

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018, HC 1899

Tuesday 12 February 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 February 2019.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Gavin Robinson; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar.

Questions 1-98

Witnesses

I: Anna Wright, Chief Executive, Naval Families Federation, Louise Simpson, Policy and Research Director, Army Families Federation, and Maria Lyle, Director, RAF Families Federation.

II: Mary Moreland, Chairman, War Widows Association, Charles Byrne, Director General, Royal British Legion, and General (Rtd) Sir John McColl KCB CBE DSO, Chairman, Cobseo.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Naval Families Federation](#)
- [Army Families Federation](#)
- [RAF Families Federation](#)
- [The Royal British Legion](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anna Wright, Louise Simpson and Maria Lyle.

Q1 Chair: Good morning and welcome to this session on the Armed Forces Covenant annual report 2018. We have two panels of three. We will be a little bit constrained by time today, so each panel will have a hard stop, as it were, after 45 minutes. I say this not only for the benefit of the panel, but for the members of the Committee who will have to exercise an unprecedented degree of self-control in putting their questions. A great example will be made by Mr Johnny Mercer, who will start us off in a second after each of the three people on the first panel has said a brief word to introduce themselves. We will start with Anna.

Anna Wright: I am Anna Wright, CEO of the Naval Families Federation.

Louise Simpson: I am Louise Simpson, the policy and research director of the Army Families Federation. Sara, our chief exec, sends her apologies.

Chair: Thank you for stepping in at short notice. Maria, this is your first time as well, I believe.

Maria Lyle: Yes. Good morning. I am Maria Lyle, director of the RAF Families Federation. I have relatively recently arrived and am looking forward to this session.

Q2 Johnny Mercer: Thanks for coming in. We have talked previously about how veterans' care needs to be much more joined up in Government. The Government have set up a veterans board meeting where they get together to make sure it all functions, supposedly across Government, to work for veterans. Some of us were keen to see the third sector represented on that board, but the Minister said, "No need for that. We will meet the third sector before the meetings and put your suggestions and concerns to the board." My first question is: has that happened?

Anna Wright: Absolutely, it has.

Johnny Mercer: What was the outcome?

Anna Wright: We are getting good access as external partners to the board. All of us and those on the next panel are getting access.

Q3 Johnny Mercer: Brilliant. What were the suggestions and concerns that you wanted to see represented in those conversations at the veterans board?

Anna Wright: The same things that come out of the Covenant Reference Group, but it is an opportunity to raise them higher, which is fantastic. For us it is about employment, accommodation, childcare—

Maria Lyle: To add to that—we might come back to it later—there is the successful transition from serving to veteran status, and particularly support to families within that process. Given that there are lots of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

organisations ready to support veterans, our link with them is helping people to transition successfully, so they will be successful outside and potentially not need the support that is out there for veterans at the moment.

Louise Simpson: Foreign and Commonwealth is where we would really like the influence.

Q4 **Johnny Mercer:** Definitely. We will come on to that later. I know that is quite a big area of concern. Have you seen any improvement in the cross-Government engagement with the Covenant after the appointment of lead Ministers? Within each Department, is a lead Minister in charge of making sure the Covenant works in that Department. Has there been an improvement? Have you seen that that has had a real tangible effect?

Anna Wright: I don't think we have seen any additional interaction, but that is because we have had good access before. What is helpful is to know is who the lead is. For example, we had some research that we launched last week and we now know who to send that to and who to engage with.

Johnny Mercer: Within that Department.

Anna Wright: Yes.

Q5 **Johnny Mercer:** Can you give us an example? Which Department are you working with?

Anna Wright: This is some research that I will send to each lead in the Government Departments to inform them.

Q6 **Johnny Mercer:** Okay. Have either of the others seen any tangible effects? One of the complaints—let me put this in the picture a bit clearer—was that getting the joined-up working across Government was not working too well. We have set up a veterans board. One of the outcomes is a Minister in each Department who is responsible for the delivery of the Covenant. Has there been any touchpoint between that and the work that you do? Have you seen any improved integration or any results at your level?

Louise Simpson: I don't think there has been much change, but, because this is under the veterans board, it makes the Covenant very veteran-focused. Obviously, we are in-service charities, so that would be my main point: do they understand that that translates to in-service families as well?

Q7 **Johnny Mercer:** Great. What about the devolved Administrations? For example, how have you found the veterans board and the Covenant meetings go in Northern Ireland? Do you notice any difference within the devolved regions?

Maria Lyle: The most recent board that we all attended was attended by representatives of the devolved Administrations, who both contributed significantly during that meeting. There is always room for improvement—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we may touch on it later—so things like discussing how we can get more metrics around health and education, which will help us to measure progress for service families and children. Working through those issues with the devolved Administrations, would be really useful.

Q8 **Johnny Mercer:** Would you agree with that, Louise and Anna?

Louise Simpson: Yes.

Anna Wright: Yes.

Q9 **Johnny Mercer:** Moving on to funding, we had the huge pot of LIBOR funding—£970 million—and now we are into the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, with £10 million a year and so on. How have you found that transition? How have you managed that in your organisations? How reliant were you on your annual bids to the LIBOR fund? Have you managed to get on to a more sustainable footing?

Anna Wright: One development has been that there is a trustee from one of us, on a rotation basis, which is me at the moment. That is really helpful in terms of us seeing bids.

Johnny Mercer: A trustee on the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust?

Anna Wright: Yes, on a rotational basis. That is really helpful, because we can absolutely add value in terms of what we see and what the bids are, and how credible they are.

Q10 **Johnny Mercer:** How many trustees are there?

Anna Wright: I don't know. That is a really good question.

Q11 **Johnny Mercer:** Don't worry; we can find out elsewhere. You are one of them, so you get a real input into where these decisions are made.

Anna Wright: Yes, and I consult my colleagues. I think that is really beneficial from our point of view. It is also helpful that it is now independent of the MoD. They have more freedom; the website has improved.

Johnny Mercer: There is a more professional delivery, if you like.

Anna Wright: Absolutely.

Q12 **Johnny Mercer:** Maria or Louise, would you add anything to that?

Louise Simpson: I would say that having just seen the proposals for the next year of funding, it is very clear that there is a good strong family focus there. We are really chuffed to see that.

From a LIBOR perspective, it is a slight shame that that money has gone, for emergency purposes. You repurposed some money so that we could employ another Foreign and Commonwealth adviser. We needed that, and not having that fund and that ability to get access to that sort of money might prove problematic in the future, but who knows.



Johnny Mercer: Great. Thank you.

- Q13 **Mrs Moon:** Can I ask you about the metrics that are used to judge the progress? Do you think they are good enough? What would your comments be?

Anna Wright: The FAMCAS—families continuous attitude survey—is used a great deal. There is not great take-up of that, unfortunately. It is also flawed in that, for example, 28% of the naval service are in long-term unmarried relationships—so nearly a third of the service aren't invited to take part in the survey. That is what we have got and it is what we know. Happily, this has been recognised and I think they have asked about six questions on the end for anybody to answer, but you would have to know to answer it. There is some more progress to be made there. I would like to see FAMCAS open to everybody.

- Q14 **Mrs Moon:** Is that a common feeling?

Louise Simpson: Yes.

Maria Lyle: Yes.

- Q15 **Mrs Moon:** There has been quite a lot of concern about dispersed families and whether we are actually looking after them. Do you feel that there is enough of a focus on dispersed families?

Anna Wright: I don't. We are mostly dispersed. Some 24% of the Armed Forces live away from the base, and that is 36% in the naval service. Weekending is our thing. There is very little support for families in the community. That is not to say that they are whinging and moaning about it, but if things do go wrong and their partner is away for nine months, it is really tough.

Maria Lyle: We are nearly at the process of publishing a report on a project on dispersed families, which was funded by LIBOR. What it brings out is that for some families it is a really positive experience, because they have taken ownership of their destiny and have made a positive choice. For those who do feel more isolated—I completely agree with Anna's point—we will have some recommendations about some relatively light-touch ways that more support could be added. I think that will be quite important, because we will probably go on to talk about the future accommodation model. That could mean that that category grows quite considerably in the future, so we would like to future-proof the support offer for those families.

- Q16 **Mrs Moon:** One area about which I have picked up concerns—and I am interested if you have any comments about it—is that of personnel who are deployed suddenly and at short notice, and are not able to talk to their families about where they are going, how long they are going to be away or when they will be back. That brings additional problems to families, particularly those with young children, where daddy just disappears and they don't know when he is coming back, and he can't talk about where he is going. Are you picking up any concerns about the lack of support, especially when those families are dispersed? Obviously I



am talking about special operations forces in particular.

Anna Wright: Yes, the community in the specific example that you are talking about, if I have guessed correctly, tends to be on the spot, because they have to move at short notice. That is not dispersed families, which I would say are a different issue. My concern for dispersed families is about the amount of separation. The best it gets is the weekending scenario, but the rest of the time they are deployed. At the moment, I meet so many people whose relationships have broken down because they never see their partner. A part of the retention equation is lack of family time—that is a real concern for me.

Louise Simpson: From an Army perspective, obviously we use more SFA than the other two services. FAM concerns us, particularly in respect of dispersed families, with the welfare models that we have and how that will apply. We have huge concerns about what that holds for the future.

Q17 **Chair:** Before we move on Madeleine, on the point about weekending, has the Chief of Defence People been engaging with you at all, in the light of his work on a future engagement model? Have you heard anything from the Chief of Defence People about this problem?

Anna Wright: Last week, we launched some research that King's did on our behalf. It was a two-year project looking specifically at non-operation separation and weekending. We are really excited to have the results of that and I would be really keen to inform any work the CDP is doing.

Maria Lyle: Just to finish off on that, when we launch our dispersed families findings, one of the things we will do when we have an FAM pilot in action—we hope that will happen at some point later this year—is to trial some different models of supporting dispersed families. We have the agreement of the RAF base where that is due to happen, so we are hoping that we can engage practically on the ground, with models that might be able to be rolled out for the future. Obviously, we have got to have our eye on costs and being successful for all forces families.

Q18 **Mrs Moon:** Part of the problem is that no one knows what dispersed families they have locally. The local authority, the health authority and the education authority do not know, and neither do local support services or the local MP. Even the Legion does not know. Is any of the research that you have looked at going to get over how we are able to actually develop a model, when nobody knows where the problems are and what numbers you have got?

Anna Wright: One challenge is that the JPA system—I don't know what that stands for, but it is the system that the services use to record personal data for soldiers, sailors and airmen—is not very keen to put too much personal data on there. My feeling is that they can't see the point of it. For example, we have a lot of unmarried folk and they do not put down that they have children with their partners. We have no sight of how many children there are. As you say, it is very difficult to provide support unless you know this. I think the first step is to incentivise people to share their data, and to explain to them why it is important. I know the Navy is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

looking at this and looking at new data systems to do it, because unless we have that data we can't do anything.

Maria Lyle: The other piece of the jigsaw is the ongoing work that the MoD is engaged with on the map of needs through Northumbria University. That is using a whole range of proxy measures to try to map firstly where veterans are and secondly, potentially, where serving families are. The challenge is that it uses proxy measures because it cannot draw directly from JPA. Even if it did, the JPA information might be out of date anyway. The short answer is that there is no easy solution to getting the correct data.

Q19 **Mrs Moon:** What are the problems with the governance structure when you are trying to cover the needs of veterans, serving personnel and their families? That is a huge remit. Is it too wide a community to be successful?

Louise Simpson: I don't think we can comment on the veterans side. From an in-service perspective, capturing that data and understanding where our families are and what their needs are is really important. I am not sure we are close to that yet.

Anna Wright: It will be incredibly helpful if we get that bit right for the transition, as Maria said earlier. It would be really, really helpful to know where they are and who is most vulnerable as they do the transition.

Chair: We need to think about moving on now.

Q20 **Mrs Moon:** Just very quickly, it is intriguing to see what are the top-priority problems that are coming the way of supportive services. The Veterans' Gateway has said that the problems it sees are with education and training, job seeking, homelessness, and housing and housing advice services. Others have said they see financial hardship and housing issues. What are the top priorities that people come to you about?

Anna Wright: Certainly accommodation is still at the top for us. Proportionately, foreign and Commonwealth is—considering that we have about 590 people, a huge number of issues—

Mrs Moon: We have questions about that later, so that is really helpful.

Maria Lyle: The other ones I would add are school admissions and healthcare, particularly when moving between areas.

Chair: Thank you, Madeleine. Mark wants to come in briefly.

Q21 **Mr Francois:** From memory, JPA is the joint personnel administration system. The difficulty with it is that it is an extremely clunky system and it is very difficult to amend it. The MoD is very resistant to touching this beast, because it is just not user-friendly. It is an old and inflexible tool. That is part of the problem.

Anna Wright: I am quite encouraged, because yesterday I had a demonstration of a new data system that the Navy are looking at, which



HOUSE OF COMMONS

has been used for the American army. It is very sophisticated, and I think it would be a lot better.

Mr Francois: And it works?

Anna Wright: Yes, it works.

Mr Francois: Well, that could be a first in the history of the Department.

- Q22 **Ruth Smeeth:** A successful Government IT scheme—it could be the first in the history of history. I would like to come back to school admissions. We have been talking about school admissions for a very long time, yet there was a spike this year in the number of issues raised that related to school admissions. Can you explain why?

Maria Lyle: I will kick off; I am sure my colleagues will have something to add. There are a number of factors. First, people are now more aware of their rights—they are more aware of the Covenant—so they might be bringing more things to us that they battled by themselves in the past. On top of that, the RAF certainly is operating in a couple of areas—particularly Hampshire and Lincolnshire—that are tight on school places. There is a complete patchwork across the country in terms of how well they are dealt with at local authority level. Some local authorities are very proactive; others not so much. Therefore, we are having to fight the battle on individual occasions.

In addition, there used to be different systems in place that were a bit slicker. As everyone knows, the education system has changed—it is a bit more fragmented—so it has been a challenge for the local authorities to engage with the schools. They used to be doing it with all the levers they needed; now they are engaging with individual schools and trusts. There are a number of factors.

- Q23 **Ruth Smeeth:** We haven't seen a change in timescale. One of the issues was that, because of academisation, if someone was redeployed in July, trying to get access to individual schools in August to enrol for September was almost impossible. It is clearly in the gift of the Department to determine when people find out about their next deployment. Have we seen a spike in deployments just before term time?

Anna Wright: The manpower challenges are at the heart of this, really. People have to go where they have to go.

Ruth Smeeth: And whenever they have to go.

Anna Wright: Yes. While there is a will to give three months if you are in area and five months if you are out of area, that is breached quite often.

- Q24 **Ruth Smeeth:** Is there a problem in specific parts of the country? Obviously, the RAF has specific issues, including in Scotland with the devolved Administration and the knock-on effect. Does this apply universally across the country as a problem, or is it just for specific services in specific areas?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Louise Simpson: There are pinch points in Hampshire and Wiltshire, with rebasing occurring over the summer. There are concerns about school places there.

One of our issues is families moving on transition and not being able to use the school admissions code. The school admissions code and the service pupil premium were one of the greatest successes of the Covenant. We launched the Covenant thinking, "This is great; this is what we've done." As an organisation, we have been campaigning for changes to be made to the school admissions code, to make it more reflective of the current circumstances. We are slightly frustrated at how long it is taking to push those through. Even if it is just recognising the more vulnerable, more mobile children and giving them slightly more access to places, that would be really appreciated.

- Q25 **Ruth Smeeth:** There is a huge issue about SEN and additional support, in respect of how you can get the package in place at short notice—and that is not being reflected.

Anna Wright: We know that people just don't move. They are so afraid—they have got everything in place and they daren't move. That is a problem. If you do move, it takes so long to get it up and running.

- Q26 **Ruth Smeeth:** That has a direct knock-on effect on retention. Obviously you're going to leave, if you have a child with high needs—you're just not going to stay.

Maria Lyle: Yes.

- Q27 **Ruth Smeeth:** On the pupil premium, what reasons have the Government given you for not extending the age range of the service pupil premium?

Louise Simpson: One of the reasons was lack of research to demonstrate that that was required. It was thrown back to the Fam Feds to do that. We just don't have the money to commission that sort of research. Our argument was very much that the pupil premium has been extended to reflect and acknowledge the early years need. Therefore, it makes sense that our mobile children of that age may also require it. It was very much a question of affordability. They have said they are looking at extending the education support fund and creating a fund specifically for under-fives, in acknowledgement that there are some issues with that age group.

Anna Wright: One concern is that we know that one in eight children in the country has a diagnosable mental health illness; that includes service children. To not be providing additional pastoral support that is specific to service children is a concern, post-16. Mental health is a tremendous problem with young people.

- Q28 **Ruth Smeeth:** Are you having challenges with the pupil premium in terms of the devolved Administrations? Are there any differences that you want to raise here about the devolved Administrations versus England, especially thinking of how it applies to people moving in and out of the Scottish education system and whether that support is in place?



Maria Lyle: My understanding is that it is a different model. Correct me if I am wrong, but it is not payable in the same way, certainly within Scotland. Having had conversations with the Scottish Government, there are other measures that they put in place; they would say that the package overall in support of service children is very much there. What I suppose causes question marks for our families is they understand the model in England and how the service pupil premium can be used to support children and to flag to schools, and it isn't there when they go to Scotland. There is an understanding within the Scottish Government that that is a challenge; it is reflected on the website. It causes questions from our families, certainly to our federation.

Anna Wright: It would be really helpful if there was more transparency. There is a perception that you have the service pupil premium in England and then there is nothing in Scotland. However, with GIRFEC every child is taken care of. The transparency would be helpful, though, so that it was explicit that it is not going into a single pot for deprived children.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I'm not the Scottish Government.

Anna Wright: I think it would be helpful if it was transparent that it wasn't just going into a general pot and was specifically for pastoral support.

Chair: We had better give Martin the opportunity to make a brief intervention at that point.

Q29 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** As the only Scottish constituency MP around the table, I think it is important. First, may I give some clarity that the Scottish education system has been separate from the rest of the UK not just since devolution, but since about 1050? I get slightly concerned that we go round and round about the issue of the MoD dealing with people moving from different parts of the United Kingdom to an education system that has been separate for nearly 1,000 years. I find it slightly disappointing. GIRFEC is about getting it right for every child. I think the Scottish Government recognise that this is about how that is articulated, but do you think it would be better for the MoD and the education Department in Holyrood to have a chat about how the MoD understands GIRFEC and the profound way in which it has challenged and changed Scottish education to the benefit of the children using it? That is not just about kids from outside the Armed Forces, but about how it can be useful for kids from Armed Forces families. Should we not do that, rather than just copying what England does because that is what the MoD thinks we should do?

Anna Wright: Absolutely. I was asking for more transparency. There is a different system, but the perception of our families is that there is a lack of understanding.

Maria Lyle: I believe the intention is positive, and the "Welcome to Scotland" website has been about supporting that move by families and serving personnel. It sounds as if it needs some work to grow the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

education and information there, based on, as you say, the MoD understanding that whole package so that it can then be written in a way that families understand and that makes sense today. That would, I am sure, quell some anxieties.

Chair: We have fallen behind at bit. Madeleine, very briefly.

Q30 **Mrs Moon:** Quickly, is there a similar problem in Wales? How does that impact on those dispersed families?

Louise Simpson: Our inquiries on admissions and appeals were up by 63%, and the figure on additional needs education was also up considerably, although I do not have it to hand. In Wales, we have the same discussions around the service pupil premium and what it is doing. I think they are very confident that every child is getting what it needs. As Anna said, this is about being open and transparent, which will help our families understand that although they might be getting things differently, they probably are still getting the same service.

Maria Lyle: The Welsh Government have been proactive in engaging. I have had several exchanges with them since I came into post, and we have meetings in the diary. The only thing that has been flagged in that regard by our families has been some concerns over the Welsh-English balance of teaching in schools, but I don't think we will ever get away from that. We will continue to have dialogue about that, and I appreciate that it is an important issue within Wales itself.

Q31 **John Spellar:** There have been a number of initiatives to improve access to healthcare for service personnel and their families. Have they worked? What more needs to be done? Are there regional differences? I do not just mean between the different Administrations; I mean within regions of England as well.

Louise Simpson: There are certainly regional differences. Earlier we were talking about child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, which have very different criteria regarding access and the age group they work with, and our families find that hard to engage with. One problem about explaining the Covenant to our families is that when they think about being disadvantaged, they think about the fact that their child has been diagnosed with a mental health condition and has accessed CAMHS in Yorkshire, but then they are posted somewhere else in the country and are told that even though their child's needs have not gone away, they are not able to access the service there because no one else in that area is able to. That is not a disadvantage according to the Covenant, but our families think it is a clear disadvantage.

Q32 **John Spellar:** Does that affect people's willingness to stay in the services? If they feel that they are losing that access for their children, do they then apply to leave early to maintain that level of service?

Louise Simpson: We do not have hard data on that, but the impact on families and on serving personnel taking leave is high, so I imagine that that issue does influence it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anna Wright: I think there is more awareness of the Covenant, but for someone with complex medical needs, moving between CCGs and moving the care pathway is a major issue. It is very complex. People are reticent to do it, and they reach out to us.

- Q33 **John Spellar:** What about for ordinary mundane day-to-day medical access, for example getting access to a doctor's practice?

Louise Simpson: We have not had much evidence regarding GPs. Dentists are another issue entirely. Our families definitely struggled more with access to NHS dentists last year. There are also rules around orthodontists: they are on a waiting list but by the time they get permission to have a brace done, they are already posted and are bottom of the list somewhere else.

Chair: Thank you. Accommodation is a huge subject, but as we are time-limited please feel free to write in with further offerings after the session if there are any points that you do not get the chance to make today.

- Q34 **Ruth Smeeth:** Yes, I got given the really little issue to talk about. In terms of the top lines—it feels like "Groundhog Day" as we discuss this every year—what are the main issues currently being raised about accommodation?

Anna Wright: It has got better; however, it is relative. There has not been any investment in the accommodation for 40 or more years, so it is relative. Louise has more to say, as she has more people in quarters.

Louise Simpson: I think it's got better. We likened it to the last year of the MHS contract before it changed. There are fewer inquiries about simple repairs and maintenance problems. Complex inquiries are getting better too; we are seeing fewer of them. I do not know how much of that is to do with complaint fatigue. We definitely had fewer boiler and heating issues over the winter period. We are involved in the NHP contract and what that looks like. We were here with the PAC three years ago, and we can say that we absolutely are being involved in that contract negotiation at the moment.

- Q35 **Ruth Smeeth:** Thank god for the end of Carillion, on that basis. We will write to you about the Defence Safety Authority report. What are the impacts of the future accommodation model and the delay in the pilots? I feel like everyone has been taken on a journey, and the journey has died.

Anna Wright: Yes, in Faslane they lost faith. People were holding off buying properties, expecting there to be something in the package to help with that. There was concern that the Forces Help to Buy scheme might end. At least we have that. There is a loss of faith in the system.

Ruth Smeeth: They didn't start with a huge amount of faith in this process, either.

Anna Wright: I think they were leaning in, in that area. It will potentially be a help.



Maria Lyle: My understanding of where we are in the process at the moment is that there has been movement, and the package may well be either with or going to the Treasury, so we would be keen for that to progress so that families can see what it means when it might come in. It is a “might” because it has to be piloted.

I appreciate that this is a slightly different issue, but I want to flag up that we have talked about improvements in service family accommodation, but we have a key concern around single living accommodation. You mentioned fire safety and I will not go into more detail there. The governance, accountability and funding of single living accommodation, and its impact on retention, is key. There is recognition of this within the Ministry of Defence, and a board is being set up to better manage that. That is of key importance to the morale of personnel and to recruitment and retention in the future.

Ruth Smeeth: Single Living Accommodation Modernisation (SLAM) is now getting to the point where it is 20 years old. It was maintenance-free in theory, whereas now it requires maintenance.

Maria Lyle: Absolutely. It is not that there has not been investment. There has been investment in new bed spaces, but the prioritisation for how further building takes place and how ageing infrastructure is maintained has been challenging over the past few years. In some cases, the funding has been delegated without the full levers to allow those owning those funds to introduce changes. We will be keeping a careful and watchful eye on this.

Q36 **Mr Francois:** I have been to RAF Digby where you have people working on very sensitive intelligence and so on. These are bright young single people who are predominantly male, but there are females too. I have seen the singles accommodation there. I wouldn't want to live in it. These people are immensely employable in the private sector, and yet we basically have them living in extremely poor accommodation—I nearly said something else. Just so we have understood you, is it right to say that that is a major factor in why some of them in the end pack it in?

Maria Lyle: We don't ask them that question, but my anecdotal evidence says yes. The figures in AFCAS say that they are not happy with it. There is a clear recognition within the military and the MoD that the governance of it needs to change to improve the spend—to prioritise the spend, effectively. I am not saying that people are unaware of this as an issue, but I would stress that we see it as a real priority. It supports the key retention and recruitment issues, which, as we know, are so important.

Mr Francois: You have the DIO, which oversees all this. I was once on the record as saying that there is nothing wrong with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation that couldn't be improved by two weeks of high-altitude carpet bombing. They are hopeless. I understand that the MoD has now devolved parts of the DIO budget to individual commands. They have decision-making priority over how the money is spent, and then the DIO will be—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Mark, this is a long brief intervention.

Mr Francois: Sorry, but it is important, Chairman.

Chair: It is, but we have very limited time, so we must get on.

Mr Francois: We have got until half past.

Chair: No. With this panel, we have got until quarter past.

Q37 **Mr Francois:** All right. Do you think that giving the commands the authority to prioritise where work is done will be quite helpful?

Maria Lyle: I can understand why that devolution was given. Local commanders should have an understanding of where the spend should go. They are working with DIO on that, because the business cases still go through DIO. I believe that there is every intention at the top of DIO for that process to get better. It is a relatively recent process. It was April 2018 that the devolution started happening. I have met people within DIO over the past month who have a keen eye on this improving. My push is that we must not take our eye off the ball, because it is absolutely vital—it really is. I understand why the funding has been devolved down, but the levers need to be working to get that devolution working.

Chair: Martin, could you consolidate your questions into one?

Q38 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** This is an easy one, given that it is about family life—it is in the name. What will your involvement be in the new study announced by the Defence Secretary to examine the support available to different members of military families, including spouses, partners and children?

Louise Simpson: We are meeting Andrew Selous on Monday to discuss what he is looking for from our participation.

Q39 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The MoD is trying to recruit more foreign and Commonwealth personnel. Have you seen any improvement in the support offered to that group and their families? What are the main challenges they face? Please feel free to talk about the visa fee payment system.

Anna Wright: I will start with the positives. I have been really encouraged by the way the Navy has leaned into this. It has appointed somebody who is reviewing all the policies, and it is looking at the recruitment process. I am really encouraged by that. However, the immigration part is really, really frustrating. As I said earlier, we have relatively few foreign and Commonwealth personnel, but an inordinate number of inquiries about immigration and visa issues. The naval charities are really concerned about the amount of money they are being asked for because of this issue.

Louise Simpson: As well as working for AFF, I am also the chair of the Cobseo foreign and Commonwealth cluster. We still have huge concerns about taking on more foreign and Commonwealth personnel, and about



HOUSE OF COMMONS

whether the information is actually out there. We struggle to engage with recruiters to make sure soldiers and service personnel understand the financial commitment that they have when coming to the UK, particularly around the cost of visas and the minimum income requirement. There was a lot of press over the weekend about soldiers not understanding that they may not be able to bring their children in for up to almost four years because they are not earning the right amount of money. As an organisation, we feel that it is immoral—we used that word with *The Times*—that we are asking people to put their lives on the line and then not allowing their families and children to come over to the UK.

- Q40 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Coming in on that point, I am sure the Committee is mindful that the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, my colleague Drew Hendry, raised the very issue at Prime Minister's questions. A UK citizen who comes from a Commonwealth country, married to a UK national, served in Iraq and Afghanistan, also in Cyprus and who is stationed now in Fort George—his names is Denis Omondi—has not been given a visa for his daughter from Kenya because he does not see her often enough. First of all, could that be something to do with the fact that he is in the Armed Forces and, secondly, the Home Office does not understand what military service and military family life is like?

Witnesses: *indicated assent.*

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I see lots of nodding heads. I believe that's an agreement.

- Q41 **Mrs Moon:** We are very aware that time is limited. We are also aware that you must hold a great deal of information in relation to the problems being experienced by foreign and Commonwealth families. Would you be willing to write to us and tell us a little bit more about what you are experiencing, where the problems lie, how much is MoD and how much is Home Office and what, in fact, you think needs to be done? That would be extremely helpful to the Committee.

Louise Simpson: Absolutely. Also, we published a report last year through Anglia Ruskin University, which was on the needs of foreign and Commonwealth serving personnel and veterans, so that is probably a good read as well and gives you a jolly good idea of what all the charities think.

Mrs Moon: If you can give the contact details to that to us, that would be extremely helpful.

- Q42 **Gavin Robinson:** I haven't jumped in on every question because of the constraints of time, but there are three parts to this touching on through-life support. I would be keen to establish what involvement or input you had in the creation of the strategy. Do you feel it goes far enough and is going to deliver over the next 10 years? From a Northern Ireland perspective, when you look at the Covenant implementation report published in November, and you look at through-life support, there are three healthy pages of action in England, one for Scotland, two for Wales and not a mention of Northern Ireland. I would like you to reflect on how



HOUSE OF COMMONS

acceptable you feel that is for serving personnel or veterans from Northern Ireland and how best, if we do have a 10-year strategy, we can make sure that the benefits reach right across this United Kingdom.

I am sorry if there is a lot in that for the time we have, but I think it is important, when we consider devolved areas and the difficulties in making sure we get delivery across the country, that we highlight where there are clear missed opportunities in the reports we have had.

Anna Wright: To take the first part of your question, we have been invited to be involved in the development of the national strategy all the way through, and it has been quite timely, because we have carried out a tri-fed research project into transition of families from the service and that just happened to be completing at the same time, just in time to inform the veterans' strategy, so we think we have added some value in that way. In terms of Northern Ireland piece, I am not confident to speak to that other than to say that, obviously, that is not sufficient.

- Q43 **Gavin Robinson:** Maria, if you don't mind, in a previous answer you talked about the involvement of devolved regions on the Covenant board and you said "Yes, both of them are represented." You said "both".

Maria Lyle: That was a mis-step.

- Q44 **Gavin Robinson:** Not Scotland and Wales?

Maria Lyle: No. There was very active participation from Northern Ireland as well.

- Q45 **Gavin Robinson:** Do you feel, when you see reports where Northern Ireland is not mentioned at all, be it on through-life support, healthcare, education—talking of the pupil premium earlier—that we are failing to recognise that, while there are different issues, we still have an honourable commitment to deliver for service personnel in Northern Ireland?

Maria Lyle: Your question has made me realise that I need to go away and do some digging to look at where our personnel stand in Northern Ireland and what specific issues they may have raised.

- Q46 **Chair:** We have got two topics left and the closing comment, so we are right up against the boundaries, but we should manage it.

- Q47 **Mr Francois:** Very quickly, one on the Covenant. According to a report conducted by the Forces in Mind Trust, only 1% of businesses had heard about the Covenant from military charities. Is there a greater role that charities could play in raising awareness of the Covenant?

Louise Simpson: From the Families Federation perspective—we're charities, but I don't think Maria is—we work with Defence Relationship Management and organisations all the time to talk about spousal employment and what they could be doing. I could not comment on other charities. We certainly feel that there is much to do to increase visibility around spousal employment.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anna Wright: We talk to businesses about the whole family and the opportunities to offer employment. We had a meeting a couple of weeks ago with Barclays, which is leading the way on spousal employment. We are doing our bit. That is not our core business, but we are doing it where we can.

- Q48 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** In the annual report, all the charities highlight considerable inconsistency in the delivery of the Covenant across local authorities. What more should be done?

Louise Simpson: I am not sure there can be with devolved localism. Every time we ask this question—I spoke earlier about families feeling that they are disadvantaged by moving from one local authority to another. Until that is resolved, and I do not think it ever will be, they question the value of the Covenant.

Maria Lyle: There could be some positive encouragement put out there. I recognise the relationship between central and local government is not of a nature where you want to be strong-arming anything necessarily, but there could be more promulgation of best practice. There are some e-learning tools that have been developed that could be further pushed out there to local authorities. There could perhaps be a best practice kitemark or something similar to recognise the ones that are doing particularly well. Those are a couple of ideas, but I agree with Louise that it will remain a challenge.

Anna Wright: The difference that we have noticed is where local authorities have been in receipt of Armed Forces Covenant funding and they have a project officer. That makes a massive difference. It really injects some enthusiasm and motivation and has a huge impact. For me, that is a big thing.

- Q49 **Chair:** The final point is that, given that you usually make joint submissions, I will give each of you an opportunity to say whether there is one service-specific issue that you would like to raise with us before we bring the session to a close.

While you are thinking about that, I acknowledge with gratitude the presence of Andrew Selous MP, who has been sitting in throughout the entire session and who has been commissioned by the Defence Secretary to undertake the new study about the support available to different members of military families. Thank you, Andrew, for sitting in today.

Who would like to go first? What would your single service-specific issue be?

Anna Wright: I do not think it sits under the Covenant—we were asked to prepare for the question, “Was there anything that does not specifically sit under the Covenant?”—but for me, it is harmony. That is, the disparity between the amount of separation that the naval service has and the other two services have. Families do not understand that and it is having an impact on retention. It needs to be looked at.

Louise Simpson: For us, it would be the minimum income requirement for our foreign and Commonwealth. I would like to take up Johnny Mercer's tweet that said you would get it sorted by Monday—that would be really helpful—

Chair: I think they have got you there.

Johnny Mercer: I didn't say that I would get it sorted—

Chair: We are right behind you, Johnny.

Maria Lyle: Other than what has already been discussed about single-living accommodation, my point would be childcare costs. I recognise that is a national issue and a burden that all families have, but for RAF families, the change in costs on posting can be massive, particularly for dual-serving or single-parent families. That is a huge concern for us.

Chair: I congratulate everyone concerned; we are only three minutes adrift out of 45. That is pretty good going—in fact brilliant by this Committee's standards. I thank you all very much. Please feel free to write to us with any further thoughts. We may write to you. We will be writing to you about the fire safety issue, for example, as was mentioned earlier. Please feel free to stay for the next session if you have the time, but if you have to leave, you leave with our thanks.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mary Moreland, Charles Byrne and General Sir John McColl.

Q50 **Chair:** We resume the session with panel no. 2. We are hoping that a fourth member who has been delayed en route will join us, but for the moment we have three. Please give a word of self-introduction in the usual way.

Mary Moreland: I am Mary Moreland, chairman of the War Widows Association.

Chair: Welcome back.

Sir John McColl: I am John McColl, chairman of Cobseo, the Confederation of Service Charities.

Charles Byrne: I am Charles Byrne, director general of the Royal British Legion.

Q51 **Johnny Mercer:** Have Ministers kept their commitment to meet you before each veterans board meeting, and did they put your suggestions and concerns to the board? What was the outcome of that?

Sir John McColl: We had the same concern that you all expressed about the convening of the ministerial Covenant and veterans board without a charity sector representative on it. That was answered by the forming of the external partners group, which consists of all of those who sit on the

Covenant Reference Group, which is basically panel 1 and panel 2 that you have seen.

Fairly early on, we asked for the consideration of a veterans' strategy and for a separate piece of work to consider the perception of veterans in the community. As you will be aware, both those pieces of work have now borne fruit, in that we have the veterans' strategy with the perceptions work folded into it. We are now moving towards an implementation plan.

If I may be brutally frank, that is the easy bit. It is quite easy to talk about policies and to produce policy documents. We are now finishing the consultation phase on the veterans' strategy and are about to move to the implementation plan. Whether it actually works, in terms of cross-Government co-ordination, will depend on whether the implementation plan has grit in it, and whether it delivers on the strategy. We have not seen the implementation plan, because it has not been delivered yet.

Q52 Johnny Mercer: So the jury is still out on that?

Sir John McColl: I would say so.

Q53 Johnny Mercer: Sorry; we have to be brief. Have you seen a discernible improvement after lead Ministers were appointed in specific Departments?

Sir John McColl: No discernible improvement. One area I would highlight is foreign and Commonwealth, which you mentioned earlier. We have highlighted the issue. Actually, the third sector is picking up an awful lot of dealing with our foreign and Commonwealth soldiers and their families, which it should not do; that should be a Government responsibility.

Since it was highlighted, progress made has been in terms of the measures to deal with the problem. Whether they are having an effect is yet to be seen. What we have not had any movement on is the policy. The policy is a matter of cross-Government co-ordination, delivered by the Home Office. We have not seen any delivery on that policy. There has been a lot of discussion about it but not movement.

Johnny Mercer: Charles and Mary, would you add anything to that?

Mary Moreland: I think Sir John has explained the strategy very well. Once again, war widows are ignored. It is a veterans' strategy, and war widows are not defined as veterans. There is very little talk about bereavement throughout the strategy. I think it should be the Armed Forces community strategy, as opposed to being specifically for veterans.

Charles Byrne: Generally there is a good opportunity to try to raise questions and concerns and at least to get things noticed. I think even the Prime Minister would occasionally chair the Covenant Reference Group. The significance given to that seems to have diminished a bit.

The other area where we see a lack is in the opportunity for one-to-one engagement with Ministers. I understand that there is an awful lot going on at the moment.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q54 **Johnny Mercer:** But it is still pretty hard to make that happen?

Charles Byrne: Yes.

Q55 **Johnny Mercer:** Finally, how have you managed the transition to the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust?

Charles Byrne: From our point of view it has gone smoothly.

Johnny Mercer: Sir John?

Sir John McColl: I sit on the trust.¹ From the service charity sector's point of view, we have the Army Families Federation and I try to represent the rest of the community. I think it has gone pretty smoothly. As you know, the trust not only manages the £10 million that comes from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, it also manages a series of other funds as well. I think the agility it has from being outside the Ministry of Defence has been a bonus.

Q56 **Mrs Moon:** May I ask you about the metrics that were used to judge progress in this year's Covenant report? Are you happy with them?

Sir John McColl: When you say the metrics, do you mean the metrics that are in the Annual Covenant Report for each section?

Mrs Moon: Yes.

Sir John McColl: Well, they are quite detailed. My first observation is that they are national, and quite a lot of what you heard and what is reflected in the report is the discrepancy between national policy and local delivery, so the metrics you are talking about may represent a particular picture at a national level but they do not represent the disparity at local level.

That is the major problem I have. I find a couple of issues associated with some of them worrying. CTP is talking about placing 82% of people in work after six months. I would question whether CTP is actually delivering that or whether organisations, such as other charities that are dealing in the employment space are doing it or whether it is just CTPs. I think there are issues there. Having said that, I do not have a particular issue with the statistics.

Charles Byrne: We recognise that it is very difficult. One of the obvious traps that it is easy to fall into is that it is easier to measure activity rather than the impact or output of that activity. We understand that it is difficult, but at least there is a mechanism that works.

Q57 **Mrs Moon:** But if we do not have that regional picture, it is not helpful to know how effective something is being. Would you agree?

Charles Byrne: Definitely. Regional variation is one of the consistent issues that comes back time and time again.

¹ *Note by witness:* The Service families federations have a seat which rotates every 2 years. The seat is currently held by the Naval Families Federation. The Chair of Cobseo is a permanent trustee on the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q58 **Mrs Moon:** So until we have that, a regional picture would be a priority for change?

Sir John McColl: The priority for dealing with the disparity of local delivery is at the heart of quite a lot of the comments across the Covenant observations from the third sector.

Q59 **Mrs Moon:** Again, is the full range of issues and problems that are associated with veterans' families and serving personnel too broad a reach? Are we trying to do too much at one time under the whole Covenant?

Sir John McColl: It is a big ask. The veterans' strategy is relatively helpful in this respect. I understand that there is some concern that it is narrow and focuses only on veterans, but the one thing it does is make sure that you are focusing on veterans. In many ways, it is positive, because it does not just say what it is not going to do. The Covenant says what you are not going to do—you are not going to disadvantage people. The veterans' strategy should be positive about what you are going to do, and that is what we tried to feed into it through the consultation process. In that case, it is quite helpful. To be frank, it is a broad remit, but I do not see any other way of doing it.

Charles Byrne: No, I don't think it is too broad. The total population including families serving is 6.2 million, so it is a big ask, but it is doable. It comes back to the co-ordination of services.

Sir John McColl: This is a cross-Government issue that affects every single Government Department in the way it looks after the Armed Forces community. It is about how well co-ordinated Government are in holding Departments to account and delivering on their undertakings. If they are effective in doing that, it is not too big an ask. If we have a series of meetings in central Government which do not have any traction when they get out to the various Departments of state, quite clearly it is going to be ineffective.

Charles Byrne: We have already seen that play out. We have talked about various major meetings. Some Government Departments are always there and always try to push it. The Department for Work and Pensions is making every effort it can but, for example, the Home Office typically would not even turn up or send a representative to the major meetings. That is a constant theme that comes back. It is patchy.

Q60 **Mrs Moon:** That was a very useful final comment. I have had a number of concerns expressed to me about the Veterans' Gateway. People have got used to the Veterans' Gateway and there seems to be some level of concern about its financial security. Is that something that you have picked up or have concerns about?

Charles Byrne: The Veterans' Gateway had its busiest month ever in January; it grows and grows, with just under 2,000 contacts or calls to the Veterans' Gateway. In terms of relative scale, it runs at about 10% of the scale of the Legion; therefore, if you multiply it up it is probably about 5%



HOUSE OF COMMONS

or less of all the contacts that come in as people try to find their way into the range of services that are supported. There is an as yet unresolved question about funding: the Legion has committed a certain amount of funding, and the Government and the MoD have recently committed more, but it is not a permanent solution. There is a degree of uncertainty that sits around that, and we are continuing to work with it, but at the moment the Legion is committed to running the Veterans' Gateway with what funding we can.

Q61 **Mrs Moon:** Sir John, any comment?

Sir John McColl: I think the Veterans' Gateway will take time to pick up speed. As Charles has just said, it has had a good month this month. I am hopeful that gradually, as we move forward, other sources of helpline will fold into it, but that should be a process of encouragement—that is the only way you can deal with it. So far, so good, but it will depend on continued support, not just from the third sector, but from Government.

Q62 **Ruth Smeeth:** Good afternoon—I have just had to double-check the time. Charles, what reasons have the Government given you for not extending the age range for the service pupil premium?

Charles Byrne: I don't think they have given us any directly. Some places do extend it. One of the counties extends it down to pre-primary, and there is certainly a need in some parts of the Legion, the Women's Section fund and, at the end, higher education, but in terms of why it is not done more widely, none.

Q63 **Ruth Smeeth:** What conversations have you had to try to establish whether they are looking to do it, or would be prepared to do it?

Charles Byrne: We put out a piece of policy consultation research about how best the service pupil premium can be used. Since then, nothing specific.

Q64 **Ruth Smeeth:** And the application of the pupil premium to the devolved Administrations?

Charles Byrne: It should be rolled out consistently.

Q65 **Ruth Smeeth:** But we are no further forward?

Charles Byrne: No. It is interesting, looking at the question more generally, that if you roll up the total spend on the service pupil premium over its lifetime, I think it is something in the region of £150 million. It is a significant spend, so it justifies a degree of scrutiny of its impact when you roll up the total scale of it.

Q66 **Ruth Smeeth:** It does, but it also provides a core aspect for how we retain—

Charles Byrne: It does, yes.

Chair: Can I reassure you at this point that the reason members of the Committee have been disappearing like victims in an Agatha Christie novel



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is that the Prime Minister is about to make a statement that we all thought was going to be made tomorrow, but has been moved to today. I can reassure you that all the subjects you are expecting to hear about will be raised by the three remaining members of the Committee and we will get through it all.

Ruth Smeeth: You've got quality.

Chair: And depth. I am particularly grateful to my two colleagues for making it possible for us to continue.

Q67 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon to the three of you. You will find some similarity between the questions we are asking you and those we put to the first panel. This question is about healthcare: simply, do you believe that veterans are getting the timely access to healthcare that they need? If that is not the case, would you outline why you believe failure to get the access they need is still a problem?

Charles Byrne: The quick answer, again—this is a theme we will come back to—is that it is patchy. In some cases it works and in some cases it does not. In some cases it is also about expectation. One of the fundamental challenges is with the understanding of what the Armed Forces Covenant asks of Government services. It was introduced very much as priority treatment understood in terms of time, so you would get your treatment sooner that way. That is not always understood in the same way in the NHS; it is typically understood as creating specific pathways. There is a fundamental difference in understanding how priority treatment plays out, and that affects this as well. There is a level of perception.

Q68 **Gavin Robinson:** Do you, as charities, engage with Government on this? Do you challenge Government to see what they could do to ensure there is uniformity of service? You know that I have a particular interest from Northern Ireland in circumstances in which a previous Health Minister wrongly indicated that the Covenant simply does not apply in Northern Ireland. As charities, are you advocating or agitating with Government to see what steps they can take to resolve those barriers to progress?

Charles Byrne: Definitely. We issued a report, "Our Community—Our Covenant", which laid out a framework that can help devolved Administrations and local government to implement the covenant more effectively, including access to healthcare. It provides a useful framework in which that stands or falls with the political will and the ability to drive it through at a local level.

Sir John McColl: Through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, we established a Cobseo representative in Northern Ireland to support the Northern Ireland Veterans Support Office. The objective was to encourage what might be described as local workarounds due to the impasse there. That post has now been in place, I think, for eight or nine months, and some progress has been made. Having said that, this is—without being rude—in the absence of any political leadership or progress. It has been working despite that, focusing on workarounds.



Q69 Gavin Robinson: It was the involvement of politicians that closed down the operational aspects of the Covenant, but you are right. A follow-on from that is that the work of the veterans officer in Northern Ireland, and indeed of your Cobseo official, has raised the profile of what veterans might expect. Previously, they had not expected any traction at all, and they are finding that these workarounds require significantly more resource to make them effective once folks become aware that there is potential for a workaround. Are you at all concerned that we are almost lifting the lid on a bigger problem, whereas previously folk just did not access the service because they did not believe there was potential for delivery?

Sir John McColl: If that is the effect of putting someone there to try to solve the problem, so be it. One of the tasks that the officials have been given is to try to improve the number of bids we have against the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to try to provide the support that we can. Having said that, the trust fund is a limited amount of money, and we really need the support of Government to deliver across the piece. What we are doing is in support of that, as ever—not instead of it.

Mary Moreland: I was just going to say that it is the same old scenario for healthcare from our perspective—the war widows' perspective. It is focused on veterans; it needs to be veterans and war widows. Given that the war widow population is an ageing population, social care is big. The disparity and differences between the whole of the UK in access to social care—devolution has an impact there.

Sir John McColl: Of course, there is the ongoing problem in Northern Ireland of including war disablement pensions in the transactions.

Mary Moreland: War disablement pensions—I think the Royal British Legion is taking that on. They are disregarded in financial assessments for social care, but not in Northern Ireland.

Q70 Gavin Robinson: I wonder if I could invoke a discrete issue that we had as part of our stage 1 report on mental health. In trying to ensure that the significant services are there, there is an aspiration to get a better handle on the suicide rate among the veteran population. We recommended that the coroner's court record whether somebody was indeed a veteran, so that you get the evidential base and can then create and support services to stop that as an option for those who have taken it previously. Do you support the aspiration in our report for the coroner's service to record this information, so that we get a better evidential base and can fit services appropriately? Is that something on which you have had any interaction with the Government? There seems to be support for it in the Ministry of Defence, but perhaps there is unwillingness or an ability to work out how they would do it within the Ministry of Justice.

Charles Byrne: There is certainly a need for more data. It is extraordinary to find out that there is not a clear picture; there is a lot of anecdotal evidence and headline news. Do we support the drive for more

data? Absolutely. The best way to do it? We haven't engaged specifically on the point you raised.

Gavin Robinson: I think the Committee will return to it in the coming weeks and months.

Sir John McColl: The political requirement for more and better data is clearly stated within the veterans' strategy.

Q71 **Ruth Smeeth:** Sir John, we are going to touch on the issue of accommodation because how could we not? What are the main issues around service and veteran accommodation that you are hearing about? What do we need to do so that this is fixed rather than being an ongoing issue for our personnel?

Sir John McColl: You have spoken to the families' federations about the serving. I will just add a bit to that if I may. I have read the statistics with some horror. They talk about improvement, when 49% of the people consulted are still finding the lived experience unsatisfactory.

That may be an improvement but it is an improvement from an appallingly low base. We should all be thoroughly ashamed. In terms of maintenance, I think it is 70% or 70%-plus found the maintenance contract still unsatisfactory. It seems to me that these were the worst figures for eight years.

I take the point that it might be improving, but let's be absolutely clear: it is awful, and it is having a direct effect on retention and the quality of life of our people. It is something that we need to address urgently. Having said that, it has been for the past decade. It is a significant problem in the services and it is down to one reason and one reason only: that is, long-term underfunding.

If we are going to get it right, it is all very well pushing the money back down to the services, as we heard. I wonder how much money is being pushed back down to the service and what proportion of the requirement has been pushed back down to them. It would be very interesting to read a percentage of what it actually costs to maintain the estate and the money that they have received. I am willing to bet it is well below 20%.

My point is that this is, I'm afraid, just pushing responsibility between the MoD and the single services. Remember, it was with the single services when I was responsible for the Army estate. It then moved to the MoD and now it is moving back again. Frankly, we are just rearranging deckchairs on an underfunded Titanic. We need to address the central problem. Sorry, that was a bit of a beef.

The second question asked about veterans. The point about the veterans has been raised by the Cobseo housing cluster. The point they make is that we would wish to see housing for veterans as part of transition. At the moment we talk about a career transition partnership, but we don't talk about a holistic transition, which includes consideration of housing. A major housing initiative was launched in the House of Lords, co-funded by



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Cobseo housing cluster and the Forces in Mind Trust—an excellent initiative. At the heart of it is the idea of a housing transition as well as a career transition.

Charles Byrne: From a veteran's point of view that is exactly the moment of highest risk, the transition point. There are people who would still be transitioning out who don't have anywhere set up for them to live. That is a big risk

- Q72 **Ruth Smeeth:** How does the Covenant apply? I have heard heart-breaking stories in the past 12 months from people through Help for Heroes. New veterans are turning up at local authorities asking for support and being told that as single men they are getting nothing. There is no support available for them at all. That is anecdotally quite clear, but is there any more information you can talk to us about on that?

Charles Byrne: We know through the Veterans' Gateway that housing continues to be one of the main reasons why people phone up for advice. On the other hand, you also hear that there is accommodation. Is it just a question of matching the supply that is there with the demand? It is again one of those areas where it is very difficult to get below the headline and the anecdotal to understand whether there is a genuine mismatch.

Ruth Smeeth: I'd like to talk about homelessness and veterans but I think we will run out of time.

Chair: Give it a minute or two.

- Q73 **Ruth Smeeth:** We have seen a great deal over the past six months, primarily because of the weather, about homeless veterans, including in my own city. Can you give us any pointers on what you think isn't being done that should be, including in transition? We are talking about veterans who might be 10-plus years out of the service. What else should we be doing to support homeless veterans?

Charles Byrne: There is the Homelessness Reduction Act, which is one of the main drivers. That is welcome. Is there anything specific that we could be doing for veterans that we are not already? Anecdotally, again, from the contact that we have we can, when the Legion comes across somebody who is homeless, find them accommodation within 24 hours. So the solutions exist, certainly for the relief of the immediate need. Why has that not always been taken up? I don't know. It exists. It is there.

- Q74 **Ruth Smeeth:** There is a pathway through to you.

Charles Byrne: It is partly that. There are a good range of other smaller charities who do good, effective work on this. Whether it breaks down at that point, or later on, often the immediate crisis—the need in crisis—can be met, and it can be met quickly. Whether it is always taken up—sometimes it isn't, as well.

- Q75 **Chair:** We have got 15 minutes. I think I am right in saying one of my colleagues has a hard stop at 1 o'clock, so we will do our best to cover the remaining four or five topics in that time, if we can all bear that in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mind. On the issues of family life, can I put to you the same question as was put to the previous panel, about what your involvement will be in the new study announced by the Defence Secretary that examines the support available to different members of military families, including spouses, partners and children? Mary, have you been asked to be involved in this, at all, from the war widows' point of view?

Mary Moreland: Not at the minute. I think it comes back to the same problem—that it is personnel, families—that the bereaved aren't entitled.

Q76 **Chair:** Well, there is somebody sitting in the audience who is relevant to this, so he might choose to make a note of the fact that the war widows would be more than happy to contribute to this.

Mary Moreland: Absolutely, because they are part of the community, and unless they are identified as that cohort—

Q77 **Chair:** I see Andrew Selous nodding vigorous assent from the body of the kirk, so that is a win for a start. Well done. John and Charles, have you been approached about this yet?

Sir John McColl: I know that there is a consultation taking place. I think that a consultation supposed to take place this morning with Andrew, the other representative who is not here. So the charities are being consulted. We have not seen the terms of reference, and we as a body have not been consulted, but we are aware that our members are being consulted.

Charles Byrne: Exactly the same position. There has been no consultation yet, but we are aware that it is under way—but it has not come to us as yet.

Q78 **Chair:** It is early days. The MoD is trying to recruit more foreign and Commonwealth personnel. Have you seen any improvement—those of you that this is relevant to—in the support offered to this group and their families? What are the main challenges they face, and will this result in an added burden to service charities? We have seen some questions raised about Commonwealth personnel.

Charles Byrne: If you were to ask for a single issue that we would highlight, this would be the one. Is there an issue? Yes. Has there been an impact upon service charities? Absolutely, and you heard it from the families federations. They are unable to cope with the demand for advice and support. Has the Government done anything significant about it? I think probably the quick answer is no—not that we have seen yet. The clear area to focus on is the indefinite leave to remain, and a clear ask would be to waive those costs.

Sir John McColl: At the last Covenant Reference Group, a paper was produced identifying a series of measures that had been taken. What was not in that paper was any measure of effectiveness. We need to see the measure of effectiveness because at the moment the majority of the effects, in terms of the queries, are being fielded by the families federations. I find that strange. They are a third sector organisation dealing with the overwash of failures of Government policy between the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

MoD and the Home Office. I think that is unsatisfactory. I would like to see whether they will actually resolve the problems, rather than just putting measures into place. That is the first issue I would take up.

The second thing is that there has been no movement at all on policy. The policy which creates the problem is still there. It has not been addressed. I understand that there are discussions going on at the Home Office, but you might know more than we do. We only know there are discussions. At the moment the policy is extant. Until that is resolved, we will continue to get problems, and if the recruiting statistics, which I understand are being considered by the Ministry of Defence, actually come to pass, this problem is going to balloon. We need to get some resolution on the policy before we go ahead and recruit a whole load more people.

Q79 Chair: Thank you very much. Mary, this is your moment. Listed in the priorities for 2019 is consideration of more support for war widows and widowers. Have you seen any evidence of that yet, and what support specifically would you like to see? I hope you certainly feel that you are now part and parcel of the cohort of people whom this Committee regards as central to our concerns, but you still, I feel, regard yourselves as semi-detached from some of the more official activities.

Mary Moreland: Very much so. 2017 was the first year that we actually had a specific mention in the Covenant report of war widows.

Chair: Any mention at all?

Mary Moreland: Any specific mention under a headline of "War Widows". At that stage, it said: "HMG is considering a policy review of this area and will make a decision in 2018." That was the wording. The wording in the report on the priorities for 2019 is that they are "considering". I suggest that they stop considering. In the debate in the House on the Covenant report, you, Chairman, highlighted the reinstatement of the war widow's pension for a small minority. That is still ongoing. We discussed it last year in Committee. We are still no further on, despite having met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury who suggested that it was a fundamental injustice.

Q80 Chair: For the benefit of those who might be watching this, this is about a cohort of 200 to 300 war widows who lost their war widow's pension when they remarried. That would not happen today, so if they were to divorce their present spouses, the pension would be restored, and if they then remarried their present spouses the restored pension would not be taken away. The MoD, I believe, wants to see these pensions restored without putting people into the perverse position of having to divorce and remarry if they wish to have the pension restored. Is the Treasury still getting nowhere with this matter?

Mary Moreland: I had a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 15 November, and I brought along a couple of the ladies who had been impacted. She identified it as a fundamental injustice. She said that the finance was not a problem.

Q81 **Chair:** This was Liz Truss, was it?

Mary Moreland: Yes. The money is there; it is just getting it over the line.

Q82 **Chair:** Very good. For the benefit of anyone who is interested, if they look at *Hansard* for 22 November 2018, they can see the personal testimony, which I had the honour of reading out, of five of the war widows who spoke most movingly of what it meant to them to have this acknowledgement of their sacrifice, and their former husband's sacrifice, taken away, the failure to restore it, and what it means to them today.

Mary Moreland: It is about recognition. It is not always financial. Although there is financial hardship in some cases, it is not always the financial hardship. It is recognition by the Government that the ultimate sacrifice has been paid, and this is compensation.

Q83 **Chair:** The whole argument is purely about retrospectivity, isn't it?

Mary Moreland: We are not asking for it to be retrospectively paid; we are asking for it to be restored from 1 April 2015.

Q84 **Gavin Robinson:** You read a very powerful contribution to the debate in November, Chair. This is something for Mary to confirm. There had been an issue around how this would have knock-on consequence for another cohort of people. I think it is fair to say that the largest cohort that could similarly be found in these circumstances were widows of Royal Ulster Constabulary personnel. That was resolved by the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland. That precedent was set, but it has led to an even more perverse situation where two serving individuals, one in the RUC and one in the Armed Forces, may have served alongside one another and lost their lives, but one widow has had retrospective reinstatement of her pension and the Armed Forces personnel's widow has not.

Mary Moreland: That just shows the ridiculousness of it all. We have an Armed Forces Covenant that clearly states that there should be special consideration for those who are severely injured, for the bereaved and for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Q85 **Chair:** I am sure that Andrew Selous, who is still here—much appreciated—will look up the testimony from war widows that was cited in our 22 November debate and take it into account, if his terms of reference allow it. Is there anything else you want to add besides that issue, Mary?

Mary Moreland: The only other thing I would say at the minute is about communication. We should actually identify war widows as a specific cohort. We talk about serving personnel, about veterans and about families. Sometimes the bereaved are mentioned—they are usually wheeled out on Remembrance Day—but the bereaved are a very big cohort, and war widows and widowers are a specific cohort within that. They are special, I would argue, because their husbands, spouses or recognised partners have given the most—they have paid the ultimate sacrifice for this country. When you talk about veterans, you need to add



HOUSE OF COMMONS

war widows or widowers, not just class them as bereaved. We need that communication, and we need a baseline of research, because we do not know what the issues are for war widows and widowers. We have anecdotal evidence about them, but not a baseline of research.

Q86 **Chair:** Thank you. Does either of our other witnesses have any perspective on that from their own activities?

Sir John McColl: The obvious injustice of this is quite shocking, frankly, and it is surprising that it has continued for so long.

Q87 **Chair:** Did Liz Truss give any indication that the Treasury was going to do anything about this?

Mary Moreland: She was going to go away and talk to the MoD to see what could happen. I sent an email to her office in December and have basically had a holding reply—I have heard nothing back, really.

Q88 **Chair:** Do you think it would help if this Committee wrote to her?

Mary Moreland: I think it couldn't do any harm.

Q89 **Chair:** We might just consider that. Charles, have you anything to add?

Charles Byrne: The Legion has campaigned on this, historically. A potential change of mind from the Government would be welcome.

Q90 **Gavin Robinson:** May I go back to through-life support? You may have heard my question to the first panel, which highlighted my dissatisfaction with the lack of any Northern Ireland-specific work in the November 2018 Covenant implementation report. What were your respective inputs into the veterans' strategy when considering through-life support? Do you believe that it goes far enough over its 10-year aspiration?

Charles Byrne: We had extensive input into the veterans' strategy, which we welcome. There was a good opportunity to contribute to its development and a formal response document, which is coming back shortly. One area to pull out, which normally Sir John kindly champions for us, is that we welcome the direction and the focus on trying to bring all the Departments to bear on veterans' issues. We are wary of the potential risk of the Government trying to push work out of its remit and towards the charities, or telling the charities what they should be doing and pushing the problem over the fence.

Sir John McColl: We had a veterans' strategy charities board, which met officials at the early stages and throughout—Charles was obviously part of that. It tried to help shape the strategy, and that will continue into the implementation phase. In the cross-Government team based at the Ministry of Defence, we had a sector representative, who was paid for by the Forces in Mind Trust but represented Cobseo and the complete sector in trying to influence how the strategy was put together.

That is all good, and I welcome it, but the proof of the pudding will be what comes out in the implementation plan. There will be some issues that need resources allocated to them and that are under the responsibility of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

other Departments. I am very interested to see whether this will be embraced by the Government Departments and whether they will actually deliver on it. The answer is: so far, so good, and the jury's out.

Q91 **Gavin Robinson:** Mary, do you have anything to add?

Mary Moreland: Nothing to add. We feed in through Cobseo.

Q92 **Gavin Robinson:** Sir John, do you mind if I ask you about a report from November 2018, "The UK Armed Forces charity sector: summary of provision"? What are the challenges facing the charitable sector at this moment in time?

Sir John McColl: I am conscious that we don't have long—

Gavin Robinson: In all seriousness, feel free to write to us if there is more information that you wish to add.

Sir John McColl: The problems that we have at the moment are, first, that we have an environment in which there is austerity, so the tide of governmental provision is receding. The charities are being asked to do more and less resource is coming from the Government to the charities, and less resource generally is coming from the population to the Government, because they have less money. We are being asked to do more with less—that is the first point.

Secondly, because of a lot of problems with charities—not military charities, I would say, but other charities—there has been a tidal wave of regulation flowing down from the Charity Commission, the Fundraising Regulator and the Information Commissioner. All of that is taking resource into the superstructure, rather than delivering to the beneficiaries. We have a problem, which is that we are being asked to do more with less anyway, and then money is being sucked up from the bottom.

That is the problem for the whole of the charity sector, but for the military sector that is of course compounded, because our profile—in terms of there being no large conflicts going on at the moment—has, thankfully, reduced. That means that, necessarily, our bottom line is affected and therefore our ability to help our beneficiaries. At the same time, the number of beneficiaries seems to be staying the same, and their needs are becoming more complex. That is what I am hearing from the charities.

Those are the challenges that we face. How can Government help? The first thing that I would ask Government to do is to look at the increased costs being imposed by regulation and by the regulator, and to see if there is not some way in which they can help. We put in a submission for an NCVO—National Council for Voluntary Organisations—study into tax and charities, and we asked for charities to be relieved of some of the tax burden being imposed on them to cope with the overheads that, necessarily, we are having to deal with at the moment. We are dealing with a plethora of headwinds at a time when the need is, if anything, growing, not diminishing.



Charles Byrne: Sir John summarised that very well. It is an ask of Government to take some of the weight of that increased regulation off our shoulders. The other point worth making is that in the response from the service charities in particular, the level of co-ordination and collaboration is high—we share a single customer management database system—so there is good co-ordination, and we will continue to develop that, I think, such as in support of back-of-house services that we provide for each other. We recognise that some of the response to this challenge lies with us, and we are addressing that.

- Q93 **John Spellar:** A report by the Forces in Mind Trust claimed that only 1% of businesses heard about the Covenant from military charities. Do you think that is right, and is there a greater role that charities like you should be playing to improve awareness?

Sir John McColl: I think it probably is correct—it was an academic study. Do I think that we could do more? Absolutely. We have in train measures to try to do more. We have 80 charities that deal with employment. They have 35,000 inquiries a year and they place 22,500 people in jobs. The difference between us and the CTP is that the CTP basically runs out after transition, after a couple of years; we deal with veterans through life. We could help in advertising what good employees veterans are, and in that way help to deal with the perception of veterans as, somehow, a burden on rather than a benefit to society. We need to do more and, at the moment, we are working with Defence Relationship Management and the Employer Recognition Scheme to see how we can co-operate in a better way.

Charles Byrne: I will add a little bit to that. Can we do more? We already do an awful lot, and this is a potential concern for me. We do everything that we can with our corporate partners to raise money and to raise awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant and the ways that they can support it. The charities can probably do more but I do not think that the solution for this lies with the charities only. Equally, it is worth drawing out that two-thirds of veterans are over working age, so actually, when we are looking at businesses, employment is an aspect, but a minority one. Let's also look at the services that businesses offer to customers, where veterans can be considered too.

- Q94 **Ruth Smeeth:** We moved on from that more quickly than I anticipated. In the annual report, all the charities highlight the considerable inconsistency in the delivery of the Covenant by local authorities. I have written to every local authority and have yet to hear back from them. It is taking months just to get the data from them. In my own authority, we have shifted—of all the original signatories, only two are still with the authority. So the consistency is incredibly difficult. What do you think that we need to do fix that?

Charles Byrne: The easy place to start is the "Our Community—Our Covenant" report, which, as I said, sets out exactly the framework that local authorities can establish to help ensure greater consistency of the delivery of the Covenant. That said, the example you gave is exactly the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

issue: even if you get the framework in place, you then get a churn of people, and it seems to come down to will—political and financial—to deliver on that. I think that the framework would help, and “Our Community—Our Covenant” lays that out. It is then just about trying to get a consistency of will.

Sir John McColl: I wonder if there is a role here for the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board as well. It is a cross-Government issue, with Government Departments right down to local level. I am not sure that we are yet getting the traction out of them that we need to deliver on this.

Ruth Smeeth: My concern is that every authority thinks that after signing up originally, that is the end of their commitment, so every authority has the beautiful certificate up on the wall, but what they are actually doing with it is a whole separate thing.

Q95 **Chair:** Finally, what more can be done through the Covenant to improve the transition from service to civilian life? We touched on that a bit earlier, but this is an opportunity to add to the previous comments.

Charles Byrne: We welcome the holistic transition support service that is being launched. One area that we would pull out again is housing—that is one of the issues that consistently comes top of the list of concerns of people calling in—and what can be done to support housing in particular during that transition phase. It is unfortunate that Andrew Gregory from SSAFA is not here, because I know that that is an area of particular concern and focus for them.

Sir John McColl: I asked Andrew about this because I knew that if he had been here, he would have wanted to speak about it. Veterans UK is delivering that service. My understanding is that 13 people deliver it at a couple of regional centres. The jury is out on whether it is actually going to make a difference, so we will see.

Q96 **Chair:** Well, we will certainly invite Andrew to look at the transcript and to write in. It is unfortunate that his own transport difficulties prevented him from being here. Mary, would you like to say something about what happens when one becomes a war widow, in terms of the support or lack of it, when, on top of a possibly sudden bereavement, people are then told that they have got to leave their service accommodation, often within a very short space of time?

Mary Moreland: I think that has changed—I am not very knowledgeable about the length of time now. That is probably something on which Sir John or Charles would be able to enlighten you. I think that some of the issue is that, if you are in service accommodation, you have built up that community and, as you rightly say, you end up having to leave that.

If you come back from overseas, there are things such as getting utilities, because you have not got those in your own name, so there is difficulty getting gas or electric. Again, this is very much anecdotal evidence because we do not have a baseline. At the minute, there are 15,854 individuals in receipt of a war widow’s pension in the United Kingdom. The



HOUSE OF COMMONS

majority of them are over 65, so it would be ongoing problems and the social isolation, and almost a second bereavement. The problem when there is not a serving personnel or a veteran in the family is access, because they are no longer in that community to go and get help. That is an issue. Any evidence we have is anecdotal. I understand the transition for the bereaved has improved, but I am sure more improvements could be made.

- Q97 **Chair:** We touched on the fact that it would be good if war widows could be bracketed in whenever mention is made of veterans. Could you be a bit more specific about a recommendation that possibly the Committee or Andrew Selous might choose to make? If you were writing the specification, would you say that whenever there is a reference to veterans, there ought to be a reference to war widows as well?

Mary Moreland: Specifically to war widows and widowers, because within the number I quoted there are 69—that is a 2018 figure. I know that adds to the length of what you are saying, but there must be more awareness within local authorities. GPs ask, “Have you served?” or “Did you ever serve?” Very few war widows will be able to answer yes to that. Therefore, they fall off any help that is there. There is no point in asking, “Are you bereaved?”, because that is a very different cohort to people who have specifically made the ultimate sacrifice.

- Q98 **Chair:** Does anyone have a last point they would like to make? If any occur to you later, feel free to write to us.

Charles Byrne: At the end of the last session, you asked. “What is the single ask that you would make?” I will cheekily make two. The first is to address the foreign and Commonwealth issues around indefinite leave to remain. Secondly, I come back to data as a fundamental weakness and an area you need to address. The push we have had to include questions about veteran status in the next national census will give a foundation of data that everybody will benefit from. Support for that would be hugely helpful for everybody involved.

Sir John McColl: I will make two as well if I may. First, the collective will to address the injustice that war widows are experiencing would be very helpful. Anything the Committee could do I would be very grateful for. Secondly, I would be grateful if you could take an interest in the detail of the implementation of the veterans’ strategy. I think it will be a really interesting test whether there will be cross-Government buy-in to the Covenant and delivery by other Government Departments on the Covenant. It will be an interesting area to keep a very close eye on.

Mary Moreland: For me, it is about that communication. As a membership organisation, the War Widows Association has only a small number of war widows as members, but the population of war widows is great. It is about getting the information out to all those war widows that we exist. Only then do we know what the problems are.

Chair: Thank you all very much. I really appreciate your presence today. I thank the members of the Committee who stayed on under unusual



HOUSE OF COMMONS

circumstances.