

Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Bill, HC 1281

Thursday 4 March 2021

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Members present: James Sunderland (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Tonia Antoniazzi; Dan Carden; Leo Docherty; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Darren Henry; Mrs Sharon Hodgson; Mr Richard Holden; Mr Kevan Jones; Jack Lopresti; Johnny Mercer; Carol Monaghan; Stephen Morgan; Miss Sarah Dines; and Mrs Heather Wheeler.

Questions 1 to 51

Witnesses

[I](#): General (Ret'd) Sir John McColl, Chair at the Confederation of Service Charities; Laura Pett, Head of Public Affairs and Campaigns at The Royal British Legion; and Ted Arnold, Senior Public Affairs and Policy Manager at Help for Heroes.

[II](#): Anna Wright, Chief Executive Officer at the Naval Families Federation; Collette Musgrave, Executive Officer at the Army Families Federation; and Maria Lyle, Director at the Royal Air Force Families Federation.

[III](#): Colonel (Ret'd) John Rollins, Chief Executive Officer at the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland; and Canon Peter Bruinvels CC, Armed Forces Champion and Civilian-Military Liaison Adviser to both Surrey County Council and Kent County Council

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [AFB0001 - General \(Ret'd\) Sir John McColl \(Cobseo\)](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Colonel John Rollins and Canon Peter Bruinvels.

Chair: Welcome to this third and final evidence session this afternoon for the Armed Forces Bill Select Committee. My name is James Sunderland MP, and I am very proud to welcome two expert witnesses. We will be talking a lot, I expect, about Armed Forces Champions and about what these very important people do for the armed forces community across the UK.

I welcome Colonel (Ret'd) John Rollins, who is the chief executive officer for the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland. John, you are very welcome, and thank you for coming on. We also have Canon Peter Bruinvels, who is the Armed Forces Champion and civilian-military liaison officer for both Surrey and Kent. Both of you, I know, are very eminent in your field, and we are very interested in hearing what you have to say this afternoon. We have had no pre-submitted questions, so we are going to go straight to the floor. Will members please step up to the plate with their questions?

Stuart Anderson: There are a few hands up, but I don't think you can see them, Chair. Don't think I am hogging it and have jumped in front of them.

Chair: Just wave, please.

Q43 **Stuart Anderson:** It is great to speak to you both. My first question is for Canon Peter. I have been looking at your bio. You currently liaise with 23 different local authorities. That is very extensive and thank you for everything you are doing as an Armed Forces Champion in those regions. We have heard a lot about local authorities and how this might impact them. How do you believe this Bill will support you liaising with local authorities, and local authorities in carrying out their roles supporting the armed forces community?

Canon Peter Bruinvels: Thank you very much, Mr Anderson. I am delighted to be here. In fact, until recently I was looking after, would you believe, over 70 local authorities, unitaries and county councils. I find that most councils, without any obligation or demand in any legislation, want to support the military, because it is the right thing to do.

Indeed, I was in your Wolverhampton area with Andy Street talking about a big civilian-military partnership board, which will bring in some of the questions that have been asked today, such as NHS issues, admissions, SEND and those sorts of thing. I think you are aware of this, but the majority of local authorities designate local departmental officers to look after the company.

There was a question earlier about governance and devolved Assemblies, which will probably be asked more, but I should underline that every

single Government Department has a Covenant champion Minister. It is all squared up and they are all working, so I believe they welcome this because it would be, in a way, celebrating what they are already doing, and they are doing it very well. We have Stephen Morgan on the call. I have been down training his own Covenant team in the Solent authority. I find, above party politics, this Bill seems to be doing the right thing.

- Q44 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you very much. I would be delighted, another time, to hear more about what you are doing in Wolverhampton. I would champion that. Colonel John, you have a very large remit over in Northern Ireland. I am aware that you oversee the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office and they report in to you. How is this going to support veterans over in Northern Ireland?

Colonel John Rollins: Chair and everyone, first, can I say how good it is to be here? I am delighted to be able to talk to you. The first thing to say is that the Bill is welcome from our perspective, if nothing else for the moral support it gives to the relationships that we try to develop locally in order to apply the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland.

I should explain that the reason I am in front of you here is that for this specific legislation, the structural arrangements that flow from the 1998 agreement prevent our devolved Government from having a direct relationship with the MoD. That reflects a wide range of ongoing political, security and societal sensitivities that we have. Therefore, we, the RFCA, as the one arm's-length body funded by the MoD, with a set of networks, some underpinned by primary legislation, exploit that to develop bottom-up relationships to deliver various aspects of defence business, in particular the Covenant. That brings us into the picture.

We have developed a wide range of bespoke relationships with the bodies that matter. Here we are talking not so much about local authorities in our case, for particular local reasons, but housing executives, health trusts and the whole education sector. The Bill encourages those bodies with which we do interface to lean into that relationship. The extent to which there is legal compulsion behind the Bill, as far as they are concerned, is a separate question mark. There are tensions that arise from local issues, but in general we welcome the Bill. How much real impact it will have, compared with other parts of the UK, is a different issue, because, as far as MoD business is concerned, we are in a completely different environment.

- Q45 **Mrs Hodgson:** Welcome Canon Peter and Colonel John—it's lovely to see you this afternoon. My first question is mainly to Canon Peter. Do you have concerns about local authorities being given new legal responsibilities to deliver the Covenant—as welcome as they are—but without the extra resources to go with them?

Canon Peter Bruinvels: That is a very good question. Certainly, local authorities are already doing that, and I think it is called good will, which I mentioned earlier. They have done that because it is the right thing to do, and in each council department, as I said earlier, we have Armed Forces



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Champions, whether it is education, democratic services, SEN, or anything like that. So, they are already doing that to a large extent.

I hope that there might be some funding, but what I would say is that I have been to more than 270 local authorities, from Inverness right down to Plymouth, and from Shropshire across the Colchester, and I find that they are all doing it. They do not need a stick to do it; they are doing it because they want to do it, and because councillors represent the armed forces community and so many other constituencies.

I consider them to be doing more of the same, and in a way, the Bill coming in is encouraging and supporting them, and, as I said earlier to Mr Anderson, celebrating the roles they already play. We have Armed Forces Champions competing to be the Armed Forces Champion in Waverley, Surrey, for instance. I think seven different councillors wanted to do it, because they wanted to support the military.

Q46 Mrs Hodgson: That is excellent. This question is to you both, if I may. What is your assessment of the delivery of the Covenant at local authority level across England? We know that some local authorities do excellent work, as you have said, but if you had to give an assessment across the piece, what would it be? Colonel John, would you like to start on that?

Colonel John Rollins: The first thing to explain here is that our local authorities, unlike the rest of the UK, do not have leverage over health, education and housing provision. That is not to say that there is not stuff that they can do throughout the community.

We have 11 local authorities, and, reflecting local politics, five of them have signed up to the Covenant, five have declined to do so, and one has passed a motion—I am reluctant to use the term "anti-Armed Forces Covenant" but bluntly, that is in effect what it is. That gives you a picture of the difficult landscape. As for the authorities that do lean in, again, that largely reflects local societal attitudes. They are very keen to help as far as their resources and ability to lever are concerned.

I referred to the primary legislation that underpins the RFCA network. Because of that, we have an elected representative from each of the 11 authorities, irrespective of political leanings of members of the organisation.

Very usefully, some time ago the then Minister for Personnel and Veterans did announce in the lower House that those representatives would be veterans champions. So, we have someone in each of those authorities to whom local individuals can go and take their case, but in effect they are referring back to us at the centre and holding our feet to the fire, rather than the local authority. I am sorry that is a bit long-winded, but I hope it gives you a feel for the fact that we are in a different landscape.

Canon Peter Bruinvels: I am slightly biased because I have gone right round the country training 380 Armed Forces Champions and 3,200



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frontline contact centre housing managers and those sorts of people, so I am bound to say this: I think they are doing a first-class job.

You can assess or monitor under the MoD employer recognition scheme. A lot of those authorities have got silver. Indeed, over 300 have got gold. They have had to prove that they are delivering the Covenant. The employment issue, which has been raised by the other witnesses, is one of the key things to get the silver or the gold—that they are delivering, and they are military-friendly.

I find wherever I go that there is keenness. I think they are qualified to do it, they want to do it, and they find time. Kent County Council suspended all standing orders and let me present to the entire council at an annual council meeting on the Covenant. Surrey let me speak to the cabinet; it was similar in Oxfordshire. I find they want to do it. It is not just doing it—it is almost like a charter mark.

If they get the silver award and then the gold, they are proving they care and putting their money where their mouth is—they are supporting and listening to the needs of the armed forces community. More importantly, they are actually asking, when someone comes to their surgery, “Did you serve?” and then we can triage them through. We have an app called Forces Connect, which has made it easier to give that support.

Q47 Chair: I am going to let Stephen Morgan come in shortly, but can I quickly seize upon a point that you made, Canon Peter? It is about the door already being open—the degree to which councils across the UK are already very willing to support the Armed Forces Covenant, through good will. My question is to John. Can I ask you about the degree to which councils across Northern Ireland might be supportive, particularly with regard to the different types of community that we both know?

Colonel John Rollins: Those who have signed the Covenant are extremely supportive within the resources available and the leave they have. There is a strong relationship between wider defence—that includes all three services. At any one time and across Northern Ireland, because of the sensitivities, we in defence—by that I mean the Army, Navy and ourselves—are really quite tightly joined up and co-ordinated in how we engage with the local community.

Within those supportive authorities, lots of activities are going on—that wider engagement in activities to specifically support veterans. That support is nice to have. People living here and all our permanent garrisons over here and a lot of our veterans do live in those areas, so that level of support is keenly felt and keenly appreciated.

Elsewhere, it is more business-like, I have to say. It is interesting—looking at the provisions of the Bill and comparing the Bill with the local legislation that underscores the need for absolute equality and that discourages any one part of society from being leaned into, if you like—that in these other difficult areas that can play in our favour, in that formally, the relationship is business-like. Given some of the challenges our service community and



veterans in particular face, that imposes limitations, but at the same time the business-like approach allows us to function reasonably well, if that makes sense.

Canon Peter Bruinvels: I would just make one point. The majority of the councils have their own civil military partnership board, so they are doing business and looking at the issues of education, employment and housing, and they have meetings with the unit welfare officers to ensure that the issues are getting through. This morning, I was handling a major case—a veterans' issue. It comes to me and I triage, but in this case I am going with it.

I think the business side to it really works. These panels, which are absolutely going all over the country—indeed, in Inverness I am suggesting how they should set theirs up—hear the issues and get things done. Whether it is elections and getting recruits from, say, Pirbright on to the electoral register, improving service children's performance or health waiting lists—all those sorts of things—they all come through these panels, and I cannot commend the operations of panels more. They are accountable, a number of them have annual conferences—Surrey, Kent and Hampshire all had conferences recently—and they stand up to be counted.

It is a partnership with the military—that is the thing. So particularly for Mr Morgan, if I come into the offices in Portsmouth and say, "I was in uniform," in the old days they would have queried you and thought, "Is it a bomb scare?"; now, they are saying, "Oh, he has come for the Covenant meeting." That is the thing: the military are now welcome, recognised and in partnership with the local authorities.

Q48 Stephen Morgan: Thank you both for your statements and for presenting yourselves as witnesses to the Committee. Canon Peter, you have painted a relatively rosy picture of local authorities across the four nations, but with 40% of funding having been stripped out of local authorities in the last 10 years, what do you think the challenges are for local authorities in delivering the Covenant?

Canon Peter Bruinvels: As I said earlier, I think it is above party politics, and they find the money for it. Although it is not one of the core services, it is a service which embraces all parts of the community, and therefore they want to do it. Your authority, through Caroline Hopper, got gold recently from the Ministry of Defence, and it works because it is there.

Now, admittedly, there are cuts around, but fortunately the military continue to survive. It could be that we have Armed Forces Covenant grant funds coming in. Certainly, we had a big one in the south-east, which you are aware of, on the Forces Connect app, which was working in partnership with the military and taking information out, ensuring that the app was to give a point of contact. So I think we are okay on it. I agree that it is tight, but I feel that the will is there. I do not think the Bill will be costly, because—I am sorry; I am repeating myself—the majority of this work is being done already.



Q49 **Stephen Morgan:** I would not expect Portsmouth, as the heart and home of the Royal Navy, to be anything less than outstanding on the Armed Forces Covenant, but obviously some local authorities may struggle because of their resources. What do you think those challenges are? How will the legislation help them?

Canon Peter Bruinvels: One thing we should be doing is cross-border co-operation. When I did training up in Cambridgeshire, we had the local authorities from all round there. When I went to Essex, Brentwood, Colchester and Southend all came in for the training. So we need to share resources. Someone could look at education, someone could look at school transport, someone could look at health and someone could look at housing and even getting on the electoral roll.

You may know that a large number of the military do not actually go on the electoral roll. They may not necessarily vote, but they do not even register because they do not see a connection with the local community. So what I have done—it has been looked at by the Electoral Commission and the Home Office—is to encourage them to register for a service vote, which is five years.

So there is sharing best practice. We have got training. All my training—Armed Forces Champion, the Covenant and frontline staff training—is on something called the Knowledge Hub with the Local Government Association. It is easy to download. I can make it available to members of the Select Committee.

I think that helps, because we will have to have quite a lot of remote training going on. But when I went to Inverness, they had brought in the Highlands, and all kinds of other local authorities came, and we shared the training then. When I went to Preston, the whole of Lancashire came in.

The other thing is that we mustn't forget that we have to train the military, because we have to manage their expectations. They think this Bill is going to give them everything—the best house in Portsmouth, the best school in Wolverhampton and those sorts of things—and there is no guarantee that will be the case, but they will be looked after. So we need to manage their expectations as well.

Q50 **Stephen Morgan:** Thank you. This question is to you both. On Second Reading, there was a suggestion from a number of colleagues across the House about making the post of Armed Forces Covenant Champion an obligation, to make sure that local authorities have one. Do you think that that would be a good idea, and if so, why?

Canon Peter Bruinvels: It was Tobias Ellwood—I heard him raise it—who was the first one. I have been an Armed Forces Champion since 2012, but I was appointed because the council wanted to do that; and it was a similar case when I was with 11th Infantry Brigade. I think it's something that is right, but I don't think you need to turn it into legislation.

The other thing is that you could find some local authorities forcing someone to be the Armed Forces Champion even though he didn't want



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to, because they wanted to stop him being a member of the cabinet or there was a reshuffle going on—those sorts of things. So I think we have got it right at the moment. I think we should recognise the role of the Armed Forces Champion, and certainly something that I would like to present to the Select Committee is a job description as to how it works.

Colonel John Rollins: I don't think it would be a wise thing to do, as far as Northern Ireland was concerned, to make it a top-down, compulsory thing. We have by default, as I explained earlier, our own champions, embedded in each of the authorities, who do what they can. We have come some way in working with them, developing protocols with them, training them and exposing them to all the things that are available for veterans in particular and that they can advise on. Given that that exists, to impose anything top down—apart from anything else, you would expose the political divide, if you like, between our authorities.

If I may just take this opportunity, Peter raised the point about expectations and I would like to echo that. A lot of our veterans— notwithstanding what I said earlier, we do have issues. There is still an ongoing security issue here, more so perhaps in terms of the perception of security. There is the fact that so many of our veterans—we do have, for the population, a disproportionate number, for historical reasons, but a lot of them are in areas in which they operated and in which they feel that not all the local community is sympathetic towards them. So there are a lot of sensitivities, and I think many of them may have been looking to this Bill as some sort of magic wand to solve everything. It won't do that. It is a welcome step, as I said earlier, but certainly when we are in Northern Ireland, we have to be realistic about the situation we have. The question is how far legislation coming from Westminster outwards can, through compulsion, create the ends we want, as opposed to finding ways of getting the outputs we want for our people within our particular environment.

The final point I would like to make on that is a really big thank you and acknowledgement of the value of the Covenant fund overseen by Melloney Poole and her team, and of our ability to draw down from that in order to target these resources into regionally based solutions, embedded in the community, and to find ways around the challenges that face us.

Q51 **Stephen Morgan:** The final question from me builds on the points that were just made. From your experience as champions, do you think that the duty should also apply to central Government and devolved Governments around the UK?

Canon Peter Bruinvels: I would argue that the Ministries already have that requirement. As I said earlier, each Department has a Covenant champion—a Minister with responsibility to be the champion. The annual report lists them at the back.

I think it is good to have a champion in each area if there is a need. The opportunity to raise issues cross-border—it may be in Northern Ireland, or cross-border between local authorities—and report back to the leader is a



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key thing; similarly, in Scotland. We are doing a lot of work with the Welsh devolved Assembly and with the Scottish Parliament through our app, and we find that we merge together. We are all doing the same things—raising the issues of the military, managing their expectations, but getting things done at the end of it.

Colonel John Rollins: Again, without wanting to labour the points I have made to date, I must underscore the fact that relationships with local authorities are important for us, to exploit support where they are onside and to minimise tensions in other areas. This goes for a serving garrison as well. It is really the relationship with the statutory bodies, which has to be based on good will given our specific local legislation, with which there are tensions—this legislation measured against some of the provisions within our local legislation. It is about being sensible in how we exploit the opportunities and minimise the tensions.

Canon Peter Bruinvels: If I may re-emphasise that last bit, in all the businesses that I have found, the local authority Armed Forces Champion will check whatever business is coming up, whether in county council, a local council or even a parish or town council, to see whether it will have an impact on the local military or military families and all of that. It is like an impact assessment—indeed, we have done those. It is a really important role for the Armed Forces Champion to be able to do that.

Chair: We are drawing to a close now. Did Tonia have her hand up? No. Okay, we will draw the session to a close. It has been a long afternoon, but one which has given a fascinating insight into the role of Armed Forces Champions. May I formally thank Colonel John Rollins and Canon Peter Bruinvels for your excellent insights and for what you are doing in support of the Armed Forces Covenant?