tell me what the statistic is, because it was a survey that was done. It was very low. I was wondering what you are doing to ensure that our service personnel know that there is a covenant there that can help them and their families. I know that we have charities that we are relying on to do this, but what is the actual Ministry of Defence doing to ensure service personnel know that the armed forces covenant exists?

**Alistair Carns:** There are two things I would say on your previous comment about metrics across the councils. There is no way in which we capture the data at the moment. There is no generic standardised way we capture data. When you turn round and go, "Which councils are doing what?", it is very difficult for us to go, "The good, the bad and the ugly". We have to improve our data capture, not just on veterans, but across





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

the whole armed forces community when it comes to local authority and delivery of the covenant. We absolutely recognise that we have to move on that. We have a couple of plans moving forward on it.

The second bit is in reference to individuals in the armed forces understanding. Over half, 54%, of personnel reported knowing at least a little bit about the covenant as a whole. We need to work harder to make sure they are educated on what the covenant is and, in particular, what it is not. There is a lot of misperception out there as to what it is not and then we find ourselves dealing with lots of complaints when, in reality, sometimes it is just due to a lack of understanding. That is on us to educate our personnel better. Also, we have to work on a mechanism of how we educate local authorities more effectively.

**James Greenrod:** It is a really valid point because I have certainly had conversations where people have said to me, "The covenant is just a veteran thing, isn't it?" No, it is a whole of the armed forces community thing. For the serving community, it is, "Okay, what is in it for us?" When we can point to specific things—if we can point to Forces Help to Buy all the way through to having your car insurance and mobile phone bill paused when you deploy on ops and say, "This is all part of the no-disadvantage package of measures"—you see the lights go on and it sparks. Some of the measures, certainly in the education and the serving family healthcare space that we hope the legislation will give us some stronger levers on, as well as things such as spousal and partner employment, will make it feel more relevant and pertinent for the serving community.

**Alistair Carns:** I served for 24 years and I do not think that I had heard about it until the last two years of service.

**Sarah Houghton:** Officials are working to look at the best way to communicate with our armed forces personnel, looking at a specific comms plan and training on the covenant. We recently launched a families hub as well for the armed forces community as a whole. It has links in there specifically to the armed forces covenant, as well as all the benefits and other useful links in terms of education, childcare, healthcare et cetera. That has had some good feedback so far.

Q135 **Ian Roome:** To finish off on this section, Minister, I have heard you say, particularly towards veterans, "Ensure that you tell your GP that you are a veteran". Could you explain to the Committee what advantages there would be to that veteran telling their GP that they have served in the forces?

**Alistair Carns:** There is a legal duty where they have to consider that. I find that, in a lot of cases across the veteran space, there is a plethora of help out there, but it is very difficult to find which bit of help is suitable for you in the right space at the right time. I am really clear that, if you make an active approach to look into the system, there is often help everywhere, but it is just difficult to get hold of it.





I go back to the numbers of the Canadian system compared to our system. It is on us to put in place a structure that makes that easier for veterans. On the doctors case in particular, I find that sometimes veterans do not want to shout about being veterans. We talked about Northern Ireland. That is an obvious one. Also in the UK, there is a thing where you do not really want to champion it. I always encourage veterans, "Make sure you mention it", because there are actually quite a lot of benefits out there. It is not perfect, but there are a lot of benefits out there.

**Sarah Houghton:** There are two specific initiatives we might raise as well, which are for veterans to raise if they have mental health problems. There is something called Op COURAGE, which has seen about 35,000 referrals since it has been going. It has been very successful. Op RESTORE is for where they need help with physical health. This puts them into touch with the various pathways and is managed by the charity sector to try to provide them the support and care, whether it is clinical or not, that they need. Op RESTORE has had over 1,000 veterans so far since it was launched.

Q136 **Alex Baker:** Hello, Minister and panel. I would like us to come on to your thinking regarding how the covenant can become more inclusive for parts of our armed forces community who sometimes receive less focus. As the Minister will know, my constituency is home to the largest population of both serving and veteran Gurkhas in the UK. We also have other serving and veteran personnel with non-UK nationality.

Our non-UK nationality personnel put up with a lot. They serve our country and make a huge contribution, yet there are barriers to their career progression. We do not give them full citizenship, as they do in the US. We charge them for their visas to bring their family to the UK. We charge them when their family applies for indefinite leave to remain. These issues affect one in 20 of all of our personnel and 15% of partners of serving personnel. Is this legislation an opportunity to show our non-UK nationality personnel our full respect and sort out some of these issues?

**Alistair Carns:** Our non-UK personnel, whether they be Gurkhas or otherwise, provide an absolute sterling part of our armed forces. I have served with the Gurkhas and others all over the world and they deserve our utmost respect. From a Gurkha perspective, which I know is linked to your constituency, I am meeting the ambassador to Nepal next week and we are going to discuss some of these issues. We have about 18,000 Gurkha veterans in the UK. Of course, we have the Gurkha welfare advice centre and the trust fund as well, which is moving in the right direction. We are absolutely committed as a Government to scrapping visa fees for non-UK veterans who have served the country for four years or more. We are absolutely on that and in discussions at the moment with the Home Office that will hopefully move forward in due course. For the specifics, I will hand over to the broader team.



**James Greenrod:** It is important to understand what are legacy issues and what are current issues. They are both equally important, but our levers for dealing with them are different. As the Minister has alluded to, the rule currently is that, if you have served for six years, your visa fees are waived. This Government have made a commitment to reduce that to four and to include dependants in that.

Within defence, there are also things within our gift that we can do. For example, we previously had a rule that, if you are a serving person and you are deployed overseas, and a close family member gets taken seriously ill, our joint casualty and compassionate centre will get you home. The policy said "get you back to the UK", which, if your close family member is in Ghana or Fiji, is not much good, so we have changed that policy. We are looking at a raft of other ones, which, frankly, just through a lack of thought, did not take some of this into account. Where we are identifying those, they are being changed.

Also, as the Minister has said, part of the challenge is that the immigration process is complicated. Therefore, making sure that we have the support at unit and service level to help navigate our people through the application process is really important, as well as being open with them up front as to the hoops that will need to be jumped through.

Q137 **Alex Baker:** So you can say today that you will be thinking in the broadest terms about this community when that legislation comes forward.

**Alistair Carns:** Those individuals who have served our country deserve our support, so we are absolutely supportive. There is a bit within defence, as individuals come to the end of their tenure, to make sure that they understand what they need to do and when, and are prepared for when they leave. We will make sure that that is included within the career transition pathway. It will not fit all, because some people perhaps want to return to their country of origin, and others will want to stay, so that needs to be balanced. It needs to be an individual choice, but we will absolutely help them with that process.

Q138 **Alex Baker:** I also want to touch on bereaved families, who are another part of our community that it is really important are recognised in all of this. How is the covenant going to be there for our families who have paid the ultimate sacrifice?

**Alistair Carns:** I have been on operations where people have died and left family and children behind. I do not think that, in any way, shape or form, from my perspective, we can do enough to support them. They are front and centre of this. I have met with over nine bereavement charities that have come together to talk about what more we can do for bereaved families, whether that be the scholarship scheme for bereaved children, all the way through to ensuring that bereaved loved ones have the support required.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

You absolutely have my word that they will be included within this and are a critical component of the armed forces community. While loved ones are serving or where, perhaps, they have passed away and afterwards, they are still members of that community for evermore.

**Vice Admiral Hally:** We have talked a bit about the principle of due regard, which applies to the vast majority of the service community, but there is also the principle of special consideration, which applies to those members of the community who have gone above and beyond, and made the ultimate sacrifice; bereaved members of our community; and members of the community who have had life-changing injuries. For those people, that is where simply making sure that they are not disadvantaged is not good enough. For those who are bereaved or with life-changing injuries, that is where we have to go further to make sure that the nation recognises the sacrifices that they have made and that we take particular care of them.

**James Greenrod:** I was at a meeting of the Defence Bereaved Families Group just last week, and one of the things that really struck home with me is that bereavement hits everybody differently. We have just reissued and relaunched our purple pack, which is the guidance that a visiting officer takes with them when they go to do that dreaded knock on the door. It sets out the full range of support that is available through defence, wider Government and the third sector. The visiting officer can use that as a handrail to talk that individual and their family through what is the hardest of times.

Q139 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** As you will know, veterans often come up in our evidence as a group who feel that they are not as well supported as others by the covenant. I want to thank you, Minister, for your engagement so far with me and the nuclear veterans, but, as you will know, an internal investigation was launched last November. The Secretary of State assured me and this Committee that nothing at all was being withheld, yet the *Daily Mirror* has just reported that at least 250 files that reference blood tests had not been disclosed to Ministers or in FOI requests, due to a filing error. Were you aware of this?

**Alistair Carns:** I just want to be really clear on nuclear test veterans. I have been really honest and open on everything that we are doing. Bit part reviews that look at a section of a section of a section within a single service as part of a broader defence community are not the way to get the broadest and most honest view of what files were or were not kept within the nuclear test veterans community.

I have been really clear throughout, to everybody within the nuclear test veterans space, that we are doing a comprehensive review of all the files. A lot of people have said things in the past without doing that larger review. It would be remiss of me to say that I have or have not seen, or have looked at a section, until that is done.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

I am meeting nuclear test veterans, perhaps with you, at the end of the month again to make sure the dialogue continues and that they are really clear. The review is comprehensive. We are an analogue Department. You have 70 or 80 years of files about as thick as a *Yellow Pages* in hangars all over the UK. We need to do this comprehensively, and I will not be drawn in to comment on it until we have done that comprehensive summary and I can look you in the eye and comprehensively say “yes”, “no” or “indifferent”. It is really important.

Q140 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Do you know when it will be concluded?

**Alistair Carns:** No. The scale of the issue is gargantuan in terms of looking through those filing systems. We will give you an update at the end of the month, when we are sat down with the nuclear test veterans.

Q141 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** You know, as well I do, that they are dying, and their families are desperate for them to get some justice. The issue here is that new files are being uncovered because of admin errors. There is a history in this country, isn't there, of big scandals where things have perhaps been not shared with Ministers or Secretaries of State? With the infected blood scandal, a previous Secretary of State said that information was withheld from them by officials.

What I am trying to drive at is how sure and confident you are that all the information that you need in this review is available and is being shared fully with you and the Secretary of State.

**Alistair Carns:** A ministerial role is a leadership role, and I will not blame officials or the Department. It is my job. If they fail me, I have not asked the right question or sought the right demands. I am being really clear with them that I want a comprehensive review of all the files. I want to be able to look at Parliament in the House, at defence orals, at one of these Committees or wherever else, and say that I have looked through it thoroughly and “yes”, “no” or “indifferent”. Until then, I will be giving you a snippet of looking through a straw pipe rather than having a broader view of the whole system.

Q142 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Have you been to AWE to view the files yourself, as the previous Minister did?

**Alistair Carns:** I definitely have not been to AWE yet. For me to micromanage and jump right into the middle of a big review may skew the whole system and detract them from the broader and far more important objective of looking holistically across the whole filing system. I will delve into the detail when I think I need to.

Q143 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Will you declassify Merlin?

**Alistair Carns:** I will not comment on the filing system. What I will say is that we will meet at the end of the month. We will discuss this with the NTVs. I will give you an update on where we are. We will be completely open and honest. The only thing that would ever get in the way of this is not a conspiracy theory or nefariousness. It is usually bureaucracy and



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

poor data management, whether that is analogue or, indeed, digital, but we will get to the bottom of it.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** That has been the root of previous scandals. It has not been deliberate. I am just concerned that this may be going the same way, Minister, but I will leave it there until our next meeting.

Q144 **Chair:** Minister, the issue of nuclear test veterans has been raised in previous evidence sessions, including with the Secretary of State, who intimated that he would make sure that all the records are gone through and that there is nothing in secret. The recent article by Susie Boniface in the *Daily Mirror* showed that secret records about experiments on troops were allegedly hidden from Ministers and from Parliament. No doubt the Committee may well be coming back to this, but we will await your findings on that.

Before I move on, I just wanted to get something on record in terms of excessive fees. You intimated that you will, rightly, be reducing the visa requirements for non-UK nationals to four years. In its submission to our Committee, the Royal British Legion said that the indefinite leave to remain visa fees should be removed from personnel from non-UK backgrounds and their families. Is that what you have committed to today? I just want to get that clarity.

**Alistair Carns:** This Government are committed to scrapping visa fees for non-UK veterans who have served our country for four or more years, and their dependants. That is for the record.

**Chair:** Okay, so not fully what they wanted.

Q145 **Lincoln Jopp:** "Go big or go home" is fantastic. It is a lovely intent. Wouldn't it be fantastic if you just left it at that? Unfortunately, as you and I know, what gets measured gets resourced. There is a really knotty problem, as you roll this out to other Government Departments, as to how you agree those measures of effectiveness.

You know the problems. To come back to your effects-based planning, you know the problem, and the eradication of those problems is the outcome that you want. To what extent are you able, with other Government Departments, to design the socket into which they plug, or are they being allowed to say, "My return says I did not knowingly disadvantage any member of the forces community as a result of the actions of the DWP", for example?

**Alistair Carns:** At the moment, the structure that we have to enforce the covenant and, therefore, measure the effectiveness at the grassroots level, the charitable level, the local level and the national level does not exist. That is the reality. We do not have a methodology. We do not have the sockets. We do not have the network. We do not have the synapses. There is nothing in place at the moment.

I would argue that, as we move forward, we need to work out what that structure looks like to ensure that we can get the grassroots feel from



individuals in the armed forces—and the armed forces commissioner will play a role in that—through a network that delivers that for serving armed forces personnel and for veterans, so as to help pool data from the charitable sector, which has a large chunk of it, although it is often in silos and not necessarily the most comprehensive or collaborative. That can then be articulated and analysed to work out whether we are delivering on the covenant as a whole. We have plans afoot, and they will come out in due course.

Q146 **Lincoln Jopp:** When this legislation comes to the House, people are going to want to know that it is not just performance art, but is going to have an effect. Those measures of effectiveness are clearly crucial.

**Alistair Carns:** I completely agree with you. There is a requirement for the ability to analyse that data, but also to ensure that we have something monitoring the support mechanisms right down at the local level. We also need to have an education and communication pathway for all those local authorities that perhaps do not see the covenant as a priority and have not been educated in it. How do we have that network? Where does it feed into? Once analysed, that data should then come up to us at the ministerial level and the Office for Veterans' Affairs to ensure that we can then hold other Government Departments to account if we do not think that they are delivering, or indeed spread best practice if it is working really well.

**Sarah Houghton:** In two other areas, we are developing statutory guidance for these new organisations to abide by, and there will be templates whereby they should be recording their decisions and the actions that they are taking with due regard when making policy decisions about that kind of thing. We can look to that as to how we assess how this is going.

The covenant annual report is another way in which we can use that going forwards as a potential measurement or evaluation of things that have been working in terms of policy changes that other Government Departments or the devolved Administrations have been making. I know that that was one area in which we have been speaking to the charitable sector about whether we use the report in that way in future.

**Alistair Carns:** We have some amazing people out there in local councils already, and you will know some of them from your own constituencies. They are armed forces and veterans champions, some paid and some not. Some do it on top of a job, and some as full-time employment. There is a requirement, as we said before, for standardising some of that support.

Interestingly, if you were to speak to them in your constituency and ask, "When you get the insight and understanding from the grassroots level, where does your data go?", it does not go anywhere; it sits there at the council level. That is a great network of understanding that already exists, but we need to make a pipeline to ensure that their data can come





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

up and be analysed correctly. It is a systems approach that we need to take to this. We have best practice from some other countries that we need to mould together and do what is right for the UK.

**Lincoln Jopp:** It is a huge piece of work to accompany the Bill. If any Government Departments or local authorities do not get the point, limited conscription would be perfect.

Q147 **Chair:** I want to move now to annual reporting. Some of our evidence says that the annual reporting mechanism gives a very limited picture of the covenant's impact. Basically, it is more focused on actions than outcomes. That was more and more apparent to us from various submissions. How could the annual reporting process be improved?

**Alistair Carns:** In some cases, there are lots of annual reports and statistics that come up, which are important individually, but really significant collectively. When you pull those together, you get quite a good feel for it, but they do not replicate or represent, in some cases, what is happening at the grassroots level. That is why I go back to the point that I just made about individuals who are dealing with veterans and armed forces communities in the charitable sector, who often have the best feel and understanding of what is and is not working. We need to make sure that there is the correct pipeline up and through to air those issues and that we can support them in the most effective manner.

**Vice Admiral Hally:** The other thing to think about here is the role of the armed forces commissioner. The armed forces commissioner is an independent voice for the armed forces and their families, and provides that means to raise to the surface, before Parliament, issues that affect service personnel and their families, and possibly prevent them seeing a long-term career for themselves in service of the nation. These are the issues that Parliament will probably be exposed to more readily and have the opportunity to delve into more deeply, should you wish.

Q148 **Chair:** In the submission from Cobseo, Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope intimated that, basically, the reporting is less good at recognising what is happening within wider society. It is very good at, "This is what the state is doing", which is great, but not so good at, "This is what is happening around us". Joining Forces said that the social impact of the covenant needs to be evidenced as well. In your view, what evidence should the annual report look to capture to show whether the covenant is performing well?

**Alistair Carns:** From a covenant performance perspective, it is going to be very difficult to capture that data through that reporting mechanism, because, as I have just described, there is no structure in place to pull it up and through from what really are the deliveries of the covenant. Local authorities are going to deal with the armed forces individuals at the grassroots level, all the way through to veterans and their families. We have to carefully look at how we pool that data and then analyse it in





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

future to make sure that we are making the right decisions on what outcomes do or do not work.

Cobseo is a really interesting set-up that provides a very good and interesting insight into the third sector, which is also useful. Other surveys, such as AFCAS, et cetera, while maybe not focused on the covenant, do provide us an insight as to how our armed forces personnel see the delivery of services and support.

If I was to baseline before handing over, we have to restructure how we look at pulling the data up from what is a really broad spectrum of outputs that are going to enhance in 2026 onwards to ensure that the right bits of our local and national architecture are delivering the right support to our serving, our veterans and our armed forces families.

**James Greenrod:** This is something that the team and I are actively looking at. We know that the covenant annual report will need to change going forward, because it was established before we had the current duty extension, so far less than the one that we are now bringing in.

At the back of the covenant annual report, there are some quite useful metrics around service children and educational attainment levels compared to non-service children, around waiting times for cancer treatments, and around access to social housing. There are some things there that we can look at and say, "Given where we want to take the new legislation and the duty extension, what are some of the output and outcome measures that we should look at in the future?"

I really do agree with the Minister that this will not be straightforward. It will take some while to bed in, but it is absolutely on our radar and we are starting those conversations now.

Q149 **Chair:** Minister, you will be aware that our Defence Committee has held annual evidence sessions with an MOD Minister to review how well the armed forces covenant is working. First of all, will you commit to appearing before us going forward on an annual basis just to look at what is happening with the armed forces covenant?

**Alistair Carns:** Yes, 100%.

Q150 **Chair:** Great, I just wanted to clarify that first of all. Going forward, how do you see parliamentary scrutiny of the covenant working? If the legal duties are to extend across a range of Government Departments, while it is always a pleasure to have an MOD Minister in front of us, how do you envisage the parliamentary scrutiny to be taking place?

**Alistair Carns:** It is a really important subject. The reality is that we can set the parameters and the principles with the covenant, but other Government Departments will need to make sure that they are implemented. I would argue that, if you were to move forward on a covenant that is cross-government, it would be useful to ask the other Government Departments in particular how they are implementing it,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

because they will have far more detailed knowledge. It would also be good to hold them to account in some cases. There are some fantastic examples of where they do an amazing job, and it would be good for them to champion it.

Q151 **Chair:** What information about other Departments' performance will be made available to assist public and parliamentary scrutiny?

**Alistair Carns:** We will try our best to make sure that as much information is available as possible and is open source. I go back to my original comment that the structures in place to provide a detailed analysis of what is good, what is bad and what is not working does not necessarily exist at the moment. We are starting from scratch, especially as we broaden out the covenant to include such a broad amount of Government Departments. We need to put in place a structure that makes sure that people deliver service and that we have proper analysis of what is and is not working. Until that happens, we are going to have to continue to iteratively build our feedback chains up.

Q152 **Chair:** Just before we conclude, I wanted to come back to something that Mr Greenrod referred to earlier in terms of the work of local government. We already know that local government is significantly overstretched in terms of the provision of public services, given its resources. If we are looking to extend the covenant duty, while the LGA, in its submission, said, "Yes, that is great. We are more than happy with that", how are we going to ensure that there is appropriate funding and resourcing so that local government can undertake that extra task?

**James Greenrod:** Unfortunately, I cannot offer a blank cheque, but there genuinely are all sorts of good examples of where local authorities recognise that it is a self-sustaining model to be supporting their armed forces community or are pooling resources together. As the Minister has also alluded to, is this somebody doing it on top of their day job? For some of us, it might feel that that should not be the case. Depending on the size and scale of the armed forces demographic in any local area, it does not necessarily need to be a large number of individuals who are focused on this.

What we are looking to get out, as part of a raft of statutory and wider guidance surrounding the extension, are some case studies of how different local authorities and local authority groupings are able to be best practice in delivering the covenant, really looking to build on the positives and having the conversation around, "This is what good looks like".

Q153 **Chair:** Minister, I hope that you are having these conversations with the Local Government Minister, because we should not be walking into a situation whereby the extra responsibilities are not clearly defined, well supported and co-developed. Are those discussions already happening?

**Alistair Carns:** They are, and the key word there is "co-developed". They need to be done in conjunction with the other Government



Departments, so that they understand how to implement them and the costs associated with them. This is really easy when there is a national threat and everybody understands the relevance and the utility of the armed forces, or indeed where lots of people have served. We sometimes do not necessarily explain or articulate the threat properly, and we do not have that many people who have served in society any more, so we have that drift. The covenant will bring this back together and start sewing society and defence more closely together over time.

**Sarah Houghton:** Just to reassure on that, as part of our engagement with other Government Departments, including MHCLG, we are conducting a new burdens assessment as well, so we will take that into account.

Q154 **Chair:** I am glad to hear that. My final point would be on evidence that we received from Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope, which was around expanding the covenant. As you are looking to do that with the Armed Forces Bill and the legislation moving forward, if we end up just making everything a priority, nothing becomes a priority. There is considerable concern in the defence community about losing focus, so how can we make sure, within the upcoming legislation, that this is not a shallow process going forward and that we remain focused on our brave servicemen and women, and our veterans?

**Alistair Carns:** There are two things. First, I would argue that, while we have to maintain focus, it was too narrow in the past. As a result, a lot of other Government Departments need to support. That will be broadened out. Secondly, if we are going to ensure that, we need to have a mechanism and a structure in place that ensures that people deliver in line with the principles of that covenant. Without that, we will not be able to hold people to account.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. Minister, it has been a pleasure to take part in this hearing, and I thank you very much for your time. In terms of the armed forces covenant inquiry, this evidence session has proved very productive. Before we wrap up the hearing, I would like to thank Minister Carns, as well as Vice Admiral Haley, Ms Houghton and Mr Greenrod. Thank you for appearing before the Committee.