

Defence Committee

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

Tuesday 19 March 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 19 March 2019.

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

Questions 99-218

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Ministry of Defence, and James Greenrod, Interim Head—Service Personnel Support.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Ministry of Defence](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mr Ellwood, Minister for Defence People and Veterans, and James Greenrod, Interim Head, Service Personnel Support, Ministry of Defence

Q99 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this session of the Defence Select Committee's inquiry into the annual report on the Armed Forces Covenant. We are pleased to welcome you this afternoon, Minister, and you, James.

James, would you like to introduce yourself and say a little about your role? I believe that the Minister would then like to make a few opening remarks before we get started on the questions.

James Greenrod: I am James Greenrod, head of service personnel support in the Ministry of Defence. Within the Chief of Defence People's area, my team and I are responsible for overarching welfare policy for the Armed Forces community. From the MoD perspective, we are also the lead on veterans' matters and the Covenant writ large.

Mr Ellwood: May I begin by thanking you, Chair? It is a pleasure to be in front of you today.

There is an adage in the armed forces that you need to understand your higher commander's intent. Reminding yourself of that is helpful in placing in perspective what you are expected to do. If I may, I would like to elevate the initial few seconds of conversation, to remind ourselves of the context that we are focusing on today, before getting into the tactical issues that are important for us to scrutinise.

The first page of the SDSR notes that economic security is dependent on our national security, and vice versa. The first duty of any Government is the defence of the realm. You could argue that it has never been more important to have strong defence: we are seeing the activities of resurgent nations and non-state actors, terrorism continues to grow, and the proliferation of cyber weapons systems is changing the character of conflict. Of course, there is also the impact of climate change as we test the limits of our fragile planet, which is leading to sea levels rising and migration movements way beyond what we have seen in the recent past.

The world is looking for leadership, and I believe Britain has a determined role to play on that international stage. The spending review will be a critical statement of intent as to whether we want to continue playing that role. That does not mean simply spending money on operations, on training or on equipment; it also means investment in our people. It is not just the person in the uniform; it is those around them—the Armed Forces community. We know that retention is an issue—recruitment is as well,



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but keeping hold of the people that we train is absolutely pivotal for us to continue our hard power capability.

The Armed Forces Covenant forms the backbone, spelling out our commitment to our defence people and the community, spelling out our ambition, our measurements, our progress, and yes, our shortfalls as well. It forms the foundations of other organisations and programmes, as illustrated, I hope, in the document that has been provided to you, and of how we provide the necessary service, support and commitment to serving personnel and their families, reservists and veterans. It focuses on a wide variety of areas but covers four particular themes: accommodation, health, education and employment.

We have some critical pillars that we work with. There is the Veterans Board, which I am sure we will discuss today. The Veterans Gateway brings together the co-ordination of the service charities. Cobseo acts as a coordinator of those charities. We work with business organisations—now numbering over 3,100—who are supportive of the Armed Forces Covenant, making that important commitment to those who serve, or are part of the Armed Forces family, or have served.

Looking ahead at our trajectory, we are pleased that we are creating, drafting and putting together an important veterans strategy that will allow us to have longevity and a direction of travel over the next 10 years. Although there is much still to do, we are sharing the good work we are doing with our NATO allies in other countries, to spread the message of the importance of that responsibility—that duty to look after every single member of Armed Forces personnel, whether they are in uniform now or have departed back to civilian street.

Chair: Also I think we would say their families as well, and I am thinking also about the war widows issue, which will come up a bit later. Thank you very much for setting that context, Tobias.

Q100 Martin Docherty-Hughes: It is good to see you, Minister. You talked about the Veterans Board; the Committee has been quite open with you about wanting to understand more about that. Is the engagement with the Veterans Board consistent across Government Departments? How are you ensuring that Departments engage properly?

Mr Ellwood: That is an important question on two fronts. First, the blueprint of Britain's governance is a complex one, if I can say that, bearing in mind the constituency and the locality that you represent. It is a complex tapestry of governance and we have to work with that. On the devolved Administrations, making sure there is parity of support in all corners of the United Kingdom is paramount.

You also touched on something absolutely critical; if there is one area of work that needs to be emphasised, it is ensuring that it is not just the MoD that is held to account, but other Government Departments. I, as Veterans Minister, am often the first port of call, simply because there is something in my title that means that, understandably, veterans will naturally come



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to me. But there is a huge amount of responsibility that Government Departments are only just waking up to in recognising their duty of care to honour their commitment to the Covenant. That is why, in ministerial meetings, which should occasionally be chaired by the Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary, we are getting better at holding other Government Departments to account.

Q101 Martin Docherty-Hughes: In terms of the practicalities of the board, are you saying that the Veterans Board meetings are always attended or chaired by Ministers?

Mr Ellwood: The top-level Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board, to give it its full name, is attended in most cases by Ministers at Secretary of State level.

Q102 Martin Docherty-Hughes: And there is devolved attendance at that, I believe, isn't there now?

Mr Ellwood: There is and, again, I touch on some sensitivities here—Northern Ireland is one particular area of sensitivity, with its own nuances that we have to deal with. But yes, they are invited and they participate fully in the meetings.

Q103 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Do you ever publish lists of attendees at the board meetings?

Mr Ellwood: I am not sure we have ever published—

James Greenrod: What we do have is the list of Ministers who have overall responsibility for veterans and Covenant affairs, and that is published on our website. The list of Ministers, including from the devolved Governments, who have responsibility is on the inside cover of the Veterans Strategy. In terms of who has the overarching responsibility, that is published, occasionally from meetings to meetings. With diary clashes, it may not be that Minister, but there will always be a Minister representing each of the Government Departments on the Covenant and Veterans Board.

Q104 Martin Docherty-Hughes: So you list most of the principal actors around the table but you don't list all of them—is that what you are trying to say?

James Greenrod: We list all of the Ministers who have got the lead for Covenant and veterans' affairs within each Department.

Q105 Martin Docherty-Hughes: But not necessarily people who might be asked by Ministers to attend on an irregular basis.

James Greenrod: Correct.

Q106 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Why? I come from a local government background. If you are going to a full council meeting or a committee meeting, there are minutes. I am not saying there is anything untoward but I wonder why you would not just publish whoever attends the board meeting. That would seem like good governance.



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Mr Ellwood: It is a perfectly valid question. I have no problem myself in letting it be known if there are attendees who come up. We occasionally get people to do presentations or to give a specific angle. I don't see a problem with that being put in the public domain afterwards.

Q107 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** You said that the annual report would be collectively agreed with other Government Departments from 2019. How will you do that? Does that also include the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the civil service in Northern Ireland, which at the moment is without a Government?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, that is difficult. The way it is cleared, it does a formal write-around through the various Government Departments in order to get the sign-off for that actually to happen.

Q108 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Okay. So what about the devolved Governments? Is that worked out on the same premise?

James Greenrod: Yes, absolutely. To date, that is what has happened, so the devolved Governments have cleared their contributions to the annual report. All we are doing this year is putting that on a more formalised footing with a more formalised write-around.

Q109 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I think I know the answer to my next question but, for clarification for the Committee, are devolved Administrations full members of the Veterans Board?

James Greenrod: The devolved Administrations are invited to every meeting and will continue to be invited to every meeting. The constitutional issues surrounding the situation in Northern Ireland have led to difficulties in formalising that position to date. It is absolutely the aspiration that we will be able to formalise that position.

Mr Ellwood: We certainly want that to happen—absolutely.

Q110 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** The situation in Northern Ireland precludes—I suppose my concern is that you have a range of other Government Departments, such as Health and Education, covering England but that is not extended to Scotland, with at least a single Minister or senior civil servant, or Wales, because of the constitutional position in Northern Ireland. Is that what you are saying? Are you excluding the other devolved Administrations at that formal agreement because we can't do it for Northern Ireland?

James Greenrod: I think you are asking two slightly different questions.

Q111 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I have got a very strange answer.

James Greenrod: Apologies. There is one around the sheer number of people we could have around the table for it still to be a constructive meeting. That is why we would not have every single Department represented from all four of the home nations.

There is a sense, which the devolved Governments share, that that would just become unwieldy. Therefore, the representatives from the Welsh and



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Scottish and Northern Ireland Governments speak on behalf of the devolved Governments writ large.

There is a separate question around how we formalise an invitation to all four home nations in the absence of the Executive at Stormont. To date, the advice we have received from our constitutional people is that what you have is a perfectly acceptable, viable workaround, and once you are in the position that you can formalise that, please do.

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will add to that, because I think it may help clarify. While there are some technical issues, which you are probing now, the ability for us to function and to make sure that we are able to work with the devolved Administrations works well. I go on visits and I meet Members of the Scottish Administration, for example, and we work closely; I have done visits to Northern Ireland as well—we are looking at, again, bespoke situations there—to make sure that veterans' affairs are dealt with in the correct manner. As I touched on at the beginning, the governance structure that we have across the entire country means that we have a rather peculiar set-up in trying to make that work, but it does work in practice.

Q112 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Finally on that point, in terms of the governance of the United Kingdom, I don't think anyone on this Committee has said that every Department within the devolved Administrations should be sitting around a table. Even in early discussions at Committee, we said that having a senior civil servant might make it easier for the UK Government to go ahead, rather than just inviting Ministers. I am a wee bit perturbed as to why there is no formal invitation to a single individual from Wales or a single individual from Scotland, because of Northern Ireland. There is a lot going on, and I am sure my colleague to my right will understand where I am coming from. There is a lot of support coming from the Government to Members from Northern Ireland, and a lot of investment outside of the Barnett formula. Scotland and Wales, in terms of the Veterans Board, are precluded, while there is a lot going on in Northern Ireland, where there is no governance. You can understand why maybe some Members from Scotland and Wales are a wee bit perturbed about why a single invitation to one or two individuals cannot be formalised.

Mr Ellwood: We want to solve this—there is no doubt about that—but they are represented. At every meeting I have been to, I think I can confirm that they have attended and have fully participated, but yes—I would very much like to get the technical arrangements sorted out as soon as possible.

Q113 **Gavin Robinson:** Is it still the case that Northern Ireland is represented by the Northern Ireland Office?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, I think that is the case.

Q114 **Gavin Robinson:** Why is that so? In this forum or in other places, we have continually raised that that is a sub-optimal position, because the Northern Ireland Office has no function, no role and no involvement in



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any of the issues that are pertinent to the Veterans Board. They don't have any responsibility for health; they don't have any responsibility for education; they don't have any responsibility for housing. If you ask them to get involved in any of those issues, the answer is, "We can't—those are devolved issues, and we are not invoking direct rule." So you have representation from Northern Ireland that has no involvement whatsoever in any of those functional aspects of what should be considered at the Veterans Board. Why is the invitation not given to the Northern Ireland civil service in the absence of Ministers?

Mr Ellwood: Is that who you would recommend should attend?

Q115 **Gavin Robinson:** They have functional operational responsibility for delivering in all of those key areas. I simply do not understand why we invite the Northern Ireland Office when it has no function, role or remit in any of those aspects of veteran affairs in Northern Ireland.

James Greenrod: Mr Robinson, there is a standing invitation to the head of the Northern Ireland civil service to attend the board.

Q116 **Gavin Robinson:** And does he attend?

James Greenrod: To date, he has not attended.

Q117 **Gavin Robinson:** Does he send anyone in his place?

James Greenrod: Not to date.

Mr Ellwood: The answer is to get the Northern Ireland Assembly back up and running.

Gavin Robinson: Well, that's not going to be solved today. What we want to focus on today is the needs of our veterans' community, and I don't see how that is served by inviting people who have no function, role or ability to deliver for it.

Mr Ellwood: For clarification, because I wouldn't want people to misconstrue this, the invitation is very much there. I myself go to the devolved Administrations to make sure that we are able to ensure that the work is done, because of the gaps, perhaps, in representation.

Gavin Robinson: If the invitation is issued, we will pick that up with the Northern Ireland civil service. Thank you.

Chair: We have spent a long time on this, but I have very brief bids from Madeleine and Martin, and then we must move on.

Q118 **Mrs Moon:** Speaking of the Northern Ireland Office, do you invite representation from the Wales Office and the Scotland Office here?

James Greenrod: Yes.

Q119 **Mrs Moon:** So someone comes. The Secretary of State for Wales would attend?



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Mr Ellwood: Yes. We are devoting a lot of time to the ministerial board, which looks at the overarching view and deals with the strategy. There are a number of groups based at senior official level and working level where more individuals and bodies are involved, and that goes to the heart of the question about making sure that nobody is left out.

Mrs Moon: Thank you.

Chair: There are two minds with a single thought, so we will move on.

Q120 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Those Secretaries of State have very limited influence on the devolved policies, as Mr Robinson has already said. Do the Secretaries of State have a formal position on the board or are they only invited?

James Greenrod: The Scotland Office and the Wales Office, alongside the Scottish and Welsh Governments, are invited to and attend the board at ministerial level.

Q121 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** And neither of them has a formal position?

James Greenrod: Correct.

Q122 **John Spellar:** Moving on from the public to the voluntary sector, the service charities told us that they feel that the importance of Covenant Reference Group meetings has diminished, and that there is a lack of one-on-one engagement with Ministers. Have you reduced the role of the charities?

Mr Ellwood: Can you give examples of that, please?

Q123 **John Spellar:** They gave us that view; that is their view.

Mr Ellwood: Well, I am sorry to challenge it, but it is not something that I immediately recognise. We have a series of events throughout the year that mean that we actively engage with service charities on a regular drumbeat. There are various meetings and conferences—I was at a major conference on Friday, run by King's College, that focused on mental health. That brought together the various heads of numerous charities to participate.

I would be more than delighted to look into any specific aspect. I absolutely endorse what you say about the charities' ability to participate and get their views across. If there is a way that we can improve that, I am very keen to look at it.

Q124 **John Spellar:** The Royal British Legion, for example, said "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." They added, "I understand that there is an awful lot going on at the moment." I think there is a feeling—it may be for perfectly understandable reasons—that there has been a bit of rowing back from



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engagement.

Mr Ellwood: I do not understand those reasons—there is no rowing back whatsoever. My role, if you are touching on the busyness of this place, has not been diminished. I have been deliberate in making sure that the day job is not affected by whatever goes on here. To place that in perspective, of the 400-odd charities, there are seven or eight, or possibly 10, that you would argue are the biggest, and another 15 or so that are medium to smaller. The majority then tails down very quickly to very small bespoke and geographically focused or thematic charities.

We see the big ones—The Royal British Legion, Combat Stress, Help for Heroes—on a regular drumbeat; we have invited the British Legion. I have working lunches and breakfasts every second or third Monday or so, in the MoD, where we get to meet them, or certainly the “biggies”, if I can call them that. That can be a bone of contention with the smaller ones, because they sometimes feel that they do not get the same attention. But certainly the biggest ones—specifically those involved in the Cobseo board, as the Royal British Legion is—get a lot of time. I would be more than delighted to write to Charles and invite him back in.

Q125 **Chair:** Tobias, you and the Committee share in common a view that defence is insufficiently funded, and you indicated in your opening remarks that it should be the first priority of Government and is often so described. Obviously without revealing too much of your negotiating strategy, what funding are you planning to request for the Covenant during the next spending review negotiation process?

Mr Ellwood: With the spending review in mind, I have written to the Secretary of State outlining a series of areas where I believe the defence people portfolio—my portfolio—needs attention. Accommodation is one of them, and the Armed Forces Covenant is another. It would be wrong of me to go into too much detail, but I have made it very clear in the past and I reiterate now that, as I said at the beginning, defence spending is not just about equipment and operations but about looking after the welfare of our people. I have underlined that we need to invest in better accommodation, better support and better mental health facilities, and in greater support for our veterans communities as well.

Q126 **Chair:** In the Armed Forces Covenant annual report, you had a section on priorities for the year ahead. I do not know whether they are in any particular order, but we have picked out about half a dozen of them. One of the bullet points is increased support for those who require special consideration, including war widows and widowers and the wider bereaved community. Can you tell us a bit about the progress on the stand-off with the Treasury, particularly over war widows’ pensions?

Mr Ellwood: This is something that you have raised on a regular basis, and something that the Secretary of State himself has taken on personally. I understand we are still in this waiting period after placing the request with the Treasury and looking forward for a reply. I know you raised this recently—



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Chair: Regularly.

Mr Ellwood: Yes, regularly, but I remember you raised it on the Floor of the House again quite recently. It is good that you do so to keep this issue alive, but the request has gone across to the Treasury and we are in their hands.

Q127 **Chair:** What exactly do you think the problem is with the Treasury? Is it some aspect to do with retrospection?

Mr Ellwood: There is possibly that. There are also definitions that are being considered. I understand that if you honour this request—this commitment—other groups might then come forward requesting similar forms of compensation.

Chair: James, you look as if you want to add something.

James Greenrod: Thank you, Chair. It is really just to support what the Minister is saying. I think we all recognise that the current position is not ideal. The concern and the focus of the conversations that are still ongoing with the Treasury and the Cabinet Office is the issue of precedent. It is a complex issue, on which we need to get a very clear legal perspective.

Q128 **Chair:** For the sake of people watching who do not know the background, let me just set it out. Correct me if I say anything wrong. David Cameron thought he had solved this problem, which had arisen from the fact that people who lost their spouse would receive a widow's pension, but on cohabitation or remarriage they would lose it permanently. David Cameron thought he had dealt with this matter, but there is a group of between 200 and 300 war widows who are in the position that their pensions have not been restored because they remarried. If they were now to get divorced from their second husbands—in nearly every case—the pension would be restored to them, and if they were then to remarry, either to someone else or to the husband they had just divorced, it would not be taken away.

We are in this daft and perverse situation where it is worth several thousand pounds a year to someone who has already sacrificed so much to go through a mock, sham process—however you want to describe it—of divorce and remarriage to get that pension restored. That is not only outrageous but insulting. It is not even about the money; the war widows who have corresponded directly with members of this Committee have explained that it is much more to do with recognition for their sacrifice. Can we take it that, as far as the MoD is concerned, you are all 100% in favour of sorting out this anomaly for these 200 to 300 people?

Mr Ellwood: You summarise the daftness of the situation perfectly. The idea that we should prompt people to get divorced and then remarry in order to secure what is rightfully theirs is strange, but we have ended up in this situation. However, it is not in the MoD's gift, much though we support this; it is for the Treasury to make that judgment, and we still await their reply.

Q129 **Chair:** Finally from me, although I know Mark wants to come in at this



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point, can you confirm whether there is anything behind the story that I believe was in the *Daily Express* newspaper, which said that the Prime Minister herself has told the Treasury that they need to sort this matter out? Are you aware of that at all?

Mr Ellwood: I am not aware of that, and I think it would be wrong to speculate. Much as you may approve of what has been written, we have to wait for the outcome from the Treasury.

Chair: That is all very helpful.

Q130 **Mr Francois:** What exactly did you as the Ministry of Defence ask the Treasury to do?

Mr Ellwood: If you like, we can give you copies of the letters I wrote myself. The Secretary of State has written to the Treasury, making out the case for war widows' pensions. As I said, we are still waiting. I am sorry it has taken so long to get this resolved or even to get a reply.

Chair: We would love to have copies of those letters.

Q131 **Mr Francois:** I want to be clear, because sometimes Departments ask other Departments for things that do not always turn out to be as clearcut as you would like. I want to be very clear that what the MoD has asked the Treasury to do is exactly along the lines of what our Chair has suggested, yes?

Mr Ellwood: I do not have the exact wording in front of me, but we can provide that.

Q132 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, but you are in front of me and you are the Minister and you are responsible, so I am asking you. I don't need to see a letter. You can tell me. This is your brief.

Mr Ellwood: If you do not want the letter, I will not provide the letter.

Q133 **Mr Francois:** There is no need for that. I just asked you to confirm exactly what the MoD has asked the Treasury to do. You are the responsible Minister. It is your brief. What did you ask?

Mr Ellwood: I do not have the letter in front of me.

Mr Francois: Sorry—no, no—

Q134 **Chair:** Mark, let's calm this down a bit. Minister, obviously nobody can expect you to remember the details of every sentence in every letter, but in general terms, was the letter pretty much asking along the lines of what I have set out?

Mr Ellwood: It was supportive of the case.

Q135 **Chair:** Was the argument roughly similar to what we have heard today?

Mr Ellwood: We are going down into the weeds here. If I provide you the letter, you will have the exact information that you require.

Chair: Okay. Mark, are you reasonably content with that?

Mr Francois: No, but let's move on.

Q136 Gavin Robinson: Minister, are you aware of the comparison with the position of widows of members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and aware that that was changed in Northern Ireland? That is a useful comparison when considering whether there is a knock-on consequence, an unintended consequence or a precedent set and so on.

Mr Ellwood: You touch on exactly what the Treasury is now looking at, because if you make a precedent here, what does this set? How does that fit in with other circumstances and other requests?

Gavin Robinson: Sure, but helpfully the largest cohort of folks that this could apply to have already had it.

Mr Ellwood: From what I understand, that is exactly what the Treasury is trying to understand and then recognise.

Chair: It is good to know that there are human beings in the Ministry of Defence; it remains to be seen whether the same applies to the Treasury. We shall watch and wait.

Q137 Mrs Moon: There are of course knock-on consequences for police widows' pensions as well. Northern Ireland has been cited many times as a discrepancy, in that what is happening in Northern Ireland is not happening in the rest of the UK. I appreciate your reluctance to go into what was in the letters without having the letter in front of you, because there are huge knock-on financial consequences from this.

Minister, I really liked the way you started this session with that statement. I increasingly get alarmed that people say those things and Ministers say those things, but we do not see it acted out in reality, so thank you for at least starting the meeting with it. The annual report, if I can go on to that, offers a national picture, but it does not show the disparities at a local level. When we had a session with Sir John McColl, he said, "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", which goes back to John Spellar's question. What local data do you have, and why do you not include it the report?

Mr Ellwood: Thank you for that question, and thank you for your initial comments. It is important that we are more transparent and honest with the British public about the state of our Armed Forces and our ambitions, but also about the threats we face. We spend too much of our time trying to big up our capabilities. We can be very proud of what our Armed Forces can actually do, but our capabilities are soon to be overtaken or overshadowed by the threats we face, which places us on the back foot. I am not sure that anybody would want that.

With regards to the Covenant and the disparities, you are absolutely right. This is an area where we need to improve, and it is difficult. We have just touched on the difficulties of the devolved Administrations in trying to understand what is going on in those areas. When you break it down to



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local authorities, we see that where there is a heritage—connectivity with the Armed Forces—there is much more of a commitment from the starting point to support our veterans, our reserves and schoolchildren who are dependents of members of the Armed Forces. Where other authorities have no connectivity—nobody in the local authority has served in the ranks—we find gaps in commitment and in honouring the Armed Forces Covenant itself.

We need to get better data to understand how we can improve, be it naming and shaming or celebrating the top achievements, which we do through our bronze, silver and gold awards. This is one area of concern that I have personally asked us to learn more about, so that we can ensure there is parity in that support across the country.

James Greenrod: I will give a little bit more of a flavour of how we are taking forward some of the Minister's direction on this matter. The position we are now in is that we have data for England and Wales that relates to working-age veterans across the four key themes of the Covenant: healthcare, education, accommodation and employment. We have that data at the local level. We do not yet have—we are working on it—is a comparator between the Armed Forces community and the general population, so that we can then assess, identify and, where necessary, mitigate where there is disadvantage at the local level under the terms of the Covenant. That work is ongoing with the Office for National Statistics. We hope to have something more to share with you later on this year.

Simultaneously, we are also in conversation with the Scottish Government to see if something similar could be done in Scotland. Those conversations have been very constructive. We understand that there is an issue here on data and are putting steps into place to address it.

Q138 **Mrs Moon:** This is something that you are clearly on top of and working on. Hopefully by later this year we will have some insight into what the disparities are.

Mr Ellwood: Correct.

Q139 **Mrs Moon:** I just wonder if you are going to find, as inevitably we always do, that when you have a champion who is committed, things happen; when you have a champion who has the title but no commitment, nothing happens.

Mr Ellwood: I met the head of the Local Government Association and have asked to speak at the conference. There are ways that we can go into and emphasise the message. Every time we raise these matters on the Floor of the House during Defence questions, I encourage every single MP to ask those very questions and to seek to meet their local Armed Forces champion in order to emphasise these things. We need to undertake a collective effort in order to raise the bar.

Mrs Moon: I could not agree more, but if you don't have a champion who is actually a champion, it is an uphill struggle.

Mr Ellwood: Indeed.



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Q140 Mrs Moon: You have explained why the data is missing and what you are trying to do about it. What are you planning to do to mitigate the security implications of the census question on veterans and self-identifying? At the local level, MPs certainly get quite a lot of questions and anxiety about that. How are we going to provide some protection there?

James Greenrod: We recognise completely the validity of the concern. The MoD has commissioned a review of the data collection process for the 2021 census, in order to understand whether there are any security risks, and if so what the appropriate mitigations for those would be. Again, it is a work in progress, but we recognise that there is a valid concern. We want to have the data, because we want to improve the service. It is hard to do that unless you have the data. We recognise that there is a balance to be struck in terms of security concerns.

Q141 Mrs Moon: When will you have resolved this?

James Greenrod: That is a very good question, which I will follow up later—but obviously before the 2021 census.

Q142 Mrs Moon: Right, so you are going to follow up by sending more information to the Committee or when you have more information to provide?

James Greenrod: If I do not have the information in the next hour, I will follow up in writing to the Committee.

Mrs Moon: That is a very generous offer.

Q143 Chair: Madeleine, I know that you have another question to follow, but I would just like to come in on this point. I have been worried for a long time about this campaign by the Royal British Legion, for the best of motives, to include a question on the census, which when people fill in their household details will indicate whether someone has served in the Armed Forces. In an era of terrorism, that sort of data could be a gift to people who mean harm to members of our Armed Forces.

I have had conversations about this in private and there has been little progress, so I think it is time that we pressed it a little more in public. Let us assume that this goes through and there is a question on the census that effectively identifies the home addresses of present or former members of the Armed Forces. Suppose you are a present or former member of the Armed Forces, but you do not wish to reveal that, will you have to fill this question in on compulsory basis, or can you decide to do so on a voluntary basis?

James Greenrod: To respond partially, to be very clear, there will not be a question for currently serving personnel.

Q144 Chair: Right, so it is only about veterans.

James Greenrod: It is only about veterans, and my understanding, which we will confirm, is that they can elect not to confirm one way or the other.

Q145 Chair: I think that would be a bare minimum, because we have had all



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sorts of examples in the past of supposedly confidential information in digitised form ending up on disks that get lost.

Mr Ellwood: You raise an important point, but I want to speak rather passionately about this. We need to be proud of our veterans—of who we are and what we have done for this country. I do not want to put anybody in any danger, but when we start talking about a hesitance, so that we forget our heritage and past by avoiding ticking a box, because we are worried that saying that we are a veteran might get us into trouble, we need to stand up, be proud and collectively say, “Absolutely, we are British, we have served in the Armed Forces and we are proud of it.” We should not want anybody to hesitate to tick that box or to wear the badge that says, “I am a veteran.” Let us stand up, make a mark and be proud of our service.

Chair: Tobias, I am as proud as anybody of that, but when I go to the Ministry of Defence, I am checked, quite properly, before I enter the building, to ensure that I do not mean to do any harm to the people within it. The idea that there could be some shortcut that would enable terrorists to send noxious substances or even harmless white powder in envelopes to people’s home addresses, because they know that there are veterans of the Armed Forces living at those addresses, recalls the debate we had some nine or 10 years ago relating to the home addresses of Members of Parliament. Parliament decided, quite sensibly, that it was not a good idea to put home addresses of MPs in the public domain. I think that what is good enough for us should be good enough for them. I wholly endorse what you said about how proud we should be of having served in the Armed Forces. Anyway, I hope that the point has been sufficiently made and will be taken away and discussed with the people who are so keen to do this.

Q146 **Mrs Moon:** Tobias, I have one further question to ask and one area I would like to clarify with you before I go. What role does the Veterans Board have in addressing the inconsistency in relation to local delivery of the Covenant? Is it playing a role at all? It takes in quite a few of the phone calls. How are we gathering data from it?

Mr Ellwood: The purpose of the Veterans Board is to ensure that every single Department is held to account. We focus a little bit on local authorities and local government, so if there is an issue to do with particular local authorities not raising their game, James Brokenshire can be asked questions about it and held to account. In the NHS, if there are problems with mental health or access for veterans, we can hold the relevant individuals to account. They can then announce and confirm their direction of travel, and the Covenant Reference Group and the various other groups can take forward the practicalities of putting into place the executive order from that top-tier group.

Q147 **Mrs Moon:** I am confused about how we manage that in relation to the devolved Administrations. It has already been commented on in relation



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to Northern Ireland, but you might have the Secretary of State for Wales present, for example, who has no responsibility for health, education or accommodation and housing—yet he is there as a representative from the Welsh Government.

Mr Ellwood: Who is responsible.

Q148 **Mrs Moon:** Are they required, before the meeting with the Veterans Board, to have gathered that data? Is that part of their remit?

Mr Ellwood: They are held to account; that is the purpose of this top-level board. It is often me, because I learn the data. I am the one who reads the Riot Act, if you like, and asks these questions: each time we meet, every six months, are we seeing a helpful direction of travel or are things going the wrong way? It is important that the devolved Administration as a whole then goes back.

We dismiss, perhaps, Alun Cairns's role as Secretary of State for Wales. He is hugely influential in who he speaks to and in what he does. You are right that technically he is not responsible for devolved matters; nevertheless, in looking after our veterans, the more of a conversation there is and the more inquiries are made, the more the message goes back to the Welsh Assembly and the more we are able to improve the service that we provide.

Q149 **Mrs Moon:** I was certainly not dismissing the role of Alun Cairns as Secretary of State for Wales—I would never do that—but I am concerned that there seems to be a paucity of data relating to the devolved Administrations. I appreciate that you have to work with the devolved Administrations in a constructive and progressive way, but sometimes when you focus on matters such as health, education and accommodation, there is not necessarily a part of your brain thinking constantly about defence and security issues with the same focus that it can be given here, where it is raised every day—often several times a day—in the Chamber.

I am glad to hear you say that sometimes you read the Riot Act, but there needs to be some assurance that there is not a lag that we are missing in the services and equality of provision to veterans, should they be in a devolved Administration. There may well be opportunities for the devolved Administrations to do something better in one of those areas, and for us to learn from that.

Those of us who come from devolved Administrations become very aware that things can have an England-centric view, without a recognition that there are people living in other areas of the UK, who also have a right to high-quality services, and a right to expect unique examples of high-quality services to be cascaded and recognised. I just want that assurance.

Mr Ellwood: I can give you that. It needs to be worked on, because the mapping of governance in Britain does not lend itself easily to it. If you had a blank sheet of paper, this is not how you would do it, but it is the way it is and we have to understand it.



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I will give you a single illustration. If you have a family with kids at our base in Lincolnshire and they move to St Athan, those kids have to go into a local school. It is so important that the parents in uniform understand exactly how they move from England to Wales with the minimum of disruption, particularly for the children. That means we need to understand the mechanics of that support and communicate. The communication piece is what we need to work on.

Q150 Mrs Moon: I am glad you mentioned St Athan because it gives me a chance to clarify who does what in terms of devolved Administrations. I spoke to you last week about the East Camp lease in St Athan. Has that lease now been signed, and who is taking responsibility? Is it the Ministry of Defence or is it the Wales Office?

Mr Ellwood: I did not know you were going to ask that particular question, and I do not know whether we can find out in the next hour, but I will try to give you an answer—I do not have that information on the technical aspects of the lease.

Mrs Moon: I have to leave to go to another meeting.

Mr Ellwood: We can certainly make sure that we get the information to you.

Mrs Moon: Thank you very much.

Chair: Before you go, Madeleine, I think you said before the meeting started that you had an assurance from the Secretary of State for Wales.

Mrs Moon: I did. I had an assurance that it was going to be happening, but my understanding is that the lease is between the MoD and the Welsh Government, so—

Chair: It is not an attempt to ambush you, Minister. We would appreciate anything you can do to help us to sort this out.

Q151 Gavin Robinson: Minister, could you give me an assessment of the effectiveness to date of the Covenant Trust Fund?

Mr Ellwood: The trust fund is critical in providing that support to those initiatives, which we see around the country, to ensure that the Covenant puts out that £10 million a year. That is an ongoing commitment. It is working. I would love more money, but with everything else, there are limits. I am pleased that it is initiated, and yes, it is doing a good job. Is there anything you want to add, James?

James Greenrod: Thank you, Minister. Part of the success of the trust fund has been its ability to evolve. It is rare to get praise from the Treasury, but the fact that the Treasury wanted the trust fund to administer the additional £10 million for mental health initiatives shows their faith in it. I am sure we will talk more about Northern Ireland later on, but the trust fund identified a shortfall. The problem we had was that the quality of bids we were getting from Northern Ireland were not good enough to award grants against, so the trust fund invested in improving

the capacity and capability in Northern Ireland. We are now seeing that bear fruit through the quality of the bids that are coming through.

Q152 Gavin Robinson: On the establishment of the trust fund, there was concern that too much resource would be used for administrative purposes. There was a cap of around 5%, or £500,000 a year, and no more. Is that limit being adhered to? Has there been any request for an uplift? I think there is the possibility of an uplift if required. How are they doing financially?

James Greenrod: At the moment, they are within the cap. That is the intention going forward. There are ongoing conversations as to whether or not, beyond the core £10 million a year, it is appropriate for other funds to be channelled through the trust fund. Unless and until those conversations reach a conclusion, the trust fund is committed to operating within the 5% cap that you mentioned.

Q153 Gavin Robinson: We took evidence from either Northumbria or Chester University of concern about the major calls issued by the trust fund coming out at holiday times. If calls go out at Christmas, Easter or during the summer period, that frustrates bids, and frustrates involvement, inclusion and awareness. Has that registered at all? Is there a willingness to look at that and to ensure that major calls go out at a time when people are most engaged and able to respond effectively?

James Greenrod: The answer is that we are always willing to look at it. The trust fund will have a number of conflicting priorities that will be part of what drives the timetables they work to, but we can certainly have another look at that.

Q154 Gavin Robinson: On education, Minister, we know that service children are less likely to go to university. Do you know why? What are you doing about it?

Mr Ellwood: You are correct. We don't fully understand that but we are looking into it. A study is being conducted by Winchester University specifically to try to learn more about that and see whether we can create more pathways to encourage service children to have a gateway into universities. We had only a handful of universities that were looking specifically to help service children and encourage them to study there. That has now expanded to 37.

James Greenrod: That is correct, Minister. In the past year we have gone from five to 37.

Mr Ellwood: So there are more universities very conscious of that. It is quite a unique environment for service personnel and their children. The fact that they have to move around is disruptive, we know that. Not only is it disruptive in having to move from one base to another, one locality to another, as a family unit, but one of the parents can go off on an operational tour and can be away for six months if they are on a ship or so forth.



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There are some big challenges to their family dynamic that you would not see in the civilian street. I am pleased that we are looking at this carefully and I am grateful to you for raising it. We do need to ensure that service personnel children are not affected, but have the same opportunities as anybody else.

Q155 Gavin Robinson: It is encouraging that there is research to obtain a better understanding of the reasons why. You will know that there has been an aspiration to make the service pupil premium awardable for five-year-olds and under, and 16 to 18-year-olds.

Do you think there is merit in conducting research into whether there are intrinsic benefits associated with extending the service pupil premium to those age ranges? If you think there is benefit—and I think you will accept the logic of that—will you fund it?

James Greenrod: At the moment we are not aware of evidence that suggests that younger service children do have a specific support need. Obviously, we are in ongoing conversations with the Department for Education and its equivalents in the devolved Administrations around a number of issues, including this one, and I think would be happy to raise this issue. It is part of an ongoing conversation anyway, but I think we can take this as a desire from this Committee to look a little further.

Q156 Gavin Robinson: If there is that thoughtful engagement, creating an evidential base, or at least exploring its potential, would be a useful thing to do.

Mr Ellwood: This is a typical example where you are asking us questions—and I am very happy to answer and particularly highlight this important aspect—but it is the Department for Education's responsibility, so if you see Nick Gibb, he is the one we need to encourage. The studies on tracking go up only to 16. Is that correct?

James Greenrod: Yes.

Mr Ellwood: We really need them to go up to 18; that would be helpful. Those are the two important years—college years, or when you are doing A-levels—that determine what happens next. We are encouraging the Department for Education to help us explore and get the answers. It is again a great example of where the MoD is held to account but we are actually reliant on the support of another Government Department, which is why the Covenant is so important to enforce.

Gavin Robinson: Which is a wonderful segue into the next question, Minister.

Mr Ellwood: I am glad to be of service.

Q157 Gavin Robinson: You said to raise it with Nick Gibb, but of course there are four Education Departments involved in this scenario, not one, and England is the only place where the service pupil premium is paid. That is not good enough. Do you agree?



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Mr Ellwood: It is not. You are right to highlight that. I should have expanded and made sure that we covered the devolved Administrations. Often it is the case that once we set a standard in one area, we can use that as a benchmark and encourage the other areas to follow suit in whatever capacity they are equating the responsibility.

Q158 **Gavin Robinson:** If we accept that there is a need for the service pupil premium—if we accept that there is a benefit to providing financial assistance associated with those pupils in those circumstances—why do we, and the Minister collectively responsible for the commitment as a nation, think it is okay that should that family move, they are stripped of that financial benefit, which we believe they should benefit from?

Mr Ellwood: Again, the ownership of this issue is not with the MoD.

Q159 **Gavin Robinson:** No, but this is a Veterans Board issue, where you should be saying, “Hang on a second: we have you from the Department for Education in England, but we also have representation at whatever level from Northern Ireland and Scotland.” What are you doing about it?

Mr Ellwood: I was about to say that is exactly the conversation we need to have.

Q160 **Gavin Robinson:** Is it your view that there is a Barnett consequential associated with this? Are the devolved regions getting the money at that Barnett level but using it for other purposes? The Northern Ireland response, for example, is that every kid goes in the same as any other; they get a school place the same as any other and, on the broad spectrum, they will come out with the same educational attainment as any other. That is not good enough—that means they are doing nothing. That means that we have a Government in England who say, “You should get additional financial support through the schools as a service pupil premium,” and that the rest of the country will show you up about it.

James Greenrod: You are touching on a very live conversation; the Scottish and Welsh Governments and Northern Ireland do have their own provisions for service children. That is the reality of devolved government. We talked previously of Anglocentric solutions; it is not for us to say how Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should go about their business.

We are focused on the outcomes; therefore, it is about having the quality of data on attainment levels for service children, so that we can have the conversation that says, “Look, in England we are doing the service pupil premium and we think it is a great thing. If this does not fit the model of how you want to do things in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, that is absolutely your decision,” but those Governments would want to set out what they are doing instead. Wales has introduced a funding stream to support service children.

Q161 **Gavin Robinson:** It goes a little further than that, does it not? You are right that there are benefits to devolution, and that means you can do things slightly differently, but the outcome should be the same. From a Veterans Board perspective, you should be trying to attain the same



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outcome. How do we satisfy ourselves as the Defence Committee and how do you satisfy yourself, Minister, that there is rigour and challenge, and that if money is coming through Barnett it is being used for this purpose? It does not have to be, because it will be unhypothecated, but it should be. We should challenge and say, "You may not wish to do it exactly the same. You can use your 300 quid and put it together and have a collective scheme for service personnel's children. But you have to be doing something." The evidence we have on Northern Ireland shows they do not seem to be doing anything at all.

Mr Ellwood: If I may—

Gavin Robinson: I am not asking you to answer for that, but that is the reality of it. They need the rigorous challenge from you and they need to answer what they are doing, how it fits and what the outcome and results are.

Mr Ellwood: As James has said, this is an ongoing conversation. On the specific issue of how the Barnett formula is being integrated, I will be more than happy to write to you with details. I am grateful to you for flagging that.

Chair: Ruth, you have been waiting very patiently. The floor is yours.

Q162 **Ruth Smeeth:** I need to declare that I am chair of the armed forces covenant group in this place. Thank you, Minister, for your recent attendance at the meeting. With regard to Gavin's questions about the fact that this needs to be cross-departmental, people's lives are messy and knowing how to access different Departments in the right way is a challenge, especially when talking about the devolved Administrations. How do you recognise that for dispersed families? How do you support families if, for example, an RAF family has to be relocated to or from Scotland? That provides different and unique challenges.

Mr Ellwood: The key ingredients when looking at dispersed families are formulated in the families strategy, which I do not know whether you have had the opportunity to see. That focuses on fairness, choice, empowerment and resilience in order to provide the necessary support for dispersed families.

There are two new initiatives that have come on the block, which you are familiar with. The first is flexible working, which has been passed by an Act of Parliament. That allows people some commitment for a period of time in one locality for a particular reason, for a set period of time.

The second is the roll-out of the future accommodation model, allowing people to embed roots, to purchase a property or to live in their own style of accommodation, rather than be obliged to be inside the wire or live in another form of accommodation that might not be their choice. I will make an oral statement on the pilot scheme in the very near future.

Chair, you are looking like there is a bell about to go.

Chair: No, no. There is a minor technical point. Don't worry.

Mr Ellwood: You are right that we need to explore how we can improve this more. The RAF Families Federation is doing some work on this to see what more can be done. We met all the families federations last week and touched on this very issue.

Q163 **Ruth Smeeth:** One issue you just raised is flexible working, and the Act we passed 18 months ago. How many have accessed that? Do you have the data or can someone get us the data?

Mr Ellwood: We can certainly get you the data. Australia introduced it before we did. The take-up was initially minimal; it was in single numbers. I suspect the numbers here will be similar. It takes a while for the idea to embed itself and for people to recognise they can take it up without fear of deterring promotion or that they will be set back in some way, and we need to enforce that.

Q164 **Ruth Smeeth:** I suggested at the time that the only way this would work was if one of the chiefs accessed flexible working.

Mr Ellwood: Yes, I would agree with that.

Q165 **Ruth Smeeth:** Obviously, one of the issues with families that has been in the news recently is one that we have been talking about for several years. Given the cap that has been lifted, it is what is happening to the families of foreign and Commonwealth soldiers. That is specifically with regard to minimum income requirements and visas. One issue I have, especially with regard to the zero pay uplift before the recent pay deal, was that it was outstripping how much they were having to pay for visas. Where are we with that?

Mr Ellwood: Again, that is a question that came up with the families federations; they raised it in earnest. What is at the heart of the problem and is critical—we are improving this—is the terms and conditions on which the individuals come here in the first place.

It has not been made clear how long they can stay, what the parameters are and who they can bring with them. That has been opaque. If you arrive here expecting that you can bring X, Y or Z, and that you can stay for this length of time and so forth, and then you are told differently, that can lead to some of the stories we have read. So, it is a case of improving straightaway, before people depart anywhere in the Commonwealth, what they can actually expect themselves.

That issue does not involve only the MoD. As with other things, it also involves the Home Office. We are working with them because they need to clarify this. I don't know if James wants to add anything. There is not much more we can say on this. We are working on it, but it is very much a live issue.

James Greenrod: The Minister is absolutely right. There is a twin track on this. While the current policy remains extant, what are we doing to ensure we are doing the right thing by our foreign and Commonwealth



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personnel and their families? As the Minister set out, that is about being crystal clear with them—both when we are recruiting them and throughout their time in the military—what the current immigration rules and guidance are and what the income thresholds are.

The single services have refreshed their recruitment websites. Reinforced guidance has been issued to the recruiters. There is also a conversation going on with the Home Office as to whether our current policies are the right ones and, if they were to be changed, how could they be and what would the implications be?

Q166 Ruth Smeeth: That is interesting in terms of recruitment, although I am not sure it is going to help with the recruitment challenge we have in the Army, which lifting the cap was meant to fill.

My issue is for service personnel from the Commonwealth who have been serving for 10 years. I met several soldiers who had been deployed in Germany and had taken their families with them, and now they have been redeployed back to the UK. They have gone from Schengen visas to having to go through a different visa process, which is more expensive. They have no support and no understanding, and they have been serving us for over a decade; these are not people who signed up for a week. They are the role models who you will be using to help recruit new recruits, to fill the gap that has been created by Capita.

Mr Ellwood: You are right: what message does this send when we want to encourage others to follow? We need to work on this. There is no doubt that some of the stories that we are reading could have been avoided—perhaps, as I said, with better clarity and better information from the very start. We need to be very clear on what the minimum income thresholds are and how we move forward. I am sorry that we cannot give more specific information now, but I am glad you raised it. We will continue to work hard on this. It is the Home Office that we need to buckle down with, and it will be on the agenda at the next Covenant meeting.

Q167 Ruth Smeeth: Would it be helpful if we as a Committee started writing to the Home Office?

Mr Ellwood: I think so, thank you. Yes, please.

James Greenrod: Briefly on that, part of this is about the fact that the immigration rules and the visa rules are quite challenging to understand. We are working with the single services, the family federations and the Home Office to make sure that expert advice is available to the serving community when they need it, so that they understand the environment that they are operating in.

Q168 Ruth Smeeth: With the greatest of respect, you have a duty of care to them directly, because they are your employees. This is not a responsibility of the family federations; there is a balance here, but there is a duty of care that you have. I know how much the family federations do, and I have had similar meetings and discussions with them, but I would be very nervous if it became just about them, as opposed to—



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Mr Ellwood: No, we hear what you are saying. I just stress the importance of the family federations as a release or a valve, a yardstick, or as a measure of the passion of the issues that they raise. It was raised in earnest at our last meeting, only a few days ago.

Q169 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, Minister; I just had to nip out for a minute. In your wide-ranging opening statement you put quite an emphasis on leadership, which I am sure is something you think about a lot, even when you are dreaming. What leadership are you providing on the subject of pensions?

Mr Ellwood: The pensions package that we offer the Armed Forces remains a positive one. It is something that the Armed Forces personnel are pleased with; it is one of the attractions.

You will be aware that there have been three changes, or tranches, if you like. There are always going to be some pressures on any pension scheme, and some anomalies as well: if you are a two-star moving to a three-star, you will find that, because of the mathematics of the tax system, your pension contributions get stolen, or get eaten into, and that can put you off taking the third star. We have made that case to the Treasury, because that is having an impact on those who want to continue with their career path. As a general statement, given where we are compared with other public service packages, the Armed Forces Pension Scheme is a good one.

Q170 **Mr Francois:** We discussed the matter of war widows' pensions, and you are going to provide the Committee with a letter, so I do not think we need to return to that. On the subject of war pensions, as opposed to war widows' pensions, what is the Government's latest position?

Mr Ellwood: I do not think we have a latest position. Do you want to qualify that?

James Greenrod: Apologies, Mr Francois; I am not sure exactly where the question is going. With regard to the war pensions scheme—

Q171 **Mr Francois:** Let me see if I can help the Minister. Is making sure that veterans are properly remunerated, particularly those who qualify for a war pension, something that is important to you?

Mr Ellwood: It is, yes. I mean, there has been no change. You are asking the question as if something new has come up, but I am not aware—

Q172 **Mr Francois:** No, I just want to know whether your heart is really in that.

Mr Ellwood: It is not about whether my heart is in it or not; it is what it is. As I began, the pensions package that we currently offer is very competitive compared with other areas of the public sector, such as the police or the Prison Service.

Q173 **Mr Francois:** But that is within your portfolio, isn't it?

Mr Ellwood: Yes.

Q174 **Mr Francois:** Good. There was an Adjournment debate last Wednesday in



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the House of Commons that you were down to do, wasn't there? How did you get on with that debate?

Mr Ellwood: Mark Lancaster covered that debate.

Q175 **Mr Francois:** Why did he have to cover it when you were down to do it?

Mr Ellwood: You will have to ask the Chief Whip.

Q176 **Mr Francois:** No. I'm not asking him; I'm asking you. You are the Minister who was down that day to do the debate and you didn't do it. If you are so interested in war pensions and war pensioners, why were you not at the Dispatch Box at the appointed time?

Mr Ellwood: Because I do what the Chief Whip tells me and I was asked not to do the debate.

Q177 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, let me be clear. The Chief Whip asked you not to do the debate?

Mr Ellwood: It was the Deputy Chief Whip, in fact.

Q178 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, which Whip?

Mr Ellwood: The Deputy Chief Whip, on the instruction of the Chief Whip. You are aware of what happened that evening. It was an eventful evening.

Mr Francois: It was.

Mr Ellwood: It was decided that it was best for Mark to take it. Mark and I have a huge overlap in the people aspect and he also used to do my portfolio. There is a bit of overlap between the two and it was felt best that he did it.

Q179 **Mr Francois:** Sorry, I just want to be clear. The Whips Office instructed you, as a Minister, not to do the debate that you were down for and it was agreed that the Minister for the Armed Forces would cover the debate?

Mr Ellwood: That is correct.

Q180 **Mr Francois:** Would you have done the debate if you had not been given that instruction?

Mr Ellwood: I would have done, yes.

Q181 **Mr Francois:** Right, but you were told not to?

Mr Ellwood: Yes.

Q182 **Mr Francois:** Presumably you protested?

Mr Ellwood: I took the instruction as it was. I am not going to have an argument about something. Given what had happened that day, it was best to go along with what the Chief Whip and the Deputy Chief Whip said.

Q183 **Mr Francois:** I know the Chief Whip very well. I will have a chat with him about that after this meeting and see what he says. Let's move on to



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accommodation. Why is service accommodation such a problem? It is constantly in the media and forever in the news. The Government have been saying for years that they are going to materially improve service accommodation. When are we going to see some meaningful changes?

Mr Ellwood: The direction of travel is a positive one. The speed at which the change is taking place is not as good. You will be aware that the Committee has focused on this. I am sure you have seen some of the accommodation. The new accommodation that is coming on line is excellent as we rehub or start to develop the defence estate portfolio.

The trouble is that at the core of this is a poorly written and executed contract that we had with CarillionAmey, and now Amey as well. We have a bizarre situation where we have a 200-year leaseback contract. We have an opportunity to renegotiate in 2021, which we have to do some homework on.

I'll be frank that this is an area where we need to be very honest with the public. We have 5,700-odd homes for which we pay £4,000 each a year and they are sitting empty. That is not good use of public money. The answer to this is with the Treasury because we do not have the money.

Those homes are empty because they are in poor condition; you cannot put people in. You need £14,000 for each one of them to raise the standards, which we don't have. If we get that money from the Treasury we can improve them and put people in, or we can rent them out in the private sector, if we want to.

This Catch-22 at the moment requires more money. I hope that will come through the spending review, but the contract or maintenance threshold is so low that preventive maintenance cannot even take place. We cannot even fix those ones.

It is a horrible contract and needs to be reviewed, and it is not good use of taxpayers' money. The situation is not cost neutral. If we are to improve the housing we could get it off our books, which is the trend we are going to, as we are getting rid of Amey housing stock, which is good, but we do not currently have the money up front to do it on the scale that I would like.

Q184 **Chair:** Before you continue, can I ask for clarification on one point? You say that it is a terrible contract, but presumably it was negotiated and drawn up by professionals. Would they have been in the legal department of the MoD? Who would have been responsible for drawing up what is now seen to be such a poor arrangement?

James Greenrod: It would have been a combination of the commercial and legal staffs who would have, in negotiation, taken the requirement and negotiated the contract.

Q185 **Chair:** Yes, but the people who were negotiating this bad contract from the MoD side—would they have been in-house MoD professionals? If so, what has happened to their careers since?



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Mr Ellwood: This is going back a bit. We can certainly find the information out for you. It is certainly before my time.

Q186 **Chair:** I just want to know whether there is any accountability. We have a lot of negotiating bad deals in Government life these days; it seems to be a bit of a habit. It is all well and good that you come in afterward—it is clearly not your fault; it was before your time—and say, “We have inherited this rubbish deal,” but one just wonders whether there are any procedures or mechanisms in place to try to raise the performance of those people who negotiate deals that turn out to be not very conducive to the public good.

Mr Ellwood: I think it was done back in 1996—I stand to be corrected, but—

Q187 **Mr Francois:** We have two different things. We have the deal with Annington over the leaseback of the homes, which—you are absolutely right—was in 1996 when Michael Portillo was Secretary of State. Arguably, not one of our finest decisions. Mr Spellar feels very strongly about it.

Chair: Just as well he isn’t here now.

Mr Francois: It probably is. Then you have the separate contract with what was CarillionAmey, and is now Amey, for the maintenance of property. They are two different things. Was the CarillionAmey contract let by the DIO or was it let before the DIO was created?

James Greenrod: I would not be confident in giving you a clear answer on that one, Mr Francois. On the Annington contract, as the Minister has already alluded to, we have the rental review negotiations, which are ongoing. Those discussions are obviously commercial and in confidence. What those responsible are telling us is that they are proceeding in good faith and that the discussions with Terra Firma are very positive. My understanding is that an MOU has just been signed—

Q188 **Mr Francois:** It has?

James Greenrod: It has, with the aspiration of accelerating that—basically to get more money back into the Department earlier.

Mr Francois: That is news, thank you.

Mr Ellwood: Can I add something? It is difficult. This was 1996-97 and goes back to when Michael Portillo was the Defence Secretary at the time. The angle they would take, I am sure, if Michael Portillo were standing here, is that that was seen as a good deal in the day, and they were not anticipating the rise in house prices. That is what, I’m afraid, has knocked things out of kilter to where we are today.

I am not trying to gloss over this. I have made very clear the financial damage this has caused, and that the answer is for us to be able to take these houses—some of them have trees growing in them—and clean them up and get them off our books, or clean them up and use them. The idea



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that we are paying a company to rent a house that is unusable is not something I think we should be doing.

Q189 Mr Francois: I agree. Accommodation is within the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, which took out a strategic contract with Capita several years ago. I understand that that contract has now been terminated early, because of Capita's appalling performance. In fact, although I may be wrong, it winds up literally a few weeks from today, at the end of the financial year. Why did you sack Capita?

Mr Ellwood: Sorry, when did this happen?

Mr Francois: It's just about to happen, Minister.

Mr Ellwood: Is that not Mark Lancaster's—

Mr Francois: No, it's yours.

Mr Ellwood: I don't have the answer to that right now. If you want me to write with the details on that—

Q190 Mr Francois: This contract, like other Capita contracts with the MoD, was an unmitigated disaster. It cost a lot of money. They didn't know what they were doing, so—if this helps you—your Department has decided to sack them. If you could write to us with an explanation. You don't seem to know why you have sacked them, with respect, but if you could find out why you have sacked them and let us know, that would be helpful.

Mr Ellwood: I would be happy to do that.

Q191 Mr Francois: Thank you. I have a couple more questions. Where are we on the future accommodation model and the pilots?

Mr Ellwood: As I referred to earlier, I hope to make an oral statement in the very near future.

Q192 Mr Francois: Right. Can you be any more specific?

Mr Ellwood: I hope to make an oral statement in the very near future. I cannot say any more than that; otherwise there wouldn't be any point in making an oral statement.

Q193 Mr Francois: Thank you, Minister; that is extremely helpful. Have you chosen any local partners such as local housing associations to work with on the FAM, on the basis that they actually know something about housing?

James Greenrod: For the potential pilot sites, we are engaged with the local authorities to make sure that we are taking into consideration the impact that it would have on the private rental market if we went to the FAM. So yes, there are conversations ongoing.

Q194 Mr Francois: But with respect, that is not what I asked you. I didn't ask you whether you were engaged in discussions with local authorities. I asked you whether you were engaged in discussions with housing associations—sometimes called registered social landlords.



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Mr Ellwood: This is commercially sensitive. There are some other aspects to it. If you don't mind, I would be more comfortable waiting for the oral statement, because there are still some issues to tie up. We did check how much we could share at this meeting, and it was made very clear that on the pilot schemes themselves—forgive me, but we are going to have to wait for the oral statement.

Q195 **Mr Francois:** Minister, it's a question on principle; I'm not asking for any commercially confidential information or any figures, costs or contracts. All I want to know, on behalf of the Committee, is: have you talked to housing associations about this? They do, perforce, know something about housing management and maintenance, because many of them have been doing it for 40 years.

Mr Ellwood: Yes. Again, it's quite sensitive because of where these are actually taking place; it will affect housing prices and so forth. But yes, discussions with a series of stakeholders, including housing associations, are taking place and have taken place.

Q196 **Mr Francois:** Thank you. Lastly, what has been the impact of moving the top level budget holders for single living accommodation—SLA—not single family accommodation, from the DIO to the service chiefs?

Mr Ellwood: Do you want to do this?

James Greenrod: Thank you, Minister. The short answer, which you may not find satisfactory, is that at this stage it is almost too early to say what the impact of that has been. The intended impact is that it will give a better ability for the single services to prioritise. It will enable better management. At the moment, part of the issue is a paucity of management data and information that enables prioritised decisions to be made in the single living space. That is notwithstanding the fact that we have had over 1,000 new and upgraded SLA units in the last year—sorry, over 3,000 in the last two years.

The other key thing is that—I imagine that one of the areas of interest will be this: is all that the MoD is doing shifting money between different budgets? I think it is important to note that, at the working level, there has been an expert group established, from all the budget holders in the MoD, to ensure that we do have a single version of the truth, so that when it comes to the grading boards for SLA, they are able to take the right decisions on how to, basically, focus the funding in the right areas.

Mr Francois: But part of the rationale for the transfer was that most of the rest of the Department had lost all confidence in the DIO. They are known internally as DI"NO". They have an extremely poor reputation with the rest of the Department. When I was in the MoD, one vice-chief—Richard Barrons—wrote a memo all about them entitled "Enough is Enough". It was. Part of the thinking behind the change, as I understand it, is to allow the service chiefs to prioritise where to put the money—because they know from their own people where the really screaming priorities are—rather than the DIO, which evidently didn't. Is that process now working as intended?



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Mr Ellwood: You have put your finger on what I was going to elaborate on. It is absolutely right that you have the three service chiefs, who want to have greater ownership. We have 92 localities around the country that are changing one way or another. I touched on the fact that we are hubbing—creating super-garrisons and so forth. That allows the service chiefs—not just the service chiefs; a garrison commander or a base commander for example—to take real interest in the budget that they have, in terms of leveraging better the work that they can do to make sure that we provide the best facilities possible. I won't touch on comment and reputation but, clearly, people stuck in offices in the MoD main building are less appreciative of what is going on on the frontlines, if you like, in these areas than the TLAs themselves. I think this a positive step forward.

Q197 **Mr Francois:** Thank you. Lastly, you told us an MoU has been signed on the renegotiation with Annington. That is news—thank you. When will we re-let what is now the Amey maintenance contract?

Mr Ellwood: I think that is probably going to be subject to the negotiations that we are speaking of.

Q198 **Mr Francois:** Forgive me, Minister, but it has got nothing to do with that. This is not about renting the buildings. It is about who maintains them and fixes the boiler when the boiler is broken. It is a completely separate contract—trust me. When are you re-letting that one?

James Greenrod: I don't have that information to hand, but we can obviously provide that separately. It is worth noting that, as the families federations noted in their evidence to you, the standard of maintenance around SFA has improved, even if its reputation hasn't yet.

Mr Francois: Thank you.

Q199 **Chair:** Before we move on to the next topic, with regard to the Annington contract, which was of course long ago, has a lessons learned exercise been undertaken into that contract, so as better to inform the future accommodation model and so as not to make the same mistakes? Has there been such an exercise? Did anybody do a proper post-mortem into what went wrong? Again, that is something you might need to check and come back to us on.

Mr Ellwood: I will check. I am sure there has been something done along those lines.

Q200 **Chair:** When you come back to us on that, Tobias, would you let us know whether, where something so long after the event clearly does emerge for the extraneous reasons that you mentioned, or any other reasons, to have been pretty disastrous, there is a general policy in the MoD of holding a lessons learned exercise? If not, would it not be a good idea to do so? Otherwise, we might end up repeating things.

Mr Ellwood: I am absolutely with you on that. You touched on something else before, which was that the churn of responsibility in the MoD—in fact in the civil service as a whole—does mean that for decisions made a while



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back, people are not held to account perhaps in the same way as they are in the private sector, which focuses decision making. Perhaps different decisions might be made if that were to be the case. Certainly, it is important that we understand what happened in the past so we don't repeat those mistakes.

Chair: Exactly. Thank you.

Q201 **Ruth Smeeth:** I would like to move on to healthcare provision. One of the issues is what provision we are putting place when serving personnel are redeployed when the families of serving personnel are accessing the NHS and are in a form of care pathway. If the serving personnel gets redeployed to the other end of the country and their partner is having ongoing treatment for a specific illness, suddenly they are no longer living in the vicinity of that hospital or NHS facility, what are we doing to ensure continuity of care?

Mr Ellwood: We met with members of the families federations and they actually brought in members and spouses and so forth who had those exact problems. They had moved to a new area and new health authority, and their access was not as good as it should be. I cannot recall exactly the details of what we did, but we took away that challenge in order to talk to the NHS about it and see what can actually be done, and it will be something that we raise at the next Covenant meeting as well. You raise something, again, that is an important issue that has yet to be resolved.

James Greenrod: To endorse what the Minister is saying, the NHS absolutely recognises the need to ensure parity of transfer on waiting lists and continuity of care pathways. Invariably when this happens, because every case is different, there needs to be a conversation at the individual level—so, if somebody is receiving a posting notice at a time that is challenging for them or a family member, there needs to be the ability to have the conversation with the chain of command. They can either look to delay or defer a posting, and if that is not appropriate for whatever reason, there are mechanisms in place in consultation with the NHS at the local level to basically enable the right measures to be put in place.

Part of the issue here—and it is something that we see across the Covenant space—is the flipside of the British resilience and “just carry on”. People, certainly in the service community, are disinclined to put their hand up and go, “This isn’t working for me.” As a rule, if we know there is a problem—if we know there is a challenge, either at the local, individual level or at a wider level—we can fix it. Part of our ongoing messaging to the service community is, “It’s absolutely all right to make people aware of the pressures that this puts on you as a family, because there are processes in place that we can guide this through.”

Q202 **Ruth Smeeth:** That is my issue here. So I am a serving officer; my child has healthcare needs, but also mental health needs, so both. We have SEN issues, we have access to CAMHS, and we are seeing it, because one of the issues—I mean, even if it isn’t about the individual service family, there is an issue around retention for these families at this point. I don’t



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think that even the communication processes at the MoD end are working, because it is just too hard to relocate your family. It is about how we are communicating properly. You are right: family is messy, so it is an individual solution at every level, but it is what we now need to put in place, so we are supporting the individual family with the relocation.

Mr Ellwood: It is important, and as I say, we met individuals who illustrated cases of this. There was one particular person who was living in one local authority where they did not even offer the necessary type of support, so she had to travel to the neighbouring authority in order to get the stream that she needed, which was a 40-mile round trip.

The Surgeon-General is responsible for doing the co-ordination—not just within England but with the devolved Administrations—and he is leading on trying to advance this. Could I invite him to write to you with more details as to what we are trying to do in practice to improve this? He is probably the expert with the detailed knowledge, I just have an overview—unless you want to add more, James.

James Greenrod: Particularly on the point that you came back to regarding service children with special educational needs, the bit of the MoD that has the lead on this is our directorate for children and young people. They are working with local authority partnerships; they have identified a group of 15 local authorities that have the highest number of service children, and they are working with those local authorities to essentially establish a process for handling exactly these issues. That is also extended to those coming back from Germany as part of the drawdown from there. I would not want to claim that we have a solution, but we are aware of the issue, and we are working very hard on it in partnership with others.

Q203 Ruth Smeeth: Is one of the challenges the issue of special treatment as written into the Covenant versus priority treatment, which is in the NHS constitution?

Mr Ellwood: I think it is fair to flag that up. We are finding that there are local authorities and NHS establishments that genuinely want to meet the Covenant responsibilities, but then how do they manage that with an urgent case, if an emergency case then comes through? For the decisions that they are making, people complain that they are being pushed to the back of the queue, because how does somebody make that judgment?

Q204 Ruth Smeeth: Are you completely dependent on the families federations for this? In my experience, families of serving personnel are as reluctant to access. They do not want to do anything that would be seen to undermine the command structure. They were reluctant to come and ask for MPs' support on issues such as this, as our normal constituents would—not that serving personnel are not normal. My typical constituents will come and ask me if they have a problem with CAMHS, but serving personnel will not, because they think that they are going behind the chain of command.



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James Greenrod: We are certainly not entirely reliant on the families federations. They are a partner, and we work very closely with them, but within Defence the single services have their own welfare structures, and as a corporate whole we have the directorate for children and young people, which effectively has its own caseworker system, so that if there are families with specific concerns they can channel them through that body as well.

Q205 **Ruth Smeeth:** Thank you very much. I have one question that is a slight deviation, but is still on healthcare. It is more about veterans' healthcare and specifically veterans' mental healthcare. If you have a veteran who does not trust a civilian GP, who does not understand the NHS process and does not want to engage with it in that way, and who is only really comfortable within a military environment—that is, arguably, part of their mental health challenge in itself—how on earth are they meant to access support? I have a case, but how, specifically, can they go about asking for mental health support if they will not go via their GP?

Mr Ellwood: We have the complex treatment centres, which are bespoke, designed for veterans. They are not designed for the general public; they are actually designed for veterans. If you are asking whether there is somewhere on campus, in a garrison, which they are going to feel familiar with, I actually do not know the answer to that. It is a good question, but the treatment and liaison centres that we have are the first step—you go in there and see how you are doing. Then there are the complex treatment centres. They are now popping up around the country and are specifically designed for veterans themselves. If there is a reason, I do not know if you can let me understand—

Ruth Smeeth: I will speak to you in private, because it is an individual case.

Mr Ellwood: If there is one case, then maybe we can make provision to help the individual, which we would want to do. I think we have to be careful as to precedent. What we cannot have is people coming up to barracks and saying, "Can I see the doctor?"

James Greenrod: The tagline answer to that would be that if there was a veteran who did not know where to go for support, in the first instance we would suggest that they go to the Veterans' Gateway. Obviously, although that is a partner organisation of the MoD, it is a British Legion-led consortium. They will have access to clinically approved mental health specialists who are not GPs, but who are familiar with the Armed Forces community. That may be an avenue, but obviously it would depend on the individual circumstances.

Ruth Smeeth: It is a gap, for me, about how they get—

Mr Ellwood: Shall we have a chat? We are happy to help and see what we can do.

Ruth Smeeth: Yes, if that's okay. Thank you, Minister.



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Q206 Chair: We have just over a quarter of an hour, because I believe you have to stop pretty sharply at 4 pm. We have two more topics, with about four questions distributed, so people can do the maths. May I just ask one thing about the tension that Ruth touched on between the NHS approach of saying, "We treat in strict accordance to clinical need," and the Covenant approach, which says that there should be some form of priority for Armed Forces personnel and veterans?

Is there any way of resolving the question of how you give any sort of priority compatible with the NHS ethos, other than the fact that one might invest in veteran-specific facilities? At least if there are some veteran-specific facilities that is one way in which you can fulfil the provision of the Covenant that Armed Forces personnel should get some form of priority to recognise their peculiar and difficult circumstances. I cannot see any other way in which this can be discharged or fulfilled.

Mr Ellwood: It is an important issue that you raise. Let's step back from the actual challenges that we face on making the judgment calls that you get on a local basis. We are also finding that the more we are making veterans aware that they should put their hand up and seek help, the more people are stepping forward, which is putting more of a burden on our NHS and in the devolved Administrations. It is therefore important that the funding is able to match the level of care that we want to provide. I have been speaking with Matt Hancock, the Secretary of State for Health, about the £21 billion he has received. I have been making the request about the money, saying, "Let's honour this. Let's make that happen." I am yet to pin him down to say how that will work in practice, but there has certainly been a huge commitment of £21 billion extra for this issue. Let us not move away from the fact that the Prime Minister herself has wanted to create parity between physical and mental health. This is a great issue for us to explore and encourage further spending.

Q207 Chair: In other words, if the Secretary of State for Health was minded to help create some veteran-specific facilities, he has the money to do it, or he will have?

Mr Ellwood: I understand he has. As I say, I read the same newspapers and see the same reports as you. As soon as I heard that announcement, you follow the money, don't you? As soon as I heard that, I recognised that we need to make the case to say, "That is fantastic. It fits in with another Government policy. Mental health is important." We are encouraging more people to step forward. The Armed Forces are a very stoic environment, and people are reluctant to step forward, but as they become better at doing so, they need to be ready to be received, not put in a queue, which defeats the purpose.

Q208 Chair: So you and your team and me and my team need to make Matt Hancock our new best friend?

Mr Ellwood: We do indeed.

Chair: Gavin, can you try and consolidate the different parts of the question?

Gavin Robinson: Yes, I will do it quickly.

Chair: Indeed.

Q209 **Gavin Robinson:** Minister, when will we get the results from the consultation on the veterans' strategy?

Mr Ellwood: I think we are just closing off the consultation period itself, then we are going to put this together. I hope we will then be in a position to launch the strategy. I think we have a preview of the outlook here. Do we have the exact dates?

James Greenrod: The consultation has worked very well. We have had around 4,500 responses. We therefore want to do a thorough job of looking at the responses. We will be issuing a response later this year.

Q210 **Gavin Robinson:** Will that be before the summer recess?

James Greenrod: I can't confirm that that would be before the summer recess, but there will be a response coming out later this year. The intention was that this would be a 10-year strategy with two-year rolling implementation plans behind it. What you will see later on in the year is the sense of how we will move that forward against the key themes and priority areas.

Q211 **Gavin Robinson:** Do you have any sense of where those responses are leading you at this stage, or have they not been analysed yet?

James Greenrod: Where we are is we have a sense around some large handfuls of issues. For example, we were just talking about health and the NHS. We are in conversations at the moment with the Department of Health and the NHS, which has been doing wonderful work. We fully recognise what they have been doing in terms of the Veterans Covenant Hospital Alliance, the transition services, complex mental health support services and the Veterans Trauma Network. Following on from the comments that have already been made, we are looking at the next stage of building on that and tying it in with the NHS's own 10-year plan. We are having similar conversations with the DWP. We are having similar conversations with the Ministry of Justice and others. I am not in a position now to give clear indications. The intention is that by the summer, we will have some headlines and a more detailed plan to follow behind those headlines.

Mr Ellwood: If I may, Gavin, as Veterans Minister, it is critical for me to have a better co-ordination of veterans' services. There are lots of great veterans' organisations out there. We need to ensure that they all mutually support each other. There needs to be good collaboration and co-ordination. We need better data. We need to understand what we are dealing with. We know that over the next 10 years the veteran community will reduce from roughly 2.5 million to 1.5 million. Their needs will change as we sadly lose the Second World War generation. We need the data from the coroners—on suicides, for example—to recognise the needs there. This is all important, to allow us to better understand the needs and aspirations of the veterans, and the transition process itself.



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I think there is a public perception issue, too. Direct exposure to our Armed Forces is getting smaller and smaller. We all may have relatives who have served. That is a bond that encourages us to be very positive about the Armed Forces. But if your perception comes from watching "Bodyguard" or seeing services charities raise funds, showing people who are injured and so forth, it might give the impression that everybody in the Armed Forces is like that, and we know that that is not the case. There is a big perception issue that we have to fight.

We need to engender more pride in our veterans themselves. I pose this question to the Defence Committee: should we review the definition of veteran? I would like it to be an accolade. When you receive your green beret after you have done that march across the moors, and you come in and can finally call yourself a Royal Marine, is that the point at which you can also be told, "You are now allowed to call yourself a veteran," as a privilege rather than a generality applying to anybody who might have served? In the United States, you have to serve in combat. People have different views here. At the moment, our rule is that you have to serve 24 hours. I would like it to be something where you say, "I am a veteran and I am proud to have served my country," rather than, "I lasted more than 24 hours in the Armed Forces," which is not quite the same tribute.

Q212 Gavin Robinson: Yes, okay. I am under constraints from the Chair, so I will make one brief point, James, on your point about DWP engagement. I don't expect you to respond. Then I will have two brief questions. Universal benefits in this country are set by the DWP. War widows' pension is disregarded for social security purposes in every part of the United Kingdom apart from Northern Ireland, so I think that is worthy of consideration when you look at responses. RBL has been working on it; I think it would be useful if you picked it up.

Mrs Moon, who was here earlier, has raised questions about the financial sustainability of the Veterans' Gateway. We understand that RBL has been making a contribution. There is a collective Government piece. There is a separate element from the MoD directly. But there is no permanent solution on the financial sustainability of Veterans' Gateway. What are your thoughts around that? My second question is, why has the defence holistic transition policy been delayed?

Mr Ellwood: Shall I address the Gateway and then James can address the transition policy? The Gateway is so critical for me as that single portal bringing things together. We need more charities to buy into it. There is still a lot of duplication in call centres. All the big charities have their own separate call centres in addition to the Gateway itself. I want to humbly encourage people to move towards that single call centre, which then provides an efficiency in savings, and allows that important financial continuity and security that they need.

Gavin Robinson: There would be less subvention required from the centre for the Gateway, if the individual charities were relying upon and resourcing the Gateway themselves.



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Mr Ellwood: As Veterans Minister, when I first talked about a single call centre, there was a lot of sucking-in of breath, and people saying, "Oh, I'm not sure." But now it is gathering momentum and I am pleased to see that it is going the right way.

Q213 **Gavin Robinson:** Okay, thank you. Let's move on to the policy delay in defence holistic transition.

James Greenrod: In short, the defence transition policy is something that we are very enthused about. I think it is going to be a step change in how we do transition. Three things will be different. It will encourage people to think about transition earlier in their career, rather than leaving it right to the end. It will be about more than just employment, although employment will remain an integral part of it.

Q214 **Gavin Robinson:** Why is it delayed?

James Greenrod: It is delayed because we need to take the time to get it right; so it is not going to be a long delay. As we have been working through this with the single services, I think there is a recognition of—in a positive way—the scale of the undertaking that this is. Therefore, in discussions with the single services, the conclusion that we arrived at was, better to postpone it a little and do it properly.

Q215 **Gavin Robinson:** So what is a realistic timeframe?

James Greenrod: That is a very good question. We are committed to it this year.

Gavin Robinson: Hang on, you might find out.

James Greenrod: Even earlier than that: we will go with this summer.

Gavin Robinson: Oh good. At least that is one.

Chair: We have covered almost everything we wanted to do. Before I turn to Mark to wrap up the last couple of points, we are going to write to you with literally two or three minor matters that, in the time available, we do not feel we have to press now. Can I just acknowledge with thanks the presence of my colleague Andrew Selous, who is conducting the review on service families and who has been with us throughout this session, as he was for the previous session? We really appreciate that.

Q216 **Mr Francois:** To conclude, just about every major council in Great Britain and, I think, a few in Northern Ireland has signed the community covenant—their equivalent of the Armed Forces Covenant. Some of them have received bespoke funding to assist with that, but that runs out in March, so how do you expect them to continue their current level of support for veterans, if that funding is drying up?

Mr Ellwood: You are speaking specifically about local authorities?

Mr Francois: Yes.



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Mr Ellwood: The Covenant bids can continue on. I think our commitment to the £10 million continues on and, again, if the Treasury happens to be listening, any more money for that is more than welcome. There is a challenge on all levels of funding, and there is no doubt about it. You touch on this as well. It is expected, because they have signed the Armed Forces Covenant, that the local authorities do continue their commitment towards it as best they can. You imply that we are seeing different levels of that, which we have spoken of before.

Q217 **Mr Francois:** Can you give us one example of best practice? Can you think of one local authority anywhere in the country that has been a shining example in this area?

Mr Ellwood: I can think of a couple. Do you just want local authorities, or do you want other businesses as well?

Q218 **Mr Francois:** No, the question is about councils.

Mr Ellwood: Portsmouth is a great one, clearly with the heritage that they have there: lots of councillors, lots of civil servants in Portsmouth are ex-personnel themselves. Staffordshire, where the arboretum is, for example: there is another one where there is a massive commitment. Those are two straight away that I can think of.

Mr Francois: Thank you, Minister. I think you have completed the course.

Chair: Thank you both very much indeed. We have covered a vast panorama in the two hours and are very grateful indeed for your time. We think we have established quite a lot of interesting facts and possibly generated quite a few interesting ideas. So with that, it remains only for me to close the session.