

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Covenant Report 2021, HC 1108

Tuesday 1 February 2022

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Dave Doogan; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1 - 46

Witnesses

[I](#): Lt General Sir Nick Pope, Chair, Cobseo; and Charles Byrne, Director General, Royal British Legion.

[II](#): Collette Musgrave, Chief Executive, Army Families Federation; Sarah Clewes, Interim CEO, Naval Families Federation; and Maria Lyle, Director, RAF Families Federation.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lt General Sir Nick Pope and Charles Byrne.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on 1 February 2022. I am delighted to welcome Lt General Sir Nick Pope; Charles Byrne, director general of the Royal British Legion; Collette Musgrave, who is the chief executive at the Army Families Federation; Sarah Clewes, who is the interim CEO of the Naval Families Federation; and Maria Lyle, who is the director of the RAF Families Federation.

Our discussion today will be around the Armed Forces Covenant report. This is an important annual document taking stock of how the Armed Forces are operating, particularly from a personnel and veterans perspective.

I am very pleased to invite Nick Pope and Charles Byrne to kick us off. Nick is the new chair of Cobseo—welcome to you. Charles, I will come to you in a second. Could I just invite Nick to give us a couple of lines to explain what Cobseo is, and how it draws together all the other charities in looking after our veterans' interests?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: First, what does Cobseo stand for? It is the Confederation of British Serving and Ex-Service Organisations—so, more than just charities. It is a mechanism to bring those together from across the 1,800 service charities that exist, to provide a common point of reference and a link into Government—not the link into Government, but a link into Government—to deal with policy issues. It also enables the federation to work out how to deliver effectively and efficiently within the financial envelope that exists. Thirdly, from a chair of Cobseo perspective, it is a chance to represent the smaller charities, so that their voices are not excluded.

Q2 Chair: That is very helpful; thank you, Nick. Charles, welcome. Do you want to say how you fit in? I think everybody is very familiar with the Royal British Legion, so we are grateful for your time this afternoon. Can you just say how you fit in with some of the other charities that you operate with?

Charles Byrne: Yes, certainly: thank you for the chance. As you say, probably everybody knows the British Legion for the work we do on remembrance. Just as importantly, as you have said, we are one of the larger organisations when it comes to providing welfare, and we are one of the key caseworking organisations, so a lot of people come to us.

The trick there is to listen and understand people, and one of the themes that will come up today is that, typically, people arrive with a range of challenges and issues where they might need support. If we are doing our job well, we listen, we understand not just the presenting need but the total package of issues, and then we try to create a bundle of support. Some of that might come from us, and some of it might come from Help for Heroes or from Combat Stress, but we think our job is to be that



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caseworking organisation that brings things together and helps collate that range of support. It might be other charities, it might be local services, it might be an NHS GP or whatever, but we try to act as a collective point for that.

- Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Before we look to your relationship with the MoD, could you just explain this: somebody who is not familiar with any of the charities, other than what they may know in the public domain, suddenly requires some form of support. Where would they go? How would they be directed to make sure they get to the right charity?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: That is quite a complicated question, because there are a number of gateways into the charitable sector, and the thing that the charitable sector has struggled with for a number of years is how to enable veterans in need to access services. Some veterans would choose to access services through Government organisations, most notably the National Health Service; others will come via a recommendation or via their own regimental associations or naval or RAF equivalents; and some might enter the door through mechanisms such as the Veterans' Gateway, or the gateways in the British Legion or in other charities. It is quite a complicated entry point into accessing third-sector support.

Chair: I mentioned that deliberately, because it was the Veterans' Gateway that I had the honour of launching. It was actually the work of Mark Lancaster; much as I did the launching, it was literally on day 3 of my job—it was Mark who did all the groundwork. I am pleased that you mentioned it, because in the moment of confusion when somebody is looking for help, they should not have to hunt around to find out which number it is—it should be one simple number. They call the Veterans' Gateway, who are then able to give them some guidance and say, "This is the charity that can help you in your area."

I hope that as we have this conversation this afternoon we can explore what more needs to be done to make sure that at that moment of need the veteran—or indeed the member of the Armed Forces personnel—is able to quickly access the help they require before something starts to spiral out of control. I am very grateful to you for setting that scene. Let me turn to Richard to take us forward.

- Q4 **Richard Drax:** Gentlemen, good afternoon. Both of you say that there are a number of continuing issues that recur each year. Why do you think the MoD have not gripped them? Nick, maybe you would like to kick off.

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: Thank you, Richard. Actually, if I may say, I think I was at Sandhurst with your brother back in the early '80s, but that is a side issue.

Richard Drax: He was a Green Jacket, so we'll forgive him.

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: Yes, we will.

Yes, this is a recurrent theme. So, 10 years on, some of the comments that would appear in the Cobseo session, the families federation sessions

or the Royal British Legion sessions are hardy chestnuts. Having thought about this, I would put three areas on the table, if I may.

The first one is probably capacity—capacity in terms of either the MoD or broadly across Government sectors—to deal with some pretty intractable issues. That intractability is the second issue. Some of these issues are complicated and complex and take some time to resolve. The third issue is probably one of priority. If you add capacity, intractability and priority together, you get an idea of why some of these issues are hoary old chestnuts.

It would be worth while putting that into context, though. There has been an enormous amount of progress over the last decade. Where we are now, compared to where we were when I was serving, is completely in a different space.

We'll get on to governance later. If you are going to address, in a complicated, cross-Government perspective, some of the solutions to some of these more complicated issues, priority and probably political direction is an area that we might need to explore. Issues of governance, I think, are ones that sit over and above—superimposed on—those three words that I gave you. Charles, you may want to add more.

Richard Drax: Charles, what do you have to add there?

Charles Byrne: Interestingly, Nick and I hadn't prepared our answers in advance, but they are remarkably similar. Again, I think there are three reasons—slightly different emphasis, but very similar.

First, I think the most difficult issues—those that have carried on the longest—are those where it requires cross-Government co-ordination to resolve them, and that immediately makes them much more difficult. In some cases, it is not so much that; it is actually the question of special consideration. So, "no disadvantage" is reasonably well understood; "special consideration" becomes more difficult, and we can talk about that later. But, primarily, if you want cross-Government co-ordination, suddenly the issue becomes many more times difficult to resolve.

There is also, rather bluntly, a pattern that people can see over history—that when there are major national conflicts the focus comes on to the Armed Forces community, and the Government and the wider general public pay more attention. When the Armed Forces are less in the public view, other issues become a higher priority—bluntly. It's an old pattern. So I think there is something about the saliency that plays out.

The third point, I would say, is that delivery is really difficult. Sir Michael Barber is an excellent expert adviser on this. Delivery is really difficult. Initiatives are relatively easy. Driving through change and knitting together across Government is really difficult. This echoes Nick's point about priorities. I am sure that Michael Barber would say that the way you solve that is that you are just relentless about doing the analysis to understand the underlying issues, and then tenacious about defining what



those priorities are, just sticking to those and working away, sometimes for years at an end, to get something, and not allowing yourself to be distracted by the slightly easier game of creating new initiatives. So, focus, prioritisation, and delivery is difficult.

Q5 Richard Drax: Charles, you talked about cross-Government being difficult. That's quite interesting, because my next question is something along those lines. Would extending the duty to pay due regard to the Covenant to all levels of local, regional and national Government solve the problem? Charles, perhaps you can come off the back of your previous answer, where I think you said that would be difficult, if I am interpreting you rightly.

Charles Byrne: Yes, I think it would help enormously, for a number of reasons. There are issues that are cross-Government, and you have only to look at the work we are doing around the Stop the Service Charge campaign to remove visa fees. It involves the MoD, the Home Office and the Treasury. Suddenly, something that is a relatively straightforward issue becomes very difficult to unlock, and we have been working away at that. That is one aspect.

The other is that any of us who are close to Government become readily expert without realising it. If you speak to somebody who I would put in the more normal position, who does not engage with Westminster, understanding what a retained issue is, what a devolved issue is and what is delivered by a local authority is really complex; it is really hard to understand. Going back to Tobias's point at the beginning, if you have people who do not know which way to turn—if they do not know whether it is a local council, the national Government or Westminster who are setting the agenda or the priorities—it is incredibly difficult. If the national Governments are also covered by the Armed Forces Bill, that at least gives a much better chance of covering, first, the whole geographic remit and, secondly, those issues that do not fall to local authorities—things about pensions and employment benefits. There are real issues there that are not covered in the current Bill.

Q6 Richard Drax: Nick, anything to add?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: The only thing I would add is—not necessarily in terms of the due regard process, but Charles picks up on it to a degree—is the difference between just aiming to the lowest common denominator and special consideration. Consistently, we have pressed as a sector for the importance of special consideration being enshrined in law, which has been quite difficult to achieve. That is special consideration for those who are deserving of it—our wounded, injured and sick veterans, for instance.

The other aspect on the legislation is its scope. It was necessary that the legislation was focused on sectors such as healthcare, housing and education, but there are other sectors that, in future iterations of the legislation, I suspect we would wish to return to. I am thinking of legislation around the criminal justice system, actions, compensation or



employment. To me, it feels like a really good start, but it is something that we just need to continue to build on.

Q7 Richard Drax: This is my final question. I know that my colleague Emma Lewell-Buck wants to come in off the back of the question I am about to ask you. Nick, do you expect any early movement on treatment of non-UK personnel, veterans and families, and war widows?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I think both issues are currently sitting on the Government's side of the tennis court. On the war widows issue, I know that Moira, the chief executive of the War Widows' Association, has been engaging with Ministers on when we might see some smoke emanating in terms of whether it is a change to pensions or whether it is ex gratia payments at an acceptable level. The issue still sits in Whitehall for resolution. It is something that the Government recognises and knows it needs to do but, again, there is an issue between, I suspect, the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury about whether this is a quantum issue or whether this is a special pensions issue, which, in itself, would carry historic consequences—that is fine, apart from the fact that the number of war widows is reducing day by day. The sooner we get after this, the better in many respects.

The second issue is to do with non-UK veterans. I will plant two issues on the table, if I may. The first is one of process, and the second is one of relative. The issue that has changed the paradigm in the course of this year is the way that we have dealt with Afghan nationals through the Afghan relocation package. That was done for absolutely understandable reasons, to do with taking our partners in Afghanistan out of life-threatening involvement, bringing them back to the UK and giving them immediate entitlements in terms of visas and whatever. That is absolutely understandable, but a non-UK veteran who has served the Crown for many years now has a feeling of relative entitlement, or relative lack of entitlement, if their own case still sits in conversations between the Home Office and other Government Departments in terms of resolution of visa fees and the like. The process still sits at the stage of the Government waiting to make a response and I understand that. There was a very good engagement period last year. We await the response to the consultation period with interest.

Q8 Richard Drax: Charles, anything to add?

Charles Byrne: A couple of points. I would like to echo what was said about the national reach, and add to the previous point about the Armed Forces Bill. As an interesting example, pensions is an issue that is reserved and managed nationally out of Westminster. We mentioned the Veterans' Gateway, and nearly half of the calls to it end up being about military pensions. It just shows that there is a real issue about national matters that do not get swept up in the current Bill.

As for your question, and in particular overseas personnel, there was a period of consultation. That has now closed and we are waiting for the outputs of that. We have not seen anything but we have had some very



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positive sounding meetings, which is good, where everyone agrees the situation. There seems to be a consensus for a good way forward, but we have not seen anything yet. There are two things that we would call out in particular, and one is the timeframes. Someone becomes eligible for indefinite leave to remain after four years, so suggesting that their qualification period is 12 years is not enough. Everybody who has served knows how the entire family is involved when someone has served, and so the other clear ask from the Legion is that families are considered so that visa fees are waived not just for the serving personnel but for their families. Those are two important points. We are hopeful. If the noises are true, we expect something positive quite soon.

Q9 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Do you ever expect that the Government will act on the pleas of the nuclear test veterans and their families, because time is running out for them in terms of recognition, truth and compensation?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: Sorry, I missed the first part of that question.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I am asking about the nuclear test veterans. Do you think that the Government will ever act on their pleas for compensation, recognition and truth about what happened to them?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I am not aware of the issue, so I will have to turn to Charles.

Charles Byrne: There has been a lot of coverage in national media, but I have not heard anything explicitly back from the Government on this. That is the honest answer. It is something that we are in conversation about with groups but I am not seeing anything on the horizon.

Q10 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Remind me Charles, is it something that veterans regularly get in touch with your organisation about?

Charles Byrne: In all honesty, not regularly, no. It is quite a specific cohort, as you say, so it is not one of the general issues that comes up. A number of things that are really important are not broad, but narrow and very deep, and that is one of them.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Thanks, that is helpful.

Q11 Gavin Robinson: Do either or both of you have a view as to why the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board has not met over the last three years? Do you have any confidence or surety that it will meet in the near future?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I will start, Charles, and then you can correct me. The good news in many respects is that MCVB did meet in the early autumn of 2021, for the first time in three years. We have had a cross-ministerial meeting with Ministers from MoD and the Cabinet Office in attendance. In an ideal world there would be a meeting before that of an external partners group to enable predominantly people on the Covenant's reference group to engage with Ministers as part of that process. That actually took place in March of that year, so there was a disconnect in chronological time between the two meetings.



I think we are asking the MCVB to do quite a lot. If you look now beneath the MCVB, you have got the annual Covenant report, the veterans' strategy action plan, the armed forces families strategy and the service health and wellbeing plan. In other words, we have a cornucopia of mechanisms across Departments for delivering support to veterans and serving personnel, which is fantastic. Given that and given that complexity, a requirement for the MCVB to provide a direction for future initiatives, and also to get an honest update on the implementation of plans, would be welcome. I suspect Charles would agree with me that we would absolutely push for more regular meetings of the MCVB, not least because it allows engagement across boundaries, and that is very important in this area.

Charles Byrne: It is very clear that the issues are less important to Government than they were. If you go back to 2011 to 2016, the Prime Minister would chair the Cabinet meetings and even the Covenant Reference Group at times. That has not happened for a while, and that slightly ties back to my earlier point about saliency. When there is a major national conflict, it is front of mind for people. I am not saying it is right, but history tells us that when it is less visible, it drops down the priority order, which is one of the reasons the Legion always campaigns year-round, reminding people that the Armed Forces are working on our behalf all the time. There is the issue that it seems to be less important, and there is now quite a confusing structure. We have seen changes over time that incrementally make the picture really quite difficult; I was talking to Nick about this.

At first, when you step into this world, you think that it is oneself that does not quite understand everything because of the various acronyms, the various meetings and when they pre-meet and when they don't meet. Actually, it is because it is confusing, and I think there is a very good argument for simplifying the governance. We have two major tracks, which are related but independent. We have the Armed Forces Covenant and the annual report, which we use as a mechanism to engage with Government, work collaboratively and hold Government to account. All of those things matter. The annual Covenant report is important. What we now have—which is separate, but related—is the veterans' strategy, and the veterans' strategy action plan. Obviously, the Covenant goes wider than the veterans' strategy action plan, which is focused on veterans.

There is an opportunity to take those two key driving pieces of work and align and simplify the governance around them. That would make it easier for everybody. Perhaps we could just be more honest about the relative priority of this and say, "The reality is, you're not going to get the Prime Minister at these," but we can set this up well and be clearer about it; and coming back to those principles of delivery, we can be a lot more focused on what the priorities are. I think driving through the actions, clearer governance and clearer priorities matter more.

Q12 **Gavin Robinson:** Thanks, Charles. Nick, you mentioned a cornucopia—I'm thinking of a useful receptacle. Of course, it's no use if it has two holes



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and there's a bit of leakage. You know that one of my interests is in the devolved regions. Of course, the Cabinet Office can speak for one of our health services, but not all four, and it can speak for one of our housing providers, but not all four, and so on, within England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Do you think that the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board now adequately ingrains information, product and programmes from the devolved Administrations, or do you still feel that the devolved Administrations are lagging behind?

I certainly have raised frustrations in the past about the Covenant Reference Group and the fact that although the Covenant report, on an annual basis, is maybe 80 to 100 pages, you will find only one and a half for Northern Ireland, maybe three for Wales and five for Scotland. It is not sufficient. Do you get a sense of that? What more can you in Cobseo or Charles in the Royal British Legion do to ensure that all the devolved regions and the variations in them are adequately reflected and responded to?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I can speak from a sector perspective, which is that it is not for want of trying. I haven't been up to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland yet in my role as chair, but I absolutely will be in the next couple of months. The way that Cobseo conducts its business is that we have clusters addressing various sectors. We have one on care, one on housing, one on employment, one on female issues and so on. Each of those absolutely picks up with the charity sector from across the nations. The charity sector does try to get into this bracket. The creation of veterans commissioners across the regions is, I think, a positive step in this direction, too.

If you look at the way that various delivery organisations within Government work—I am thinking of the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund—then there is a very clear mechanism to demonstrate where we are putting resource into supporting initiatives in the devolved regions.

If the question, however, relates to how the Government tackle the Armed Forces Covenant or the veterans' strategy action plan, I am probably less well-placed to answer that question. I would say that there is work done and work to do, if I was to be frank about answering that.

Q13 Gavin Robinson: Charles, do you wish to add anything?

Charles Byrne: Only a little. I think Nick sums it up well. There is work being done, there is no lack of good intent, but there is more work to do. An example that stands out to me, when we are talking about the differences and why it is difficult to unlock these things, which comes back to the fact that delivery is just more difficult than people tend to realise, is that in Northern Ireland, uniquely in the UK, Armed Forces personnel still sacrifice military compensation in the financial assessment for social care. Some of these most tangible and important day-to-day issues are treated differently, and to the disadvantage of Armed Forces personnel, in those devolved nations. So it is an issue.

Q14 Chair: I am actually deeply concerned. This is an important committee,



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put together with a lot of fanfare, I recall, with the Prime Minister saying that this was our moment to really energise our support for the veterans community; and yet it hasn't met for three years. I find that very disturbing indeed.

I went over to the launch of the event itself. It wasn't in any special room—it was just another Cabinet room. I was really concerned that this was all a lot of smoke and mirrors—that this was all designed as part of an effort to win over the veterans community.

It was a promise, I think, that the Prime Minister made in the lead-up to the general election in 2019—that this was one of the things he would implement. Yet here we see, in practice, this important co-ordinator of activities that happen, unfortunately, in rather silo-ed Government Departments, unable to function in the way that it should. Am I wrong to be agitated and cross about that?

Charles Byrne: This is exactly the point that we picked up right at the beginning—that the most difficult issues are those that are cross-Government; of course they are. That is why things like the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board and the external partners group that meets to help inform that are so important. Without that, the most difficult things don't get addressed. It is a frustration that we have shared continuously. Nick's predecessor, Sir John, was very vocal about it, too. It does go to the core of that first issue that we talked about.

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: How do I add more to that? I think in all the reports that either Cobseo or the RBL have put in over the last couple of years, this has been one where we have beaten the drum regularly. It is not for want of the charity sector leaning into the Government to say, "Hey, it would be great to have more of these committees."

Rather like you, Tobias, I think this is a missed opportunity. It is not only something that was resonant particularly at the time when we losing blood and treasure in Afghanistan and therefore there was, absolutely as Charles says, a strategic importance about this. A decade further on, the need hasn't gone away for that particular sector of society. We would absolutely welcome anything we can do to increase the cadence, the regularity, of meetings—any chance to engage, frankly.

Q15 **Chair:** The Committee will lean into this further. The Government chose to raise the bar and then did not meet their own standards, which they set. That is deeply disappointing. Defence questions are coming up shortly. I will look to the Committee to see whether we can write about this as well, but it is a concern. That critical committee is not doing its role in co-ordinating the activity of Government in supporting veterans. We need to make some progress, but, Charles, did you have a quick final comment?

Charles Byrne: You know how this has worked, but I will just draw out the fact that with that opportunity for engagement—I think it is called the external partners group—when it works well, there is genuinely a sense of partnership: not uncritical and unquestioning partnership, but genuine mutual intent to do the right thing. We want to get back to that. The



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charitable organisations are not the enemy; the Government are not the enemy—there is a genuine sense of shared ambition here. The opportunity to help shape that agenda and to feed into it, for the charities, and to listen to Government, so that they can be measured and work together—there is good intent there. It would be very good if we can get back to that situation.

Chair: Let us stay with Government. Sarah, do you want to take us forward on that relationship?

Q16 **Sarah Atherton:** Good afternoon, Charles and Nick. The OVA, as mentioned, was launched in 2019. It was a substantial amount of money going out into myriad projects. We are certainly in a better position now, or the veterans are in a better position now than they were in, say, 2018. What impacts do you think that the OVA has had? We will start with Nick.

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I think it is the new kid on the block. We did not have the OVA three years ago, and it is finding its feet in its structure, its ambition and its capabilities. I have been really reassured by the growth of the organisation. The OVA two years ago was probably three people and a dog; we are now up to about 26 or 27 people, so its capacity to deliver—from a cross-government perspective—is far better than it was two or three years ago. It has now got a stood-up research capability and a much better mechanism for delivering policy as well. From that perspective, tick VG, I think.

We are still trying to work out our respective positions. When you bring something new into the overall organisational structure, it has consequences for everybody else in terms of organisational design. In military terms, we are trying to establish the battle rhythm, for how we engage with the OVA and how the OVA engages with the charitable sector, the MoD and other Departments. The good news is that Jessie Owen, the director of the OVA, is very good and very open at leaning out and listening to pleas for coherence and co-operation.

My take is that this is a genuine mechanism to do things better, if we can live—as Charles has just said—with the idea of this being a genuine partnership between the third sector, academia, industry and government. That is a great place to be. This gives a link to do that, so with all of those intractable issues at the start that we were talking about, this gives us a platform to deliver cross-government, cross-society delivery in a way that we did not have before. That is kind of Panglossian; the proof will be in the delivery. We have set up an organisation, so now let us see if we can make it work.

Q17 **Sarah Atherton:** Charles? It is good to see you again.

Charles Byrne: It is good to see you, Sarah. Again, not wanting to sound as if Nick and I have rehearsed our answers, which we have not, the OVA, the new kid on the block. But I would say that the people we engage with—the director and assistant director, Jessie and Matthew—are good people to work with: open-minded, collaborative, and intent on doing the



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right thing and getting the right results. That is good and that is a pleasure.

The real issue for me is that, as I understand it, the great opportunity that the OVA brings all of us is that potential to corral Government and to be that focal point. The real danger for the OVA, the people there and the people they support is that they end up with an undoable job, if they don't get the right top cover. I am not sure if that is CDL, but getting the right authority that helps them marshal other Government Departments is absolutely crucial to their success; otherwise, they would be left out on a limb. That matters more than budget, I think. If they get the right authoritative support, then they can help on their half of the picture, and we will lean in and help on our half, but they have got to get that authoritative support.

Q18 Sarah Atherton: I think we are waiting for a meeting with the director of the OVA. To pick up on a point made by my colleague, Gavin, I sit in a devolved Administration in Wales and I am increasingly concerned about the postcode lottery that there is with regard to access to services for veterans. My own veterans' network does not know about the gateway. Op Courage, which we read so much about, is a great scheme but covers England only.

In fact, the UK Government have stepped in to fund a veterans commissioner in Wales, because Wales had decided that they wanted liaison officers. I am particularly concerned about the variations that this postcode lottery has for veterans' services. Do you share these concerns? Do you have any suggestions as to how this can be overcome?

Charles Byrne: It goes right back to clarity of governance. What I think I see is good intent, patchy in places, and people stepping up to do things. Over time, the net effect of all that is that it is bloody confusing; forgive me. You have lots of different things working in different ways. It is difficult for people who need support to know which way to turn, as every new initiative just puts another player on the pitch. It is high time there was a chance to look at the overarching structures and the governance, and to find a way of tidying it up to make it simpler.

So yes, it is a concern. We create specialist functions of teams to try to address those particular local issues. There will always be local issues. That is fine. It is different in Northern Ireland and in Wales—we get that—but the more we can have simple, clear structures that sit above that, the more that will help us get through.

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I would add one other point, Sarah, which is about changing the way that we deliver services, either regionally, nationally or locally. I am thinking here particularly about the national health service. We are moving from 150 or so clinical care commissioning groups to an integrated care system, with 42 integrated care boards across the country—across England, at the very least.

Those boards will be the people commissioning services in the future. I am really thinking now about the commissioning of mental health services, for



instance, either from a charity perspective, such as Combat Stress or Help for Heroes, or through VMH resources, in terms of transition, intervention and liaison services and the like. That is a complicated change, about which we and NHS England are deeply in lockstep, in order to try to work out what it means for each sector.

It picks up on your postcode lottery issue. For instance, if you are living in north-west England, are you getting the same level of access to services as someone who is going to get a different integrated care board, who may have a different view about priorities, down in south-west England, or in Wales or Northern Ireland? The answer is that I don't know, because we are changing the system, so I have a lot of sympathy with your view about postcodes. It is not just about health, either; it applies in terms of social care and all the other aspects that we take into the charity sector.

- Q19 Mr Francois:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. Turning to veterans' mental health, which we know comes under the aegis of the national health service. Over the last few years, this Committee has had a lot of evidence, both formal and anecdotal, that while the NHS has created a separate pathway to address the needs of veterans under the TILS heading, on the one hand it is quite good at early diagnosis, but the systemic failure is, in many cases, having diagnosed veterans as needing urgent help, there are still long delays, in some cases of up to a year or more, before those veterans actually enter into an active treatment programme. In some instances, in the intervening period, very sadly, a number of them take their own life. What is your opinion of how well or badly the Government are doing on mental health? Where would you like to see improvements made? Nick, it is good to see you again, sir. Could I ask you to open up on that, and then Charles next, please?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: It is good to see you again. We as a sector welcomed the Op Courage initiative that the Government put in place to look at veterans' mental health on a holistic basis. Admittedly, I think it is just England-based, but it was a welcome start. We in the charity sector set up a cluster contact group looking at mental health issues, and the good news about that cluster is that it brings in Government and the national health service as well as service charity providers. It is a vehicle for people to get together to deliver an integrated package to enable those in need to access the service. You can argue, therefore, that there are some good initiatives that have taken place, and I am really happy about that.

Funnily enough, an area that came out in a different cluster recently—the housing cluster—was when we were talking about homeless veterans coming into housing communities. The conversation strayed into this area of high-dependency veterans who had complex issues to do with dependency, whether it is alcoholism, drugs or mental health; the answer was that it tended to be both. The difficulty in the system right now is that if you want to be treated for addiction, you cannot necessarily do that until your mental health issues are solved. If you want to be treated for mental health, you cannot do that until your addiction issues are solved.



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You have got this bizarre outcome here where those at most need are unable to access services because you have got different structures in Government, or whatever, who cannot resolve complicated cross-Government issues in social care, mental health, addiction or whatever. I recognise that there are people out there who we, societally, are failing, and they are the most difficult people to look after. We need to find a mechanism to reach out to them.

On your issue of the waiting lists, yes, I recognise it. It is broader societal issue, as well as one for veterans. I think the cluster groupings and these kinds of mechanisms to ensure that we have ways to talk about issues and resolve them on a cross-Government, third-sector basis are a good outcome, but there is still more to do. As you will know vividly, this is a growing area.

Charles Byrne: I would say something similar. There are some good initiatives, some good intent and some patchy delivery, in truth. The first point is that, on mental health, as we said earlier, these issues do not present themselves in isolation. What we see is typically someone who is coming forward with mental health problems. That will be one of a number of things; exactly as Nick said, it might be alcohol, it might be substance abuse and dependency, and it might be employment. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that mental health is just one thing, and if we can fix that, everything else gets fixed. It is always mixed up in a number of challenges.

Because we have recognised that waiting lists are too long, the Legion gave a £6 million grant to Combat Stress not long ago to help to fund the treatment for complex PTSD, because nobody does that better than they do. Equally, we got a fund out to the Matthew Project, who are looking at alcohol and substance abuse and dependency. We are doing activity in those areas to support those who are at the cutting edge of it, but there is a theme emerging here that what we see always is that the nature of the issues and the nature of the provision of support is complex. I think, however hard we try to make it simple, it is going to always be complex.

I am reminded of the work that Macmillan do for people who have cancer and find it difficult to navigate their way through the NHS. It is not a journey that you take very often. Often, what a Macmillan nurse can do is to be your expert navigator and help you understand the diagnosis and what you need. That is very similar to the role that some of the major military charities play with caseworking, which we were talking about earlier. When somebody comes to us, we can help them navigate and bring these various things together. There is often not a single, simple solution. What really matters is the ability to join up these various elements, which is why it is so darned difficult. I think recognising that and joining things up is probably a key element to fixing this.

Q20 Mr Francois: Charles, just quickly, it is a completely non-partisan point. We all know, as constituency MPs, that the mental health services in all of our constituencies are under considerable pressure. In fairness, the Government have put a lot more money into mental health. The other side



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of the coin is that as we have done a lot to remove the stigma about admitting that you have a mental health issue, more people have come forward and presented with issues. The system, to some degree, is always struggling to keep with up with ever-growing demand. We all know that all of our constituencies are under pressure.

There is a tremendous amount of signposting going on. You could argue that there are more signposts in this area than there are at spaghetti junction, but the difficulty is actually getting these people into treatment programmes. You are both right: almost by definition, the toughest cases are often complex and multifaceted. We have other areas to cover, but is there more that you could do from the positions that you hold to encourage the Government to actually increase the width of the aperture to get complex cases into treatment programmes, because what we see is a lot of different bits of the NHS pointing at each other, and meanwhile these guys are having bad outcomes? Is there more either or both of you can do?

Charles Byrne: Some of this actually is about early intervention and early awareness, if we can catch it. Mark, you know better than anybody about the Battle Back Centre we have up in Lilleshall—

Mr Francois: Yes, it's great.

Charles Byrne: The work that we do there, including resilience training, is just phenomenal. In terms of catching people early and providing them with support that reinforces their ability to take control of their lives and direct them in the way they want, you can have a pyramid of mental health challenges, and there is a lot of work we can do at the bottom. If we can capture people early, whether through the GP or elsewhere, identify that someone is a veteran and say, "Actually, there are other people and pathways that can help you before you get to the crisis point," that might help quite a bit.

Q21 **Mr Francois:** That is a very good example. Nick?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I am going to be an echo chamber here. I think we need to spend far more energy in the prophylactic area of the business—left of the bang—both for serving personnel and through transition into the veterans community. One of the priorities that I put on the table when I spoke to BFPS a couple of weeks ago about my priorities was comradeship and belonging, and resilience. If we can spend some time on that, hopefully we can start to reduce demand on the NHS. What would be great would be if there was no need for Cobseo because we crack it all in a healthy and supportive veterans community—so, more in that area by way of priority.

In terms of what we do to capture those who are in need, I think it needs better identification up front. If you can get the veterans community into contact with their regimental tribe or their air force association or whatever on a regular basis, you might have a better chance of capturing people before they get to level 4 or 5 mental health issues, so that immediacy is something that we will focus on.



Q22 Dave Doogan: Gents, I wonder if I can touch on the fractured nature of provision across and within the different nations of the United Kingdom—we have touched on it briefly and it is relative to this point. Certainly in Scotland, we have integrated health and social care partnerships—they are coming for up 10 years old—that reflect local authority and health board boundaries. That is coming in England too, so it will be everywhere. Do you have any intention—perhaps you already have—of doing a kind of heat map, or at least mapping the United Kingdom and the availability of service and resource to support veterans to better understand what gets done really well, and how they manage to do that? I am minded to think that it is not always to do with financial resource—it is to do with other, softer issues about providing the very best care that we can. Have you got any evidence around that and, if not, do you think that that is a priority that is worth pursuing?

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I have a couple of comments, if I may. We have a heat map of need—which is run on our behalf—that identifies where people are asking for services across the United Kingdom. That is a good thing. It shows clusters down the A1, unsurprisingly, with the RAF; down in the south of England, on the coast, with the Navy; and the Army kind of scattered at random across the area, but particularly in the north-east and north-west and into the central part of Scotland. That map identifies need. We're working in England and awaiting with interest—gagging interest—the data coming out of the census, which Charles's organisation helpfully supported on the question of whether somebody is a veteran. I am really looking forward to understanding the demographics and the geographic location of the broader veterans community, which we don't know about and which might actually have issues for us. In terms of data analysis, my gut feeling is that we are all thirsting for data in this area, to identify the future needs of our veterans community.

In terms of best practice, what you identified in Scotland—an integrated local community with medical and social care and support—is absolutely what I would like to see across England. Social care is a massive lacuna in some of the statements—either the veterans strategy action plan or the Armed Forces Covenant—that we need to get under the bonnet of. There is absolutely work to do there.

Sharing best practice across the regions—yes, I buy it. We do that through the clusters. Do we need to do it more? Possibly. I will take that away and scratch my head and think about it. In terms of identifying the detail of what support exists right now and the future requirements and superimposing all of that—yes.

Charles Byrne: To echo Nick, the quick answer is yes. There is a map of need. We will get that data, which is welcome. We see that there are genuine differences in the challenges people face and the solutions that can be delivered in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland. One thing we see is that those local Armed Forces Covenant champions can make a big difference. We also see local variation across England, as well, because we have teams who work regionally. We have a well-established expert team, based out of Manchester, and they have the right people on speed dial.



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Sometimes it is national; equally, sometimes it is local delivery. A good, effective Armed Forces Covenant champion can really make all the difference.

Coming back to the simple answer to your question: is this something that we all need to understand better? The answer is yes. Again, it immediately becomes complex and therefore services are not as well provided as they might be.

Q23 Sarah Atherton: I don't expect you to have read this, but you will be aware of this Committee's inquiry into women in the Armed Forces and female veterans, "Protecting those who protect us". We made 35 recommendations; the MoD is addressing most of those in some way, although sadly not the recommendation for murder, manslaughter and rape to be heard in civilian courts. But it has gone a considerable way to meet our recommendations. Do you have any thoughts about that inquiry and the MoD's response?

Charles Byrne: I am very aware of the report on women in the Armed Forces. I think this is probably just echoing what you would say, in terms of urging the Government to listen to these voices and to listen to the report, particularly around rape and sexual assault. Frankly, they should listen to the recommendations of the report and drive those through.

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: I will pick it up from two perspectives. I am sitting right now at Sandhurst as the senior mentor to the Army generals programme. We are desperate to get you connected to the generals course right now to talk about this, because culture and challenge are really important. For instance, I know that next week the Army is having a strategic reset where everybody in the serving Army, regular and reserve, has a day of thinking about equality, diversity and inclusion. Good stuff—a start, not the end, but at least the conversations are going on.

Interestingly, the focus of the course over the years has been on the purpose of the Army or whatever, but the focus this year is on soft issues—challenge, culture, inclusion. That is for the serving community. You can go into the veterans community; it is exactly the same issue, which is about reconnecting with those members of our veterans community who do not feel able to connect. It is great news that the LGBT+ review is about to happen. We will be involved with Craig Jones and Caroline Paige from Fighting With Pride, with the Government, in how that review is taken forward, I hope, in terms of recompense for people who were wronged historically.

You have exactly the same issue, though, for female members of the Army prior to 2000 who had to leave when they became pregnant. There are people who feel excluded from the system, and since then, as your report picks up, there are people who feel that they have been wronged—who were wronged—during their time in service and latterly.

This is a phenomenally important issue. The female veterans cluster is the first cluster that I have visited, because I feel passionate about this area.



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We have to do more on the veteran side on equality, diversity and inclusion. I hope you are heartened to hear that the away day that Cobseo had as a committee in December had two agenda points; one was on the future of Cobseo, and the other was about how we get better at equality, diversity and inclusion. This is an area that is firmly in the spotlight; now we have to do something about delivery.

Q24 Sarah Atherton: The MoD has recognised that there is a lack of understanding and research around serving female personnel and veterans. I understand that it is making moneys available to start that research so that there is a database—a baseline to work from. I suspect that charities and academic establishments will be quite keen to get a slice of that funding. What areas do you think they should be concentrating on? I am mindful that only a few days ago, in *The Times*, we had a report about domestic violence within the military landscape.

Lt General Sir Nick Pope: We have to make sure that we do not have some form of internal bidding war going on. We have a research organisation funded through the OVA, which is doing research on behalf of the Government, and in the charitable sector, Forces in Mind Trust, which is the charitable research element, is also doing research. They both want to commission research on female veterans and on better understanding the needs of our veterans community, which is laudable; we just need to make sure that those studies are in lockstep, because it will inevitably be the same specialists bidding for both. I am keen to ensure that we have some sort of integrated approach across Government into the charity sector to deliver outcomes.

I cannot answer on the specifics of which areas I think they need to look at, apart from complex sexual abuse cases, obviously. There are also other issues relating to historical hurt within our veterans community and, on the positive side, to how our female veterans want to better access services. It was great if you were in the Women's Royal Army Corps pre-1995, or whenever, because you had the sense of a tribe that you could belong to, but since women—females—have been employed across the Army, that sense of singularity and focus has diminished. Working out how we now look after our younger female veterans is an area that I am quite keen to go under the bonnet of.

Charles Byrne: I am sure that the veterans strategy action plan raises the importance of more research in the area; I think something like 11% of armed forces personnel veterans are women. One area we would want to focus on early is understanding whether there are particular barriers and whether female veterans are less likely to come forward for help and support. In our case, that is to the charities, but more widely there is a suspicion that it may be more difficult, for a whole host of reasons. If it is a harder hill to climb, we need to understand why, and see what we can do to make it easier for people to come forward, so they can be confident that they are listened to and understood.

Sarah Atherton: Charles, from our evidence, I agree with you on that one. Thanks, both.



Chair: Thank you for raising that *Sunday Times* report, which we will probably come back to when we speak to the Families Federations. At this point, I say thank you very much indeed to Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope and Charles Byrne, Director General at the Royal British Legion for your time this afternoon. You are welcome to stay online, but you will have to hold back your comments, as it is now the turn of the Families Federations to come forward. We interactively invite them back on to the screens; there they are. I hope you had a chance and were able to listen to that.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Collette Musgrave, Sarah Clewes and Maria Lyle.

Q25 **Chair:** Welcome, Collette, for the Army, Sarah, for the Royal Navy, and Maria, for the RAF. First, were you able to hear all that? Were you able to listen in and get an appreciation? You were. I will begin with a general question. I suppose it is traditional to start with the Senior Service, so Sarah for the Royal Navy, could you give us a couple of lines about the impact of covid on the work that you and the Federation do?

Sarah Clewes: Thank you for the opportunity to answer the question. However, the quality of my answer may not be as you wish. I have been in post for a few weeks, so I am therefore unable to comment. I can certainly find out more and get back to you. I am sorry to duck out of that one early on. To be honest, I have been in post for only a few weeks, and all the covid stuff and pertinent issues were pre-me. Sorry.

Q26 **Chair:** No worries at all. Welcome. It is great to have you here in your interim post. Collette.

Collette Musgrave: The effect of covid on our families has been multifaceted. Obviously, our families are part of the community and faced much of the same challenges as everybody else, with lockdown and restrictions. I have to give a big shout out to the Army for its responsiveness to the particular needs of Army families, as they were moving around locations. We had real challenges, with a significant number of families located overseas. There were significant challenges with them coming backwards and forwards to the UK, particularly to support their children's education or to support family members who needed it in the UK.

The Army was very forward-leaning and responsive, with flexibility around its approach to the interpretation of allowances, of Joint Service Publications, of AGAIs etc and all of the policies and processes. That was a very positive experience for our families.

There were less positive experiences for some of our families. There was a freeze on postings and moves, which caused a fair amount of logjam in the housing system that took some time to unpick, and there is still an impact. There was the perennial problem that many of us faced, trying to work at home and home-school at the same time. That put a strain on wi-fi connections that was particularly acute on some of our service families'



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accommodation estates, where broadband was not good. The three Families Federations worked very closely with some charities, including the Annington Trust, to try to ameliorate that with the provision of wi-fi dongles.

That might sound like a small issue but, believe me, when you were trying to home-school and work at home at the same time, that was a bit of a crisis point, when you realised that your neighbours down the road, in their private estate, had decent wi-fi and you were struggling because of where you were.

It was a mixed picture for our families, but I would commend the Army and Defence for leaning in and supporting them in their interpretation of policies and processes.

Q27 Chair: Thanks. Maria.

Maria Lyle: I have two short points to add. The first is around some interesting challenges that arose early in the pandemic, in interpreting who was the most important person in a household. Many armed forces personnel are married to people with busy, full-time jobs as key workers. It was that understanding that cultural balance of, yes, often the armed forces have to come first, but actually not always. That can be an ongoing challenge, in how we balance roles and expectations that someone is there to serve all the time. Actually, there are times when they may need to take a step back.

On the follow-up issue, echoing Collette's point about families overseas, I did an overseas visit late last year and one thing I picked up was that, while the information had been reasonably well provided by Defence, as Collette alluded to, the fact is that there were feelings of isolation of people in overseas locations. They had accepted postings on the assumption that, first, they would be able to go out and meet new people as they arrived and make a new life for themselves, but none of those activities or the ability to meet new people were there, and secondly, that their families might be able to come out and see them, or vice versa. Both of those were issues.

I spoke to some quite vulnerable members of the community—young partners who had gone out there but were on their own at home with children and unable to meet new people for extended periods of time. I know that learning has taken place, in terms of how we would do things differently if confronted with this again. It was a difficult experience as a result for some people.

Q28 Chair: Thank you for that; it has been a testing time. Can I just go back to Collette to deal with the wi-fi issues and so on? Have they been resolved yet? Of course, so much of our life is now dependent on decent wi-fi standards. Has that been rectified or is it still an issue?

Collette Musgrave: Far from it, actually. It was a problem before covid and it remains a problem now. I know that senior personnel in the Army are actively engaged with this. In fact, the Minister for Defence People and

Veterans—whose constituency is Aldershot, one of the worst-affected areas—

Chair: Is that right?

Collette Musgrave: He is very gripped of this issue. However, progress seems to be very difficult to make. Even invoking the armed forces covenant—we will no doubt talk about that in some detail, as that is the purpose of today—with BT is not really gaining us any traction at the moment to support that particular problem.

Chair: This is why it is very helpful to get your perspective on what is happening here. It also allows us to take these issues to other Departments. Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is particularly important in making sure that this roll-out of the wi-fi is able to reach the areas you represent. Let us turn to another heavy subject that I know is important to all three of you: accommodation. Mark, I know you are very interested in this.

Q29 Mr Francois: Good afternoon, ladies. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation is known affectionately to the Committee as “DI NO”. We know that it does not have a particularly strong reputation among service personnel and their families. As an empirical metric, in the last armed forces continuous attitude survey—AFCAS—barely a third of service personnel were content with the standard of maintenance of service family accommodation. Why, after so many years of repeated problems and complaints, do the MoD, the DIO and their contractors keep getting it wrong? Can we start with the Army this time, please?

Collette Musgrave: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this. It is a very important area for our families. I do not feel that I am well qualified to say exactly why they are getting it wrong. I can merely represent the views of our families in terms of the impact that that has. However, having said that, and probably going back on myself a little bit, I will reflect on what we have been able to do with the new contract and engaging with the new suppliers under the FDIS programme. We have certainly been able to present to them the impression of our families over the many years we have been raising housing issues and what they might look at in terms of doing better.

One key area is consistency in the level of service. When making a commitment to a family, saying “We are going to come and fix something in your house”, that that family should have a real expectation that that will happen in a timely fashion and will happen the first time they turn up. If a workman turns up at your house, he is going to be at least qualified and equipped to have a good go at fixing your problem, or at least to identify how the problem might be fixed if another expert is required.

Getting it right first time is really important for our families to feel that they are being taken seriously as living within a family home, and that it is recognised as their home. It is not merely a Ministry of Defence asset, or an Annington Homes asset for that matter, to be maintained to whatever standard the system thinks it should be maintained to; there is a



recognition that it is someone's home, and it is treated in that way, with the respect that a homeowner might get in terms of the level of service when logging a complaint or concern and when tracking a concern, how a contractor might feed back to them with progress on that concern, and how a contractor might disport themselves within the home and communicate with the family while they are there. It is the entire process of recognising that this is someone's home and should be treated in that manner. The proof of course will always be in the pudding, but from our engagement with the new contractors that will be coming online in a few months' time we feel that they have taken those points on board. We hope that much of that will result in much greater satisfaction from our families on the general level of maintenance of the homes themselves.

Q30 Mr Francois: Thank you, that is very helpful. Conceptually, FDIS is not that different from what came before it, and what everyone agrees has been failing for years.

Collette Musgrave: No.

Q31 Mr Francois: Some people believe that all the MoD has done is reinforce failure with slightly more resource. What is the Royal Air Force perspective on that, please?

Maria Lyle: Building on Colette's point, for me the two key factors driving what we have seen as a less than stellar performance in the past have been costs and a poorly written contract. If you put perverse incentives into a contract, you drive behaviours that you do not want to see from contractors. I speak as someone who came to this role having been in the private sector delivering big contracts to public sector clients.

Having said that, I feel that both those factors have improved somewhat in the new contracts to be introduced. As Colette says, we have yet to see them in action. Also, the process of changing over from one to another clearly has a number of risks attached to it. Over that period, families could be impacted, so the jury is out. I think there is a genuine desire to do things differently and better. On whether there is the level of ongoing commitment and investment needed to drive really different outcomes, they are starting from a different place, and the outcomes will depend on keeping that commitment up and keeping that focus. Part of our role is to hold people's feet to the fire to try to ensure that that happens.

Q32 Mr Francois: On the Committee, I would just say that across a whole range of issues what we hear from the MoD forever is "jam tomorrow"—everything is going to be better in a little while, even if it has been rubbish for years—and after a while you get pretty cynical because the jam never turns up, but let's see what happens. The Royal Navy, please.

Sarah Clewes: Yes, absolutely. Our families are a pretty resilient bunch, but even some little changes, such as if they are given a window of time when someone is going to turn up to help with their issue, would be great. If someone is going to arrive in a window of time, if they actually turn up and do a good job, and while they are there respect the fact that, as Colette says, it is somebody's home, and perhaps look at other defects as



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well and have some respect, even those little changes would make a huge difference. It does not seem much to ask, if you can track your DPD parcel and you know when it is going to turn up on your doorstep. There is an expectation around this that it really should not be that difficult. Hopefully, if they can get to the stage of a new contract and get some little things right, we might get people on side. It does not seem too much to ask.

- Q33 **Mr Francois:** There is a much wider issue about the ownership of those properties, and the relationship between the MoD and Annington, but for reasons of time we will not get into that now. That obviously will affect all the families that you represent. Suffice it to say, that is something that the Committee will want to follow very closely but—forgive me—perhaps on an occasion other than today. If I were to summarise what we have heard, it would be: “We’re hopeful but we’ve yet to see actual delivery.” I hope that that is not an unfair representation.

Collette Musgrave: If I might say so, Mr Francois, I am glad that you are reverting to another day to talk about the Annington potential and the buy back of Annington Homes, as we ourselves have only just been made aware that that is a piece of work that is ongoing, so I am afraid that we would not be able to comment on it anyway.

- Q34 **Richard Drax:** Sarah, on the Royal Navy, I visited the Special Boat Service the other day in Poole. I was told that some of their accommodation is way below standard. Bear in mind that these are special forces. They all deserve good accommodation, but it is appalling that even our own special forces do not get good accommodation. Are you aware of this? If you are, what, if anything, is being done about it?

Sarah Clewes: I am not aware, having only been in post for a few weeks—sorry to sound like a stuck record—but issues of substandard accommodation across the piece have been brought to my attention, but not specifically Poole, I’m sorry.

- Q35 **Richard Drax:** Right. Can I leave that with you, then?

Sarah Clewes: Absolutely.

- Q36 **Derek Twigg:** Why is progress so slow on the education of children of service personnel? Do you think the attainment gap is inevitable, given the moves that children have to make to different schools? What is the solution? Perhaps we could start with Maria this time.

Maria Lyle: What is interesting about this is that it is not necessarily a clear picture across all levels of children’s education. There are not gaps at all stages and using all measures. There is a gap in the percentage going on to higher education, and I think—other colleagues might know better—there is a piece of work potentially ongoing that will try to unpick the reasons why that might be. There is a question mark over whether that is because those from military families are more likely to join the military and follow in their parents’ footsteps, and whether that explains the gap.

One of the reasons that the progress that you allude to is not always clear is that the evidence behind it is quite hard to find, and that is because



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there is no clear discrepancy between service children and civilian children when it comes to GCSE performance. Therefore, arguing a special case for why things should be done differently or how we can do things differently is quite hard. There is some really good practice in various areas across the country, supporting service children where there are significant numbers in one place, but, of course, service children are very widespread, so it is also difficult to design interventions that fit well.

One of the things we are involved in is trying to spread the word of good practice in use of the service pupil premium, so that those schools that are in receipt of it can make use of it for catch-up activities to support military children.

Collette Musgrave: I agree entirely with Maria's point, which was very eloquently put. We do have feedback anecdotally to support the evidence, but anecdotally it is a very mixed picture. Many of our families can feel a little concerned that their children are presented as not attaining quite the same level as it is perceived they would in the civilian world, and they come to us with concerns around the real lack of evidence in that regard. That is why, as Maria has said, a number of pieces of work are being taken forward, predominantly through the SCiP Alliance, which we at the Army Families Federation are supporting, to understand more about this picture.

Q37 **Derek Twigg:** Do you think the MoD is doing enough?

Collette Musgrave: In what regard?

Derek Twigg: Is it talking to families? Is it discussing how we can improve the education of service children? Has the MoD come forward with any ideas or plans to deal with some of the challenges over the last year or so?

Collette Musgrave: Shall I take that one?

Derek Twigg: Yes.

Collette Musgrave: I am just looking at my colleagues; the three of us work very closely in this area. There is defence children's services, which is currently reorganising itself to better respond to defence children's needs, but it is a very complex picture. There are priorities around supporting children with their mobility in particular, so helping families to support their children with moving between schools—particularly children with special educational needs—as well as moving between UK and overseas education systems, and between the education systems of the four nations within the United Kingdom.

Defence children's services has a very broad remit. It engages with us, other stakeholders and families. Whether that is enough is a difficult thing to say. As ever, we understand that it has to be balanced against other resource priorities. You could, of course, do much more, particularly in relation to the Armed Forces Covenant and leveraging some of the terms within the Covenant to gain more traction to help particularly, as I say, the movement of children with special educational needs around the country.



However, I think that without further research in this area, which we have already alluded to, it would be very difficult for us to say where to direct those resources to have the best effect for children in all age ranges across the whole of the UK.

Sarah Clewes: Just to add that on family separations, we are in the business of identifying themes. As it is so complicated, and we could pick up on a number of individual cases that are quite complex and unfortunate, we need to concentrate on the themes to see what we can do. That makes it more complicated, because there is a whole world of data to come, no doubt, that could confuse the picture until we can work out what the underlying themes are that need addressing.

Q38 **Sarah Atherton:** Good afternoon, all. You have all served in some capacity in your respective services. You are obviously linked as a family within the family and your unit communities, and you are also representatives, so you have the full gambit of experiences of women linked in some capacity to the military. You are aware of our report "Protecting those who protect us". I suspect you may be aware of the increasing focus on domestic violence against women linked in some capacity to the military. Do you have any thoughts about whether the MoD is doing enough to support and protect women? Ultimately, this is about the retention of service personnel, so do you have any thoughts around that whole, large area? I will start with Maria.

Maria Lyle: Yes. I have looked into this a number of times over a period of time and I read the report you alluded to over the weekend, and I am keen to understand the more detailed demographics about where the risks are and how they compare to the civilian community, so we can better target interventions. We know some of that information around specific communities within the Armed Forces community as a whole that are more at risk. I think there is research around some of the behaviours to do with alcohol use, gambling and risk that drive these behaviours. What I have not seen is that clearly laid out, and I think there is an opportunity for some more work on that to inform our responses.

In the RAF context, last year, there were far fewer referrals for domestic violence than in the year before. I am referring to the all-round package, including coercive control. That does not mean that we can be complacent. I am pleased that the RAF has a contract with SSAFA, which is pretty effective at providing this kind of support. In fact, I am meeting the contract lead next week, and this will be one of the things we discuss.

There is more to do to understand specifics, such as the root of the problem, and there is always more to do around the culture, be it in the chain of command, among neighbours or in support services, at any stage where it looks away from this. Some of the stories in the article you alluded to were horrendous. If that culture exists in pockets—and it must do; I am not disputing the veracity of the article—it has to be stamped out.

Sarah Atherton: Okay. On the RAF, Sarah.



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Sarah Clewes: I am here to speak about the Navy.

Richard Drax: The Senior Service.

Q39 **Sarah Atherton:** I am sorry; I have just insulted the Senior Service. On the Navy, Sarah.

Sarah Clewes: Thank you. We work in collaboration with a number of charities, including Relate, on a project called Strengthening Families. Putting relationship and domestic violence issues into the mix of family issues is a great starting point, because this issue is often apparent alongside others, and when you start to unpick it, you might get a sense of how serious it is. Strengthening Families is a collaborative approach to supporting families. As I say, it enables us to unpick various aspects of an issue and see where the problems lie. It is difficult, but we are making changes. Working in collaboration with others, and certainly expert charities, is a really good start.

Q40 **Sarah Atherton:** Collette?

Collette Musgrave: Like Maria, I follow this issue very closely, given my personal experiences, but I need to make it very clear that our families federation is slightly different from the other two, in that our charitable objects limit us to engaging on issues that are family-focused, as opposed to single-issue focused. I was previously invited to speak to the Committee when it was taking evidence in support of your report, but was unable to in a professional capacity. I just needed to make sure that was on the record. Having said that, I agree with everything that Maria said about identifying the demographics, and about providing further information, so that resources, and the interventions with which we are all engaged, are correctly targeted, and so that when it comes to domestic violence and domestic abuse, we have a strong intervention and support process that supports local welfare systems.

A little like the RAF, the Army is looking again at its welfare support processes, and is identifying how it might change them to focus on families better. An Army Inspectorate report from almost a couple of years ago highlighted that families could often be a bit of a second-order priority in some of the Army welfare processes. The Army took that very seriously and has set in train a piece of work that will look again at how welfare provision in the Army is structured, so that families can be better supported and family issues can be better understood, identified and acted on. We are working closely with it on that, and hope to see progress that provides benefits across the piece.

Q41 **Sarah Atherton:** Collette, could you clarify a point? You mentioned that as a families charity, you do not get involved with single issues. Did I understand that correctly?

Collette Musgrave: Yes. It is a complex area for us. You will notice that my colleagues mentioned that they are there to address any concern of any serving person and their family. They will provide evidence on issues such as single living accommodation and posting cycles. We are structured



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in a slightly different way. The charitable landscape is far more complex for the Army than for the other two services.

There is a multiplicity of Army charities that have various roles in this landscape. It is something that the Army is grappling with. It has just instituted something called the Army charities advisory group so that we can work more closely together and be more co-ordinated in our actions. There are issues that are in modern family life, such as violence against women and the impact of the planning of posting cycles for serving personnel, and this will ensure that we do have a direct impact on family issues. I am a strong advocate for this, but as an independent charity I have to go through a certain process in order to get there. It is a work in progress in terms of potentially either extending our charitable remit or ensuring that the charitable remits of other charities are extended to cover these emerging issues, which develop out of a different and more modern way of living.

Q42 Sarah Atherton: I can see your dichotomy with the remit of domestic violence, be it a single issue when it actually happens within the confines of a family, but I will leave that one with you.

Collette Musgrave: That is something I grapple with on a daily basis. As an independent charity, not part of the Army system, it is sometimes difficult to make sure that the boundaries are well understood and that nothing falls between them. That is what I'm advocating at the moment.

Q43 Chair: I wouldn't mind pursuing that for a second, because I think it is an important point. I am not trying to put you on the spot at all. It is interesting. You have your remits, and that is quite understood. Let us take a step back. The families federations are so critical as these overarching organisations with outreach that we can relate to and speak to. I and other ex-Ministers here can speak to that as well. They bring together other, smaller charities that do not have the same gravitas or reach that you do. Given that you have highlighted the fact that there are single service personnel who you recognise do need support—in the case of females and so on, as in the study that Sarah pioneered—would the federation be minded to expand its remit to include this area of responsibility in the future?

Collette Musgrave: That's actually a very difficult question for me to answer. I am head of an independent charity. I have a board of trustees, and it is their responsibility to, in the final instance, agree or otherwise. However, I am in discussions with the Army at the moment about extending our remit, and, with that, extending our funding potentially, which as an independent charity is always an issue.

Chair: Okay, I won't press it any further than that. The MoD has a responsibility operationally to make sure that we equip and train those people to do their job. Then there is an absolute responsibility to look after the Armed Forces and their families in the wider community in a non-operational environment. That is where you great people come in. To make sure we have all of those bases covered, we have to make sure that



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nobody is left behind from that perspective. Thank you very much for explaining that to us. The final question today is from David.

Q44 Dave Doogan: The integrated review makes it quite clear that deployment will become a much more common feature of service life. What discussions or preparations have you had or made to take account of that?

Collette Musgrave: I have to be absolutely honest with you; those discussions are at a very early stage. We are still in discussion with the Army to understand exactly what the implications of the integrated review are on a number of factors. One is about their presence overseas—in particular, accompanied service overseas and understanding where that is going to be and in what numbers. Secondly, it is about understanding what the tempo of operations is likely to be and what that actually means for time away from the family, both on operations and in training.

If I move on to training, obviously there are still questions to be answered around where the training locations will be. Going off for three months to Canada—will that be replicated by going off for three months somewhere else, or do we think that the training tempo will look different as well? I am afraid we are still in the stage of seeking many of those answers to those questions, as regards the Army, before we can even get to the stage of thinking about what that means for the level and type of support that families may need in future.

If you overlay that with wider defence personnel issues such as the future accommodation model, you get into a level of complexity. I have a degree of sympathy about why it is taking this long to really be able to engage in a meaningful manner with us. There are a lot of moving parts at the moment.

Q45 Dave Doogan: I think it's helpful to know that level of development. Sarah, perhaps it is an even bigger issue for naval personnel. What preparations are there, and what is your understanding of what this will mean for service personnel?

Sarah Clewes: That's a very tricky one. We were talking about this only this morning with a serving commodore. In terms of surface ships going away, certainly when I went away to sea, it was a couple of months here and a couple of months there, and the inability to plan your life was a real issue, so they switched to a nine-month deployment. Okay, you are going to be away for nine months, so now you can plan your life. It is a big chunk of the year, but at least you can plan. But that was not popular, either. Six months seems to be okay and manageable.

However, I think it is the uncertainty around the ship's programme, because you kind of get your head around six months and then invariably the ship's programme will change. As we found with the submarines only this year, they were expected back at Christmas and then things changed and they did not come back until the new year. So it is a really tricky one. There does not seem to be an ideal solution because, as I say, the surface ships have certainly tried both. It is tricky.



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I guess it just comes back to being as honest as possible and having that transparency to manage the expectations of our families. They are a resilient bunch. They know what they are up against. It is the uncertainty and the constant change that they find difficult. I know that's always difficult because of operational commitments, so it is really tricky. It is something that's been an issue on many occasions, even when I was serving, and it is still an issue now

Q46 Dave Doogan: Thanks, Sarah. Maria, can you give us the RAF perspective?

Maria Lyle: The only thing I would add is that we have learned over the past two or three years how critical good quality information is for families who live overseas. Leaving deployments to one side, if we are growing our footprints overseas and including families, investment in time to grow that information—information that isn't sitting behind a firewall and that is accessible to them so that they know what they are letting themselves in for and can prepare—would be a vital step in having a successful growth of that footprint as a result of the integrated review.

Many families thoroughly enjoy time spent overseas. Where it goes wrong, it is usually because they have not been aware of some crucial piece of information, or were not given it in a way that allowed them to prepare. There are things that we can help the MoD to do once there is some clarity over where those footprints might be. As Collette and Sarah have alluded to, some of that is still very much being worked out.

Dave Doogan: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I am grateful to all the families federations. I will say just two things. First, on the wi-fi issue, subject to the Committee's approval we will look into that a bit further for you and see what more can be done to shunt the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to provide greater support. That is something that we can easily lean into.

Secondly, as we are discussing the Armed Forces Covenant, if there is anything we have not discussed in detail that you would like to share with us, please put it in writing; we would be delighted to receive it from this end.

Thank you very much to Collette, Sarah and Maria, and also to Nick Pope, the new chair of Cobseo, and our old friend Charles Byrne, director general of the Royal British Legion, for helping us in our study of the Armed Forces Covenant here today. The hearing is now closed.