

## Defence Committee

Oral evidence: [Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2016](#), HC 492

Tuesday 17 January 2017

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Douglas Chapman; Mr James Gray; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; Ruth Smeeth; Mr John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 1-71

### Witnesses

I: Mark Lancaster TD VR MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, and Helen Helliwell, Head of Service Personnel Support, Ministry of Defence.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Lancaster TD VR MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, and Helen Helliwell, Head of Service Personnel Support, Ministry of Defence.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this one-off session on the Armed Forces Covenant. I would like our two panel members to identify themselves for the record.

**Mark Lancaster:** I am Mark Lancaster, the Minister for Defence Veterans, Reserves and Personnel.

**Helen Helliwell:** I am Helen Helliwell, the head of service personnel support.

**Chair:** Welcome, both of you. John Spellar will begin the questions.

Q2 **Mr Spellar:** The breadth of policy areas encompassed by the Covenant clearly makes cross-departmental co-ordination and focus on delivery a high priority. Can you tell the Committee what has become of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on the Armed Forces Covenant?

**Mark Lancaster:** It has evolved into an inter-ministerial group. I do not think that there is anything particularly remarkable about that; it broadly follows a wider Government review of how these cross-cutting Government groups work.

I am very conscious that I was told off by the Committee at a previous appearance—I think during the Lariam inquest—for publishing information on the day, which was unfortunate. I had hoped, before this session, to have been in a position to have sent the Committee the terms of reference, which are just being drawn up, for the new inter-ministerial group. Unfortunately they are still awaiting being signed off, so I cannot give you those at the moment. I will of course write to the Committee to ensure that you have them as soon as they have been confirmed. I expect that publication very shortly.

Q3 **Mr Spellar:** So what was the reasoning behind this evolution, as you put it?

**Mark Lancaster:** As I just explained, they are about wider Government trying to have a degree of consistency about how these cross-Government groups work. I was delighted that in one of the first speeches that the new Prime Minister gave about defence she absolutely underlined her commitment to the Covenant. On the way in which I see the group evolving, it is likely to be chaired—it will be chaired—by the Secretary of State for Defence. The purpose of the group, as ever, will be to ensure that across Government we get to monitor delivery, agree strategy and, crucially, as we begin to develop the Covenant, make sure that the implementation is effective.



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**Q4 Mr Spellar:** The trouble is that Secretaries of State are fairly busy people, so how regularly is it going to meet?

**Mark Lancaster:** We anticipate that it will meet twice a year. Without wishing to get myself in trouble, we rather hope and expect that the Prime Minister will actually chair the first one to underline her commitment to the group. I cannot give you a date for when that will happen, but I will ensure that the Committee is notified in advance and, as I said, send the terms of reference in due course.

**Q5 Mr Spellar:** But surely six-month intervals between Committee meetings means that, in the world of Whitehall, the spotlight of ministerial focus is not as clearly placed on that. Therefore, a Committee that meets more regularly and receives updates on progress made on decisions is more effective than maybe a high-level strategy meeting, which, worthy though it may be, is not going to deal with the very important issue of operational and policy co-ordination between Departments, which up to now has been a serious problem that I think we all acknowledge.

**Mark Lancaster:** It has been a serious problem. With respect, Mr Spellar, you are suggesting that this would be the only group that meets. Of course, beneath this top-level ministerial Committee we have a whole raft of different committees that seek to implement the Covenant, such as the Covenant Reference Group, which engages outside bodies, the devolved Administrations and charities.

As the Minister for Veterans and being responsible for the Covenant, I have regular meetings with ministerial colleagues. Only last week I met with an Education Minister. Probably the one I have on a most regular basis is with my Health counterpart. If you are under the impression that this would be the only body seeking to co-ordinate this, that is certainly not the case. It is, however, the most senior and I think a tempo of twice a year is appropriate, given everything else that is going on at the same time.

**Q6 Mr Gray:** Given the cross-cutting nature of the thing, as you describe, Minister, is there not an argument for saying that the MoD should not have responsibility for it at all and that it ought to go to the Cabinet Office or No. 10? The Prime Minister is chairing the first Committee. Wouldn't it be better to have a central Government Committee monitoring the Covenant rather than the MoD?

**Mark Lancaster:** There is probably an argument for all sorts of different policies being implemented by Government to centralise, but that rather undermines the way that we seek to have different Departments dealing with issues.

I think there is absolutely a role for the Cabinet Office to monitor progress and ensure that we are implementing, but, on balance—and this was something that was reviewed during SDSR 2015—I do feel that it should sit within the Ministry of Defence. There is good reason that the specific area that the Covenant sits under is the responsibility of the Chief of Defence People, General Nugee. He is responsible for some of the major

policy movements—for example, the future employment strategy and, indeed, the future accommodation model.

At director level—Helen’s level—Helen is responsible for many of those cross-Government discussions and policy meetings that we have just talked about. On balance—and it is a balanced decision—I think it is right that it should continue to sit primarily within the Ministry of Defence and not move to No. 10 or the Cabinet Office, though, as I said, there is a role for both to ensure that they scrutinise us and that we are delivering.

**Q7 Mr Gray:** Is there a problem with constructive tension, though? You are asking for things—better housing, education, healthcare—which will cost those Departments money. Are they going to be reluctant or resistant to your requests? If it were a Cabinet Office Committee or a No. 10 Committee, they would be better able to bring some pressure to bear on the delivering Departments to do what you want.

**Mark Lancaster:** There is a counter-argument that, by ensuring that each Department is responsible for the delivery of the Covenant, that responsibility is enforced.

There is seemingly no suggestion at the moment that we move to a Veterans Department. I quite like the system that we work at the moment from my experience of dealing with my colleagues, because all of them have bought into the fact that they are responsible for the Covenant and delivering it from their own Departments.

To allow people somehow to think it is someone else’s business is potentially damaging. Once again, I can only say “on balance”, but I think the system that we have is working. There are always improvements that can be made, but I am comfortable with the organisation and structure that we have at the moment.

**Q8 Mr Gray:** A final question on organisation structure: what do you make of the RUSI suggestion that there should be a senior owner appointed for the Covenant, someone they describe as a “charismatic, overtly engaged and challenging senior responsible owner”? They even go as far as suggesting perhaps someone from the younger generation of the royal family might be an appropriate person. Isn’t there a purpose in having a figurehead for the Covenant?

**Mark Lancaster:** Forgive me: from the description I thought you were talking about me for a moment, Mr Gray, but clearly not.

**Mr Gray:** No. We know you better than that, Mark. Sorry.

**Mark Lancaster:** It would probably be inappropriate for me to suggest or commit a member of the royal household, for example, to do this job. There has been engagement and championing within the Covenant. You only need to look at Prince Harry’s involvement with the Invictus games, for example. I was also delighted that the Duke of Cambridge came to award our gold awards recently at the Royal Hospital. They have been very good in championing elements of the Covenant and I am sure that will continue.



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- Q9 Johnny Mercer:** Turning to healthcare, in the report the Royal British Legion has expressed concern that a decade after the extension of priority NHS treatment to all veterans, there are still problems with awareness and understanding how the policy works, both among healthcare professionals and among veterans themselves. This problem was also identified by our predecessor Committee in the 2011 report. Why has it taken so long for that to be addressed?

**Mark Lancaster:** We have 2.6 million veterans. We have over 200 clinical commissioning groups. I cannot guess how many doctors we have in GP surgeries and elsewhere. Understandably, it is taking some time to slowly filter through the information but, as the report shows, we have made progress. Health Education England has been particularly encouraging, having clearly engaged with this through the ways in which it is seeking to communicate with doctors. I accept that we haven't managed to—it is certainly not “job done”—and that more work needs to be done. Only through engaging with Health Education England can we continue that process.

- Q10 Johnny Mercer:** When a serviceman leaves the armed forces now, what is the link-up in terms of GP-to-GP? From regimental medical officer to GP, what happens now? Up until a year ago it was still papers, wasn't it? Frankly, in 2015—I understand what you are saying to questions from James about marking our own homework and that veterans' care seems to be going quite well. You know my views on this: I think we have some way to go. Paper records that get lost in 2015 is not good enough. Why do you think it takes so long to make that transition to professionalise what we are doing for our veterans in terms of their healthcare?

**Mark Lancaster:** I think you are absolutely right: it is not good enough and we completely recognise that. This is why there is a process being undertaken at the moment to move away from paper records for our service personnel and to have an electronic system, which is partly in place already. Crucially, it is not just a stand-alone electronic system, but a system we can directly link up with the national health service so that the electronic record can be transferred.

There is a secondary motivation for doing that, of course, because—we may discuss this later—one of the key challenges we face is recording our veterans and keeping in touch with them. We know exactly where they are at the point of discharge, but all too quickly we can lose track of veterans. One of the purposes of having an electronic record, which is easily transferrable into the national health service or one of the devolved Administrations, is that we can flag up on that record that they are veterans. That in itself will help this education process and ensure there is a smooth transfer.

That work is ongoing. It is progressing well and is not yet complete, but it is one of my priorities is to see it complete as soon as possible.

- Q11 Johnny Mercer:** Part of the commitment made in the 2015 report was to identify specialist GP and armed forces champions in every CCG by



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summer 2016. In which parts of the UK has that been achieved?

**Mark Lancaster:** It has been achieved in certain parts of the UK. I would hesitate to say that every CCG now has a champion.

Q12 **Johnny Mercer:** That is what it says in the armed forces report. It says it has been marked as “completed” in the annexe.

**Mark Lancaster:** I would hesitate to say that every CCG has an armed forces champion.

Q13 **Johnny Mercer:** If I could just drill down into that, that is precisely the problem with the MoD marking its own homework, because there are aspects of this that are not really up for debate—they are just not right. That is why James’s point about the Secretary of State chairing the group that is going to look across Departments is relevant. Fundamentally, I don’t think that model will work until someone like the Prime Minister, who ultimately assumes responsibility and our duties towards these individuals, ensures that takes place. It has been marked by the Secretary of State that it has been completed. It is not completed.

**Mark Lancaster:** On reflection, I think there is probably a degree of ambiguity about what that actually refers to. I think it really refers to—I absolutely accept responsibility for this—the fact that the e-learning programme by NHS England has been implemented. It is a very good little package that offers education to GPs in specific areas of veteran care, service family care, and service personnel care.

If that has wrapped up the completion of that part of the project with the fact that there is a champion in every CCG, I apologise. I think the obvious answer to that in next year’s report is to separate the two factors. When we talk about tick boxes being complete, I am pretty sure that refers to the e-learning programme, not the champions in every CCG. I am very open with you about that.

Q14 **Johnny Mercer:** None the less, whether it has been ticked or not, it was something that was committed to by last summer and still has not been done. I do not want these sessions to turn into, “Come in here and we will pick up what’s gone wrong”. Ultimately, like you, we want this stuff delivered. We want to arrive at a vehicle—the new group the Prime Minister has set up sounds great. Did you think that the previous vehicle of the cross-reference Covenant Group was useful?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes. Are you talking with specifics to healthcare?

Q15 **Johnny Mercer:** Specifics to drawing all these threads together to ensure that the offer we give our veterans is as professional as we expect them to act during their time in service.

**Mark Lancaster:** Probably like you, Mr Mercer, I occasionally get slightly confused by a whole raft of different groups with very similar names. Within healthcare specifically there is the clinical reference group which is there to try to ensure that the various pathways that the NHS uses in



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integrating our veterans' care is working. That is a useful group. We have seen that evolve.

To give one example, the Committee may well be aware of the new trial of integrated high-dependency care for our veterans, which is seeking to ensure there is a pathway. Historically, for our most seriously wounded veterans, it has been difficult to discharge them from the military into the NHS, whose primary responsibility is to look after our veterans because of their complex needs. The new system that is being trialled—I initiated it in the summer—seems to be going well. It allows medical defence services greater control over the commissioning of care for our veterans and allows them to move into post-service life. At the moment, it is only designed for the most seriously wounded, but if it works well it could be expanded.

That is an example of how we are trying to have that integration move forward and away from the cliff edge that we talked about at the point at which you leave the service and become a veteran.

You are right: if you read the transcript, these sessions can sometimes appear to be question after question about where things have gone wrong. At this point, may I refer the Committee to some of the opening comments that were made by the Covenant Reference Group about what good progress has been made over the last year, so that we do not lose track of that? I am not for one second saying that every single piece that we promised last year has been delivered, but on the general direction of the report, which I hope the Committee accepts and which has been witnessed by the Royal British Legion, Cobseo and others, I think that the general direction of progress is very positive.

- Q16 **Johnny Mercer:** Absolutely. I think the Committee would 100% agree with that. Your personal intervention, particularly on the dependency care programme that you referred to, has made real strides. I guess our concern is that the figures released by the MoD that were in *The Sun* yesterday, and the article written by the new chief executive of Help for Heroes today, show that, on our progress, we are climbing the mountain, but the challenge is getting steeper all the time. Unless we catch up, that gap just gets wider and suddenly we are in a place where we have a real nightmare on our hands.

**Mark Lancaster:** I am determined that we continue to make progress.

- Q17 **Chair:** I want to insert a couple of questions at this point to do with the census. In June 2016, you asked the Office for National Statistics to look again at its position on the inclusion of a veterans marker question on the next 10-year national census. That is in relation to the Royal British Legion's campaign "Count Them In", which argues that veterans' whereabouts should be reported back once every 10 years in the census.

Can you explain why you asked the ONS to revisit this, given that its position appears to have been that enough information ought to be available from your Department's own records? Are you satisfied that you are using that already available information as intelligently as you could be?



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**Mark Lancaster:** I am simply responding to the clear will of Parliament. Every time we discuss this and have a debate, there seems to be a consensus on both sides of the House that we would like to see this specific question included. I feel that I am acting as a champion on Parliament's behalf to try to deliver this.

I did not realise that the chief statistician—forgive me if that is not his correct title—has a degree of independence, while he falls under the Cabinet Office. I simply feel I have a role in my position to ensure he is well aware, as I have said several times now in the Chamber, that it is the clear will of Parliament that we would like this question included. I will continue to press.

Q18 **Chair:** Can I try to break that consensus, even with a single dissenting voice? Wouldn't the inclusion of such data on the census, if leaked, be an absolute gift to terrorists who wanted to target ex-soldiers in their own homes?

**Mark Lancaster:** I don't think so, necessarily. I am not sure that that level of—has it ever leaked? Do you have any evidence of such leaking?

Q19 **Chair:** Well, since we entered the digital age there has been a lot of evidence of Government disks containing millions of pieces of information about people's private data being unaccounted for. The problem of the efficiency of the digital age is that whereas in the past one mistake might affect a limited number of people, now one mistake can affect hundreds of thousands or even millions of people. I believe there is cause for concern about putting this sort of information into such a format, because if it got into the wrong hands, it could be rather dangerous.

**Mark Lancaster:** That is certainly a view, Dr Lewis. I respect your view. I think if we were to look at all the data on individuals, from bank accounts to goodness knows what else—indeed, you only need to look at what people decide to say on Facebook or Twitter, where people self-identify as veterans or serving personnel. If you are asking me whether I think this would add a significant risk compared with the information that is already potentially accessible out there, the answer is no, I don't.

Q20 **Chair:** But there is a difference, you surely accept, between people who put themselves at risk by self-identifying and posting personal data about themselves on the internet and people who would be obliged to put things in the census that would reveal a service background and who might not wish that to be in a format that could be accessed by people who wish ex-servicemen harm.

**Mark Lancaster:** Presumably there is a logical compromise. I am not exactly sure how the census works. If people choose to identify as Jedis on the census, that is down to them; presumably one does not have to provide information if one does not want to. The reality of someone receiving a census form and then deciding that they are not going to declare whether they are a veteran—

Q21 **Chair:** So it would be an optional declaration.



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**Mark Lancaster:** While I hear what you say and understand your concern, on balance I think, because of the potential information out there about individuals anyway that they choose to give, a sensible compromise is that the question is on the form and whether or not the individual decides to tick the box is down to them. That is probably a sensible way forward.

**Chair:** Okay—if it is down to them.

- Q22 **Mrs Moon:** Given that Scotland and Wales do not have clinical commissioning groups, and given the ambiguity about what had been achieved and what had not, would it be possible to have an update on where we are in terms of finding the specialist GPs and the armed forces champions? Is that something you can provide for the Committee?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes. I am happy to go away, look at that and write to the Committee with an update. That is a perfectly reasonable request.

- Q23 **Mrs Moon:** You mentioned Cobseo in your answer. One of its concerns about the Ministry of Justice's recent proposals to reform more pensions and the armed forces compensation scheme is the removal of the specialist medical and service specialist members, on the basis of cost. Cobseo feel that such a move would result in a serious disadvantage for veterans and have sought assurances that that would not happen. Can you give that assurance?

**Mark Lancaster:** My understanding of those panels is that it remains the role of the president of the panel—indeed, he or she has an obligation—to ensure that the membership of that panel is appropriate for what they are considering. With that safeguard, I do not see how—when a panel is considering something where medical evidence is relevant—there would not be a requirement for an appropriate person to be on the panel, and that proviso remains.

- Q24 **Mrs Moon:** Can you give us an assurance that the WP and AFCS tribunals won't be merged with larger tribunals as another cost-saving measure?

**Mark Lancaster:** I cannot give that assurance because it is not within my remit, but I suppose I would go back to the answer I just gave. There is a requirement for the president to ensure that the panel, in whichever form it takes, has the appropriate membership to consider what is before them.

- Q25 **Mrs Moon:** Who is going to monitor that? Who will take responsibility for monitoring and making sure that veterans are protected, and that the appropriate expertise is there? Is that something your Department will be doing?

**Mark Lancaster:** My understanding is that these proposals—well, they are not even proposals as they stand, but the review of these various panels that come under MOJ operations, is some way ahead. Given the comments that have just been made, I am more than happy to write to the Ministry of Justice to reinforce the view that under the principles that they have established, the panel must be appropriately manned to deal



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with what is in front of them. That should provide sufficient protection to address what Cobseo is concerned about.

**Q26 Mrs Moon:** Right, thank you very much. That is a most helpful suggestion.

Mental health services for veterans are very much in a lot of people's awareness and are a growing concern. The annual report's stated ambition is to improve communication about what the Covenant is and who it supports. One thing the Committee has noted is that the veterans site does not mention access to the Lariam support that you put in place. Can you correct that?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, I am delighted to. I was in Lichfield recently at Defence Medical Services and spoke to the team, who were literally on the end of the phone. I am pleased to say that that service has been put in place. We have discussed it in previous Committee sittings; it is being well used and it seems perfectly logical that that should also be on the website. I will write and ask for it to be added.

**Q27 Mrs Moon:** Thank you. Can you give us an outline of what the Government are doing to look at specific barriers to care, particularly in relation to mental health services?

**Mark Lancaster:** Forgive me—barriers in what sense?

**Q28 Mrs Moon:** We still have the problem that a lot of veterans are not coming forward to receive and access health services. We still have the barrier that veterans prefer to go where there is an understanding of the experiences of military service, so there is that barrier to accessing NHS services. If they do come forward, there is also a barrier to understanding what individuals may have experienced and what the impact may be on their mental health.

So are you maintaining your ongoing discussions? You talked earlier about close links with NHS colleagues in the Department of Health. Is that an ongoing area of concern and an ongoing discussion, and are you seeing improvements in awareness and understanding?

**Mark Lancaster:** The key is communication. There are a number of different areas where we are seeking to improve communication, in collaboration with GP services and NHS England and the devolved authorities. I think more can be done—there is no doubt about that.

The Committee will be aware of the provision at the moment for veterans to have access to Defence Medical Services for up to six months after they leave service. This issue was raised recently by the Member of Parliament for Hull—I forget which one, east, west, north or south—at Defence Questions; in answer to that question, I committed to a review to see whether the period in which veterans can have access to Defence Medical Services should be extended. That work is ongoing. We also had the Murrison review a couple of years ago and I am pleased to say that all the recommendations from that report have now been implemented.



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There is always more that can be done. Mental health is not just an issue for veterans; as constituency MPs across the UK, we have seen an increase, perhaps partly because the stigma around mental health is falling away, both across our civilian population and our veterans, in the number of people who are prepared to come forward and seek assistance.

We need to ensure, since that is a rising trend across society, that we have the appropriate care in place, and pathways to deliver the support required. It remains very much a priority for us to do that and I hope I have demonstrated two areas where we are looking at reviewing the situation to ensure that we can provide appropriate provision.

**Q29 Mrs Moon:** I think everyone on the Committee would acknowledge that the military has made huge strides in the understanding of mental ill health as a result of trauma from service. It has almost made it acceptable to come forward and discuss mental health problems, particularly where trauma has been involved.

Certainly, TRiM has impacted right across the health services and has changed a lot of provision. I know that many police forces now use TRiM as well, but we still lack assurance about the expertise among GPs and armed forces champions across the health service. We are talking about individuals who have challenges to their mental health, which, had their service been in, say, local government or business, would not have been affected.

Cobseo has suggested that perhaps there ought to be targets, target times and resources, around provision of healthcare services to veterans—in particular, mental health services. What is your response to that?

**Mark Lancaster:** My understanding is that NHS England, certainly—I am not sure about devolved Authorities, but I assume that the same is the case—has set targets on its website for delivery of services. They are not necessarily veteran-specific; none the less, when it comes to accessing services across the NHS there are targets and those can be seen on the website, so those targets apply.

I suppose if we were to develop a conversation, it goes down to one of the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant, which says that in certain circumstances veterans should have priority treatment. What I do not have access to, and I am not suggesting that this is a question you would ask, is in how many circumstances veterans have had priority treatment.

There is a slight dilemma with the Covenant, which, if I am entirely honest with the Committee, I am not sure we have ever really bottomed out. We all accept that in certain circumstances, because of their injuries, veterans should receive priority treatment, but how does that work on clinical need, when somebody who is a civilian perhaps has a greater clinical need?

That is an area where I feel we need to work with the national health service and with the devolved Administrations to bottom out exactly what it means. So far it seems to have worked. So far, when required, it seems



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that veterans have had priority treatment, but we have not necessarily engaged in what could be a slightly tricky discussion as to what the bounds actually are. I consider that to be an area that we need to bottom out.

- Q30 **Mrs Moon:** I totally endorse what you say. It is one thing if, 30 years on, you have blood pressure problems; it is different if, as a result of service two or three years ago, you now have problems, perhaps, with an injury received during service. That is a totally different requirement in terms of priority than a blood pressure issue 30 years on, a problem with kidney stones or something else that could not be linked back to service.

**Mark Lancaster:** This is where we need to be careful as the Covenant continues to develop and evolve. I am delighted, as I am sure we all are, that the Covenant clearly has the support of the general public and it is right that our service personnel should have no disadvantage. However, we need to be careful not to get to a position where service personnel are perceived to have an active advantage over our civilian personnel.

If we get to that point—healthcare is an interesting question, which is why I want to bottom out what that relationship will be—I fear that we may begin to lose some of that good will that we have with our civilian population. We are not there yet, but as we continue to progress and if we continue to make improvements, we must be aware of that point, which we probably shouldn't cross.

- Q31 **Mrs Moon:** Is that work you will commission or work that is ongoing and that you are examining?

**Mark Lancaster:** I am fortunate in having been in the job for 18 months. As a Minister, you seem to spend most of your time reacting to things and having to fight fires. I am bound to fall over in the Committee and demonstrate a complete lack of knowledge on something, but having got to a position where I feel confident in most of my portfolio, I have the opportunity to start being proactive.

**Mrs Moon:** You'll be moved.

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, it's probably time for me to move on.

This is one of those areas where I feel that we should do a bit of horizon-scanning and be aware that this may be an issue coming our way. Rather than it coming and biting us and having to react to it, I am trying to begin to commission some work to establish what the bounds should be, so that there is a line we don't cross.

**Chair:** Madeleine, you had a point about Lariam.

**Mrs Moon:** I raised it.

- Q32 **Chair:** I'm sorry; I didn't quite hear it. On the question of the website itself.

**Mrs Moon:** It's going to be added. We have a commitment.



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**Chair:** I am sorry. I was paying insufficiently close attention to that. Good.

**Mrs Moon:** You doubted me. I'm insulted—I'll leave!

**Chair:** I thought it was very unlike you to have overlooked something.

**Mark Lancaster:** I spoke very quietly, Mr Chairman. It was entirely my fault.

**Mrs Moon:** It was a whispered conversation.

Q33 **Chair:** When preparing for this meeting, I inserted the word "Lariam" into the search engine on the Covenant website. It raises the point that there is a proliferation of single points of contact for different things, and you have to know where to look for them. Do you have an extensive page of links on the website so that even if it does not deal with a particular matter, it will point you in an appropriate direction?

I am very conscious of the fact, Helen, that you have been sitting here totally mute until now.

**Helen Helliwell:** The Minister has been ably answering questions.

**Chair:** He is a very eloquent and highly briefed Minister, but perhaps you would like to make a few comments on that point or any other points that occur to you.

**Helen Helliwell:** We have a link in the healthcare section of the Armed Forces Covenant website to the NHS Choices website, which has a whole page about veterans and where to access care, and describes the sort of care veterans can be accessing.

It also includes the Health Education England toolkit that we talked about earlier. Having had a look at it a few days ago, I can say that it is fantastic for all healthcare professionals. It is free to access and UK-wide, and it has templates for doctors to insert text saying, "This is a veteran whose illness has been caused by service and they need priority treatment." I think we provide the right links on the website and we are always happy to add more if there others we need to provide.

Q34 **Chair:** Are there any other points you would like to insert at this moment in relation to what we have been discussing so far?

**Helen Helliwell:** Only in respect of Mrs Moon's comment about veterans' mental health. NHS England spent quite a lot of time last year commissioning work on barriers to access for veterans. It is now tendering for veterans' mental health services, so we should see some real progress on that in the coming months and years.

Q35 **Chair:** Good. Please feel free to contribute to the discussion as we go along.

**Mrs Moon:** And please feel free to keep us up to date on that.

**Helen Helliwell:** Okay.



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**Q36 Gavin Robinson:** Minister, I am sorry if your comments were prophetic, but I do not want to ruin the notion that you had to horizon-scan to see a problem. Priority access is the nub of the lack of implementation in Northern Ireland, particularly around healthcare. When you have indicated both to Mrs Moon and to Mr Mercer that there has been progress on healthcare both in England and across the devolved nations, do you really mean that, or do you still see Northern Ireland as a particular issue when it comes to healthcare implementation?

**Mark Lancaster:** I think there are challenges in Northern Ireland, for reasons we all understand. In answer to a question at the end of last year from the hon. Member for Strangford, I said that I wanted to have a particular focus on Northern Ireland this year. I was due to go very, very, very shortly. Unfortunately, because of the events of the last few days, I am now not going very, very, very shortly, for reasons that we understand. However, I will travel to Northern Ireland in due course, with a specific interest in and commitment to try to get to the bottom of what more we can do to ensure that Northern Ireland does not end up—I do not believe that it is—a poor relation when it comes to delivery of the Covenant.

Quite how you can give a percentage figure to show how the Covenant is being implemented in Northern Ireland is probably a bit tricky, but I am none the less told that it sits at 83% or 84%. However, I recognise that that is about 16% less than it should be, so I have a determination to try to do more.

I hope that the events of yesterday have not delayed this timetable, as we have two more local authorities due to sign the Covenant this week if they haven't signed already. Once again, that demonstrates more progress. But there are challenges—there is no point pretending there aren't—and I am determined to try to get to the bottom of things and do what I can to ensure that we get further progress in the current Northern Ireland.

**Q37 Gavin Robinson:** Thank you for saying that. You are most welcome to visit Northern Ireland. Of course, the difficulty is that local authorities in Northern Ireland don't have any of the responsibilities for healthcare, schools, etc.

**Mark Lancaster:** I understand that, but I still think they have a role they can play.

**Q38 Gavin Robinson:** Absolutely right. The Health Minister wrote to my colleague, my Sir Geoffrey M. Donaldson, on 15 December, "As you are aware, the armed forces Covenant is not in place here"—that is, Northern Ireland—"and ex-military personnel therefore do not have the 13YJ code that identifies them as veterans." I will leave it there. I will take your commitment and I look forward to future engagement on that issue.

In the 2014-15 Covenant report, there was an undertaking that in 2016 you would publish the cause of death for veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, although I understand from the 2016 report that that is at

risk of not being completed. Can you outline for the Committee what the delay is about?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes. As I understand it, the data was collected from 2003 to 2013, I guess, or 2014. There is an awful lot of it; I would guess that—I don't know.

**Helen Helliwell:** I think it's about half a million records.

**Mark Lancaster:** There are probably about half a million different records. The delay is in the cross-matching of that data to healthcare records. There is some funding required for that, which is not currently in place. I am confident that it will be in place and then that process will start.

So there has been a delay, but there is certainly no brushing the record under the carpet or an intention not to progress with that work. However, it has been delayed and, given the number of records we are talking about, hopefully the Committee will understand why it is a very big job.

Q39 **Gavin Robinson:** Are you in a position to indicate a timescale?

**Mark Lancaster:** I'm not, but I will go and ask that question and come back to you.

Q40 **Gavin Robinson:** I am very grateful for that. Thank you.

A decision was taken to stop publishing—Operation Herrick—the statistics for very seriously injured or seriously injured tracking statistical bulletins. Given what you have just said, and in exchanges with the Chair about the consensus around census, you clearly recognise the need, one, to have raw data and, two, to be able respond to need once it's been assessed. Are you concerned that in not publishing these statistics from Operation Herrick that there will be an unwillingness, or a barrier or something else that precludes the Ministry from responding to need when it arises?

**Mark Lancaster:** No, because I think there is a difference between not publishing the data and not having the data. Why do I say that? If we just take a step back, we have always had a regular tempo of publishing quarterly statistics for the very seriously injured and others, as you have just described.

My understanding is that during the period of Iraq and Afghanistan, because of the scale of that tempo of operation and the number of service personnel involved, rather than relying on the quarterly statistics, we effectively had a separate set. Over time, the number of service personnel still in service and still potentially in a care pathway has dropped significantly, as one would expect moving forward in time, to an extent where—once again, I will ask Helen what her view is. What percentage do you think we have dropped?

**Helen Helliwell:** I think it is about 5% from the original statistics population. There is now a concern that those individuals could be identified, should we publish ongoing data about their care pathways.



- Q41 Gavin Robinson:** Is there clarity while you do not publish? I recognise the point that you do not need to publish it to act upon it, but do you disseminate that statistical information to those who need to know?

**Helen Helliwell:** Yes.

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, and of course, potentially, it could be made available if there were an FOI request or something, but we are quite restricted in what format we can publish information via the official statistics route. That format, as I understood it when the submission came to me, runs the risk of unnecessarily revealing individuals because of the relatively small cohort. But, as I said, we do have it—that is the crucial thing—and therefore can use it.

**Gavin Robinson:** Thank you.

- Q42 Ruth Smeeth:** Good afternoon. We are going to move on to education now. I, for one, would love the armed forces to have a special deal. When we were talking about healthcare, I did not really have a problem with them getting additional services—I think it is part of what they have earned and what we owe them—but at this point, I think it would be most helpful if they got the same deal, or at least anywhere near it. In terms of education, despite Government assurances in 2013 in response to our previous report and despite the ten-minute rule Bill raised by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed on schools admissions policy, there is still a huge challenge for armed forces personnel redeployed within the UK during a non-conventional school admissions time. What additional resources are you going to use to fix this?

**Mark Lancaster:** Work continues with the Department for Education to try to ensure that our service personnel are not disadvantaged when they end up moving within the United Kingdom. Of course, it is not just the United Kingdom; it is also returns from Germany and overseas postings. What can we do, from an MoD perspective? I think it is clear that we are now trying to give longer notice of potential postings. We are trying to allocate greater flexibility when it comes to service family accommodation, so that they can have some flexibility about when they move, to try to coincide with school terms.

What I would say is that this also goes back to my slight fear about not seeking to have an advantage. I suppose, as constituency Members of Parliament, we all have individuals who come to our surgeries saying that while they can get their child into school, it is not necessarily their first-choice school. That is where we need to be careful. We need to make sure that we have a system where service personnel can definitely get their children into school mid-term, and potentially into the school of their choice, but I would find it difficult if we moved to a position where we guaranteed service families their school of first choice when other constituents potentially would not have that. It is a case of finding equality, but I accept that. I have outlined how we are trying to help with longer lead times, longer notice and flexibility in housing allocation, but we need to do more.



**Q43 Ruth Smeeth:** One of my concerns is that at least two schools, according to a senior officer that I have met, said when contacted that the Covenant did not apply and that they did not accept it. For a serving officer, it is very difficult to challenge that without going to the chain of command or their MP. They do not have the option, or do not think they have the option, of coming and asking for our support during the process.

We are talking about children who have already had their education disrupted, and who are already struggling. We have already put up obstacles for them in many ways, if they are being moved about, that are not faced by children in the civilian population. Going from school to school to follow your parents can be a challenge. I appreciate that we all have weekly or annual conversations with constituents who do not get their children into the first—

**Mark Lancaster:** I do accept that, but that is precisely why we have the education support fund, for example. I think that about £6 million has been spent to deal with specific situations, as you describe. We also have the service pupil premium. I am not judging success by spending money, by the way; none the less, about £22 million has been spent to try to support schools that are teaching service personnel. Not only have we tried to be more flexible about timings of postings and everything else, but we are offering support to schools financially to try to address some of the issues that you rightly raise. But, as ever, more can and should be done.

**Helen Helliwell:** When individuals approach us to say they have had a problem with the school, the team engage and we have had very positive results. If they do not want to raise it with their chain of command, they can raise it with my team and we speak with the school. We normally get the right result.

**Ruth Smeeth:** It is also making sure that, when they are relocated, they know who to contact and how to do it—if that is the solution. One of the frustrations that many Members of Parliament would have is that servicemen and women are not necessarily comfortable coming to politicians to ask for help, because they would view that as deviating from their chain of command, or telling tales. If they know that they can contact you when they are getting assistance—otherwise, they are struggling.

**Chair:** Before you move on, a couple of people want to come in on that other point.

**Q44 Mrs Moon:** I want to raise an issue in terms of education for the 16 to 18-year-old tranche. Under the requirement that there is ongoing access to education and training for 16 to 18-year-olds, in the education field, the Ministry of Defence is excluded from that. I know you have a particular interest in education. What are you doing to look at making sure that that cohort is getting access to education that will give them opportunities to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, given the high need for technical competence that there increasingly is in the armed forces, and also that that 16 to 18-year-old tranche is getting access to qualifications that are equivalent to those in the civilian world, which we



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are moving for post-18, but do not seem to be doing for under-18? Is that something you are looking at?

**Mark Lancaster:** That is a very reasonable point, because we recognise that there are key points in a child's education, and stability is key at those points. We of course have the continuity of education allowance, which is available—

Q45 **Mrs Moon:** This is young people who have signed up.

**Mark Lancaster:** I see. Yes, it is a very reasonable point. I invite Helen to say a couple of words.

**Helen Helliwell:** I understood that the majority is involved in the apprenticeship schemes. The Ministry of Defence has the UK's largest sign-up for apprenticeships. My understanding is that, as individuals join, they are looked at personally and holistically—what their educational needs are—and they have a specific development plan that is a through-life development plan, which we have been introducing across the services.

Q46 **Mrs Moon:** And you are definitely confident that that is happening for 16 to 18-year-olds? My understanding is that it is definitely happening for 18-plus, but not necessarily for 16 to 18.

**Helen Helliwell:** That is absolutely my understanding, but I am happy to write to you.

**Mrs Moon:** Thank you very much—that is really helpful.

Q47 **Johnny Mercer:** Briefly touching on what Ruth said at the beginning, when she mentioned having a priority healthcare system for veterans—though I appreciate that she moved on to education—you talked about horizon scanning. That was something that you did not want to see happen. By extension, do you think that the way the Americans do things, such as the Gold Star Families scheme, for example—are you saying that that is wrong?

**Mark Lancaster:** I am not saying that it is wrong. I am always hesitant to criticise other systems. When you talk to our counterparts in Washington and they talk about how their system has evolved, it has evolved to being an incredibly complex, overlapping, inconsistent system—

Q48 **Johnny Mercer:** Sorry to interrupt you—I know that time is short. I do not mean taking their model and putting it here; I mean the concept of the sacrifice that we ask these people to make against the priority they receive in healthcare and education. As a concept, does the Department disagree with that—as a policy idea?

**Mark Lancaster:** That is precisely why we have the Covenant, to make sure that our service personnel are not disadvantaged through their service. All I am saying is that absolutely we should recognise the contribution and sacrifice that our service personnel and families make because of the unique nature of their job. What I am saying is that as we move forward—we are in the relatively early stages as we develop the Covenant—we need to be very careful that we do not cross the line where



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we end up losing the support of our civilian population. I have no preconception as to where that line should be. I am open to debate as we move forward, but we should keep it under review, rather than—

- Q49 **Johnny Mercer:** But do you really think that in the UK today, the general public would have a problem with us not providing a better deal, but looking after people who serve?

**Mark Lancaster:** No, absolutely not—

- Q50 **Johnny Mercer:** So why is there this reticence, saying, “We must make sure that we never cross that line”? In doing that, you come back to the military Covenant, which clearly is a good thing, but the evidence outside of the MoD is not quite as the MoD would have it. If you look at the SSAFA evidence from July, eight out of 10 people do not know what the Covenant is. The RUSI report came out in October, and 29% of Covenant signatories think that the MoD’s management of the Armed Forces Covenant is a success. You are right to rely on the Armed Forces Covenant, if it means something.

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, I think you and I are violently agreeing, but coming at it from slightly different angles. What I am saying—

**Johnny Mercer:** I hope I am not being violent, sorry.

**Mark Lancaster:** Agreeing, sorry. The point I am trying to make is that I do not have a preconception as to where this mythical line that we are both describing sits. It may well be that the will of the British public, for reasons that you rightly state, is such that that line could be moved even further to the right, and that is great. All I am saying is that we need to be conscious of wider public opinion, review it and ensure that we do not end up losing that good will through blindly moving forward and taking actions that might be counterproductive. Like you, for reasons that are obvious with our backgrounds, I would like that line to be as far to the right as it can be, but I don’t want to set it at a point where we have lost the will of the British people.

- Q51 **Chair:** Let me come in and press you on the point you made earlier, which suggested that you might be setting it a bit too low so far as the armed forces are concerned. You said earlier, “Well, we will make sure that they get a school place, but why should they have a better chance of getting a place at their first choice of school than someone in the civilian environment? That might be a step too far. That might upset the civilian population.” Surely the point of the Covenant, however, is to ensure that service personnel are not disadvantaged by their service. The children of service personnel are disadvantaged in educational terms by parents’ service, because, whatever quality of school they are in, they are being moved around more often. It would seem to me and I suspect to a lot of us that it is absolutely right to compensate for the fact that they have many more moves than the children of the civilian population have to undergo. Why should they not have a better chance of getting their first-choice school? That would in some way offset the disadvantage they have already had from having their education disrupted more often than the



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child of a non-service family.

**Mark Lancaster:** There is an even simpler solution, which is simply that the Government should have an obligation to do whatever it can to ensure that we move above having 90% of primary schools rated good or outstanding and 80% of secondary schools rated good or outstanding. If we do whatever we can to ensure that all schools—

**Chair:** I am sorry, but I think that is just a cop-out saying we should make every school wonderful.

**Mark Lancaster:** It's not a cop-out.

**Chair:** The fact is that schools vary in quality. Even if they do not, parents perceive them as having different qualities. The reality is that you are being over-sensitive when you say that people would object to service personnel families having a higher chance of getting their first-choice school than civilian families when those children have already been disadvantaged by dint of having had their education disrupted.

Q52 **Mr Gray:** I want to make a particular point. Most people would be stern supporters of the Covenant, but when it comes to an actual local event, that might well change. In a very military area such as my constituency, if I had a lot of civilian children discovering they could not get into Lyneham Primary School because suddenly a very large number of servicemen had moved in and they were all having to bus 10 miles to Royal Wootton Bassett, their support for the Covenant would very quickly disappear. I think therefore the Minister is—I would be interested to know what your view is—right in trying to define where that line is. Of course we have to look after servicemen that move around, but not to the significant disadvantage of the civilian population or the support for the Covenant will very quickly disappear.

**Chair:** It is a matter of scale, isn't it?

**Mark Lancaster:** I can only repeat what I said to Mr Mercer a few moments ago, which is that I have no preconceived idea in my mind as to where this magical line sits, as to what is realistic in terms of matching what we would want to do and the ability to deliver. All I am saying is, as the Covenant continues to develop, as the Minister responsible, I would like to move that line as far to the right as I possibly can. We just need to be conscious that rather than doing that blindly, we do so in recognition of the environment in which we are living and working, and that varies around the UK. So let's just be sensible about it as we move forward rather than blindly setting a line and saying, "This is what you get: no more, no less."

Q53 **Chair:** But then also don't we have to be careful about raising expectations, which some of these statements have done—if, when it boils down to it, we are saying that the perceived compensatory advantage cannot actually be given?

**Mark Lancaster:** But that works both ways—both with our service community and also with our non-service community. That's why I think



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this whole process needs to be managed carefully, which is why I'm saying that I'm trying to be as proactive and forward-scanning as I can to maintain that balance. And it is a balance.

- Q54 Ruth Smeeth:** Before we move on, we should just remember that one of the reasons why military personnel may choose a specific school is that there are other military personnel's children at that school, and because of the support network they require, especially at key events: if parents have been deployed over Remembrance weekend, those things have different connotations if you parents are serving. You can understand why people would want their children to be with other service personnel children.

In addition, I thought one of the most interesting things that was raised during the debate in the House on the ten-minute rule Bill was about the number of schools this affected, and how it was only two or three children per school, across many, many schools. I very much appreciate the specific challenge that was raised by Mr Gray about Royal Wootton Bassett but that is unusual.

**Mr Gray:** Wiltshire.

**Ruth Smeeth:** Wiltshire is slightly different, but that is unusual.

Moving on, we have obviously seen the recent defence estate rationalisation plan: 27,000 military and civilian personnel are probably going to be relocated and moved about. Has there been any assessment of the impact on the affected personnel and their families?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, that has played a part in the process, so we have kept under review exactly what the impact will be. One of the reasons why we have announced the strategy over such a long timescale, running up to 2040, with closure announcements for certain sites as far away as 2032—for example Fort George up in Scotland—is to try to give as much as notice as possible so that families can plan ahead to try to smooth this transition.

- Q55 Ruth Smeeth:** I would be interested if you could give us some more information on the assessment about education, accommodation and healthcare requirements of those who are being relocated, especially what conversations you are having with local authorities? Because, if we are suddenly looking to shut facilities that may be used by both military families and civilian personnel, and if we are looking at how we are rejigging some of these around—

**Mark Lancaster:** I think Wiltshire is a very good example. If we were just to look at the one area of moving of the Army back from Germany, not exclusively but to a large degree to around the Salisbury Plain area. Wiltshire Council has been over to Germany to engage with our service personnel, to talk them through what the options are. You only need to go to Ludgershall, a military site there and you go and see the—gosh, I can't remember how many—but the new service family accommodation which is being built as we speak to accommodate the move back from Germany. The engagement with Wiltshire Council, led by Baroness Scott, has been



fantastic. That is a really good example of how we are trying to get ahead of the game and smooth that process.

- Q56 Douglas Chapman:** Good afternoon. You are well aware of the importance of accommodation for service families. It is very much a part of the Covenant commitment and has a huge impact on things like recruitment and retention. The external members of the reference group, the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee, results from the continuous attitudes survey and a large quantity of anecdotal evidence point to the fact that the lived experience of service families continues to be very poor, as it says in the report. In terms of accommodation, why does that continue to be a serious problem?

**Mark Lancaster:** I think there is a historical issue here. Obviously, the issues we have had with the introduction of new national prime contract with CarillionAmey are well documented. I think it had a reputation for there being issues. We had the Get Well plan earlier this year, which saw improvements. The latest figures show that CarillionAmey are now meeting their targets of 95%. Whether those are the right targets is a different question, but there are historical problems.

The only thing in your comment that I would challenge you about is that I am not for one second dismissing this. This is a big issue, and I have spent a lot of time trying to work it through this year. On the attitudes survey, only 2% of people who leave the forces say it is directly because of accommodation. None the less, it is a factor. I think there could be a combination of things, of which accommodation is one. I hope that when we see the next survey next year, it will be better. An awful lot of work has gone into trying to address our maintenance contracts ahead of winter this year. I have had CarillionAmey in several times to make sure there is an appropriate winterisation plan. It is going on at the moment, and the latest figures show that they are broadly meeting their targets.

I am certainly not satisfied. I am not satisfied that we are seeing a decline. That is one of the reasons why we are investing £68 million in our service family accommodation this year to try to improve the quality of it. Since April, no home has been allocated that does not meet the Government's better home standards. That is also an improvement in the situation, which I hope we will see filtering down through the surveys next year.

- Q57 Douglas Chapman:** You said last year that you would consider terminating the contract with CarillionAmey. At what point would you want to make that decision, if it is quite clear that the contract is not delivering for forces families and service personnel?

**Mark Lancaster:** There are two different issues there. One is whether the contract is delivering for forces families based on CarillionAmey's key performance indicators, and the other is whether we would terminate the contract because they are failing to meet their key performance indicators. The latest evidence shows that there has been an improvement. There was a slight dip in November, but in December they were meeting their



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key performance indicators, so I don't see any reason why at the moment I would be seeking to terminate the contract, although I can only underline my commitment to do so if they were to consistently fail.

I think the wider question is whether the contract as it stands, with those KPIs, is right. Is it satisfactory that we are committed to fixing 95% of broken boilers within four days? From a user, family perspective, would you perceive that to be a good service—if you didn't have a boiler fixed for four days, but none the less the box was ticked because it met the KPI? While CarillionAmey are meeting the KPIs, I think the biggest challenge now is to look again at what we want those KPIs to be, from a service family angle.

**Q58 Douglas Chapman:** Is there an opportunity to alter that during the term of this contract?

**Mark Lancaster:** Those discussions are ongoing. I am determined to improve the quality of service that our service personnel receive.

**Q59 Douglas Chapman:** Okay. Just moving on slightly, the implementation of the combined accommodation assessment system for service accommodation rental charges—I had to read that out because it is quite a mouthful—suffers from a range of inconsistencies, banding assessments, complex appeals procedures and so on. We heard in the report, for example, that there are perhaps rows of accommodation that are rated or banded at different levels, and yet the accommodation on the face of it seems identical.

The service families' federation considered that all these issues, alongside the continuing problems with maintenance, make this an inappropriate time to be increasing rent charges for the vast majority of service personnel. I think something like 81% are experiencing a rent increase. On the appeals procedure, there are 1,675 appeals and only 377 have been processed, resulting in only 24 changes out of all that work. How do you respond to how that is working out in terms of rents and the appeals? What can be done to improve that situation?

**Mark Lancaster:** There are two very separate issues there. I wouldn't necessarily bring together the maintenance contract by CarillionAmey, which we have just discussed, and an ongoing stream of improvement work, with the banding reassessment.

The old four-tier assessment was horribly out of date. It had some bizarre criteria—for example how far the home was away from a telephone box. In 2016, how many people go and use a telephone box? A more modern criteria would be what access there is to broadband. I think it was right that we updated it. Yes, for 81%, that has resulted in a rent increase. I have already mentioned, though, that we have changed the criteria for allocating housing, so now none is allocated that does not meet the Better Homes standard, so the quality of allocations has gone up.

There is a wide acceptance that there was an undervaluing, or undercharging, for our service accommodation, which is of course already



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subsidised to quite a significant extent compared to its civilian counterpart—we mustn't forget that. On balance, I think it is the right thing to do, and 20% of service personnel have seen a rent decrease, so not all have suffered.

Every penny that has been raised or is being raised through any additional revenue is being reinvested into our service homes. There is also a wider recognition that there are places where our service personnel serve where we have delayed those increases. For example, our overseas bases are charged at one or two gradings below what they would be in the UK. There have been issues in the Falklands that have resulted in the delay in the implementation.

On balance, it is the right thing to do. I do understand: no one likes to see an increase in their charges, but I do think we have to put it in the wider context of what those charges are compared to other constituents renting from the public sector, away from the Armed Forces.

- Q60 Douglas Chapman:** Okay. Finally, on the future accommodation model, the report suggests that there is some anxiety from service charities about the models that have been used. Can you tell us how the Department is going to engage and discuss those issues and give some assurances to the charities that would be involved, to make sure that they have some say in the development of the policy?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes. We are still at a very early stage in developing the future accommodation model—I think we have now boiled it down to potentially eight different options and we are not quite ready to go public with those yet. We will narrow them down even further before we do. I have had regular communication with the Families Federations and other charities. This is raised on a regular basis. I am well aware of the Family Federation's survey that it carried out. We have just carried out our own survey. We have had—how many responses do we think we have had?

**Helen Helliwell:** I can't remember. Sorry, I don't know.

**Mark Lancaster:** We have had thousands—tens of thousands—of responses. The data is currently being analysed and I will publish the results of that in due course.

The one thing that is absolutely clear with the future accommodation model is that one size is not going to fit all. The challenges we face accommodating people in central London are very different to the challenges we would face accommodating people, say, in Faslane, where there would be a more static population because of the move of the submarine fleet up there. It is going to be complex, but the principle of the future accommodation model, where we will be allocating on the basis of need, is absolutely right. The early indication from the survey is that there is a degree of polarisation between younger members of the armed forces, who seem to support it, and others, who perceive that they may lose out under the new scheme. That is something that we have to work through,

and I look forward perhaps to coming back to the Committee with what our proposals will be in due course.

- Q61 **Phil Wilson:** Can I move on to the Corporate Covenant? Recent research by RUSI has shown that almost two thirds of the signatories to the Corporate Covenant who were surveyed expected greater assistance from the Government in engaging with the wider defence community—particularly the service charity sector to help them navigate through all the various charities. What priorities do you set for sector support and what initiatives will you introduce to improve communication between the private and charity sectors?

**Mark Lancaster:** We have the defence relationship management team who, over the last couple of years, have proved to be quite successful when it comes to managing those relationships. They will continue to be the focus of our relationship between defence and the corporate world. We also have the 13 RRFCAs across the country. I spoke at their annual conference recently and they continue to be an absolutely key channel when it comes to communicating with local business and, indeed, local communities.

Historically, when it comes to relationships with corporate bodies, we have focused on reserves. As I move forward, I would like to see priorities when it comes to the employment of our regular personnel as they leave—working together with businesses in that respect. Equally, in certain specialist areas such as engineering, medical and others, as we look towards our flexible employment system where we look at potentially dialling down regular service to part-time service in certain circumstances, or indeed dialling up the reserve service, in the wider space I see that there needs to be much greater integration between the MoD and the private sector in recognising that there are certain skill sets that we need to share—particularly in engineering. That flexible employment system will allow a sharing of an individual, either as a reserve or, potentially, as a dialled down regular for a period of time, who may go and work in business.

I am always very conscious that when we talk about the Corporate Covenant it is sometimes clear what we would like from business, but not always clear what we can give back as the MoD. My priority over the next year will be, in ways that I have just tried to explain, convincing business about what is in it for them, as much as what we can get from them to support the MoD, and to move away from just a focus on reserves.

- Q62 **Phil Wilson:** The other thing is that only 29% of corporate signatories to the Covenant—according to the survey by RUSI—actually think that it is a success. Do you think that the policy is failing and if it isn't, why not?

**Mark Lancaster:** I haven't got those RUSI figures in front of me. Does the Committee have a breakdown of how that 29%—

**Phil Wilson:** It might have, but I haven't got that in front of me.

**Mark Lancaster:** From memory—I do not have them and have only scanned them—

**Phil Wilson:** I think that this is from October 2016.

**Mark Lancaster:** So, 29% say what? What do the other 71% say? From memory—I could be wrong—the overwhelming figure was a neutral, central figure.

- Q63 **Phil Wilson:** The figures say that 29% of businesses thought that the AFC was already a success, 26% disagreed and 45% neither agreed nor disagreed—they did not have a view.

**Mark Lancaster:** So I am right: the overwhelming body, if you like, are undecided and in the middle. That probably reflects where we are in the evolution of the Covenant and the Corporate Covenant. I also remember, from the same report, that 90% or something signed the Covenant because they wanted to support the Armed Forces. The way I interpret that is that we have a groundswell of support, but as the Corporate Covenant is being developed, an awful lot of companies are still undecided about how that bilateral relationship is going to work. That goes back to my earlier point about recognising that, in the early stages of the Corporate Covenant, there was an awful lot of, "What we would like from you," but not enough from the MoD about, "What we can give you." That really ties in to your earlier question. My priority over the next year is to try to work more closely with business to ensure that this is a two-way relationship. If we do that, I think you will see that figure change.

- Q64 **Phil Wilson:** It seems to me that you have got a big hurdle to get over if 45% do not have a view. It feels as though companies may have just ticked the box. Obviously it is the right thing to do to support our Armed Forces, but does it go beyond that? How do you encourage them to do more?

**Mark Lancaster:** That does not sit with my personal experience. Having attended the gold awards for the Duke of Cambridge, having attended the London silver awards recently, and indeed having been in Nottingham signing a whole raft of Covenants recently, there does seem to be genuine enthusiasm that is much more than ticking a box. But one thing your figures demonstrate is that in the early stages of this development, more work needs to be done. Hopefully, in answering your previous question, I have demonstrated where my priorities lie in trying to deliver that.

**Helen Helliwell:** Could I add that we are chairing the Service Charities Partnership Board next month, which has the chief execs of all the military charities that we work with on it? One of the things that we will be discussing with them is how they will engage the businesses that have signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant so that they know what priorities we are working on through that Service Charities Partnership Board to get the businesses more involved from that angle, too.

- Q65 **Phil Wilson:** It would be good to hear back from you on that.

**Helen Helliwell:** I will be happy to.



- Q66 Ruth Smeeth:** Can I get some detail in terms of how we would monitor whether corporates are applying the Covenant? One of my concerns is that it is an easy tick box, especially if you have got a defence contract at any level, to say, "Of course, we are supporting the Covenant because we support the Armed Forces." But anecdotally I have heard from officers who have recently left the services who have gone and had interviews—they would be the only ex-military veteran applying for a role—and, when it came down to the final two, they did not get the job even though they were told they had the same capability. They questioned why the Covenant was not being applied and were told, "Well, this is about business, not about the Covenant." I wonder how we are going to monitor the applications, especially with those companies with which we have a contractual relationship.

**Helen Helliwell:** That is a really good question. That is something that we discuss with Defence Relationship Management. They produce a report. Their regional account managers will engage with the businesses, ask them for evidence of how they are being active in fulfilling their pledges, and if we do not think they are being particularly active, we will look at steps: is that because there are some barriers, or because they do not understand what needs to be done? And we issue guidance about what common things companies could be doing to really help our Armed Forces community. It is something that we are really mindful of, but we know it is not a legal requirement. They are signing up to this voluntarily, but I agree that we probably need to do a little bit more on testing that, once they are signed up, they continue to deliver on their pledges.

- Q67 Ruth Smeeth:** If we do not think they are delivering on their pledges, would we ever consider removing the Covenant? Would we ever publicly censure a company?

**Helen Helliwell:** We need to look at what we would do in those circumstances. Like I said, it is voluntary. There does seem to be a huge willingness—you see that at the awards ceremony—with them wanting to do more. I think we need to give more guidance to them so that they know what kinds of things are helpful: spousal employment, the transition element that the Minister has talked about, and flexible HR policies for partners of serving spouses so that they can have more leave when people come back from deployments and so on. I think we need to do more to monitor what they are doing and then we will look at the implications if we do not think they are fulfilling any of their pledges, and the reasons why.

- Q68 Ruth Smeeth:** The final question. Are we encouraging every company that we have a contract with to sign up to the Covenant? What are we doing to ensure that when the MoD signs a new contract with a new company that is not a member of the Covenant, we are encouraging them to join the Covenant?

**Mark Lancaster:** Certainly, there is a wider attempt to get all companies to sign the Covenant. I do not think it is a contractual requirement, shall we say, and I am not sure we would be allowed to make it a contractual requirement—I hesitate to say—under European procurement laws.



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**Ruth Smeeth:** Soon not to apply.

**Mark Lancaster:** Indeed. Let's look at it.

Q69 **Phil Wilson:** Next question: the Community Covenant. Almost every local authority in the UK signed up to that Covenant. Research shows that there is a divergence from council to council about exactly what they are doing, and there does not seem to be consistency across the UK. I understand that one of the stated objectives for 2016 was a greater level of regional consistency. Can you let us know what are you doing to try to achieve that?

**Mark Lancaster:** Yes, absolutely. At the start of the year, I commissioned the Forces in Mind Trust to carry out its review with support from the Local Government Association. I am not sure whether the Committee has had the opportunity to read that report. It is very positive and it really does underline exactly what you have just said, Mr Wilson, about where there is inconsistency. The challenge now is not getting key leadership in local authorities to support the Community Covenant, it is transferring that commitment down to a desk level and a basic understanding of what that means when it comes to implementing local authority policies.

In the main, it comes as no surprise that local authorities that have a high service population are doing that well. Once again, Wiltshire comes to mind, and also some of our north-east local authorities. But we are doing our bit—as a result of that review we now have a toolkit, which we can give to local authorities, which gives best practice and offers advice on that. I spoke last year at the local government conference on this subject and I hope to do so again so that we can continue to reinforce that message.

It is a pretty similar picture whereby progress is being made, more needs to be done and we are now firmly at the stage of showing best practice. That is precisely why we issued the toolkit to local authorities.

Q70 **Chair:** Before we bring matters to a close, I want to raise one more issue, which is stretching the concept of the Covenant a bit, but not, I believe, beyond propriety: that is, whether the Covenant, at least informally, contains any sort of obligation towards our veterans, in particular that, long after they have finished their service, they won't find themselves being pursued through the courts in ways in which we have seen in relation to the Iraq inquiry, in ways that are now being started up in connection with Northern Ireland and the Troubles, all those decades ago. If such methods had been applied, for example, to veterans of the second world war, it would have probably made that conflict all but impossible to fight.

I do not want to use the word "tinkering", because that is demeaning, but while we are tinkering or at least trying to do our best in the foothills of the problems that face service personnel and veterans, surely the proverbial elephant in the room is this huge issue of the application of the civil law to military conflicts, particularly conflicts involving countering



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terrorists, whether in the Middle East, on the UK mainland or, especially, in Northern Ireland.

Can you tell us what the Ministry of Defence is trying to do to fulfil that overall obligation that we must have towards our service personnel to protect them from usually spurious legal claims being made against them, often long after the event?

**Mark Lancaster:** Indeed. I do not think I can add too much to what the Secretary of State said to the Committee in his evidence shortly before Christmas. On the wider principle, we have made matters clear, given that the policy for much of this does not sit within the Ministry of Defence. For example, you mentioned Northern Ireland: the issue firmly sits in the Northern Ireland Office. On that specific issue, I can only really refer the Committee to the letter that the Northern Ireland Secretary issued to all Members of Parliament on 10 January, which gave an update as to where we are.

As the Secretary of State said in his evidence, we are in discussions with the Northern Ireland Office as to how we can influence any potential legislation to offer support to our veterans who may be involved in that. I think it would be inappropriate to comment at this moment.

While I thought sometimes this morning that I am responsible for just about all the policy of the MoD, there are areas I am not responsible for and it would be inappropriate to comment on another Minister's policy. Equally, however, we have made it clear that, when it comes to legal support, the MoD will be supporting our former service personnel. Beyond that, Mr Brazier, I can only refer you to the Secretary of State's earlier comments—

**Chair:** It is Mr Lewis actually.

**Mark Lancaster:** I was thinking of my former MoD colleague as we spoke, Mr Lewis. Now you have completely thrown me—

- Q71 **Chair:** Before you get back on track, let me press you a little further. We fully understand that it is not the responsibility of your Department, ultimately, to decide what will happen, but what your Department can do, and what you as Minister with special responsibility for veterans can do, is to make the strongest possible representations to the Departments that are ultimately responsible as to how the law could be changed—for example, in the case of Northern Ireland with regard to a possible Statute of Limitations timed to ensure that anything happened before the Belfast Agreement could not now be revisited. Are you making the strongest possible representations to those other Departments of what must be done if people are not to say in future, "Why on earth should I want a career, possibly a dangerous frontline career, in the Armed Forces if decades after the event I am going to get a knock on the door and find myself hauled up before a court for something that I probably didn't do wrong in any case"?



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**Mark Lancaster:** Let me simply reassure you, without going into the detail, because negotiations are ongoing, that the strongest representations are being made, certainly at the moment between the Secretary of State for Defence and the Northern Ireland Office, as to how we can influence any future legislation to offer support for our veterans.

**Chair:** That is exactly what I wanted to hear. Thank you, both of you, for your evidence today. We greatly appreciate it. The sitting is concluded.