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Report of the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill

Statement made on 22 June 2021

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Statement made by

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	Aldershot	

Commons

Statement

The Ministry of Defence welcomes the Select Committee's report on the Armed Forces Bill (HC 1281). I am grateful for the Committee's support of the endeavours to improve the lives of our Service personnel, veterans and their families. I will address the Committee's recommendations in turn.

I look forward to engaging with Members across the House as the Bill makes progress.

Beginning with the Committee's recommendation that Select Committee scrutiny should continue to be the convention for Armed Forces Bills, I believe that the appointment of a Select Committee, with its ability to produce a report and to make recommendations, ensures transparency and proper scrutiny of the Armed Forces Bill and the legislation in question. I therefore thank the Committee for their work and report and readily welcome the Committee's recommendation.

I note the Committee's recommendation that more time be allocated for the conduct of its business. The Government is committed to giving select committees adequate time to undertake their work, however, the timing available for primary legislation is ultimately a matter for the Business Managers. The primary purpose of Armed Forces Bills is for the quinquennial renewal of the legislation that governs the Armed Forces. Armed Forces Bills must reach Royal Assent before the Armed Forces Act 2006 would expire. Additional time for the Select Committee could compress the time available for other stages of the Bill, impact the wider Parliamentary programme and delay the Bill's passage, placing undue pressure on the deadline to renew the Armed Forces Act 2006. Furthermore, time is also given for further scrutiny of the Bill, as it is considered by a Committee of the whole House as well as by the Select Committee.

The Committee's keen interest in the Armed Forces Covenant reflects members' universal support for our Service personnel both regulars and reserves, veterans and their families. While there remains a difference of view on some issues, I welcome the Committee's assertion that questions in the annual Continuous Attitude Surveys would help to ascertain whether the Covenant has had a positive or negative impact on the defence community. For that reason the Armed Forces, and Families Continuous Attitude Surveys already include a Covenant-related question on whether the Service person or Service family feels advantaged or disadvantaged compared to the general public in specific areas, such as housing, education and healthcare. This provides a measure of whether Service life is having a positive or negative impact and is therefore of use as a measure of the Covenant.

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I acknowledge the Select Committee's concern over how the duty to have due regard would function in practical terms and its recommendation that the Government should conduct a review of this after 24 months of operation. We recognise the importance of understanding the impact of the new duty and how that can be measured will form an important part of our ongoing work in helping our Covenant stakeholders as they begin to implement the new Covenant duty. We are always happy to work with the House of Commons Defence Committee, and the Government will of course continue to report on the progress of the Armed Forces Covenant, including the new duty, annually to Parliament. As part of the Armed Forces Act, the new Covenant duty would also be subject to the quinquennial parliamentary renewal process.

Further, I thank and appreciate the Committee's conclusions on our efforts to reform the Service Justice System. The Bill addresses a small part of that work and we are implementing a number of recommendations following the Service Justice System Review that will ensure the Service Justice System is more effective, efficient and provides a better service to those who use it, in particular victims and witnesses. A key means of underpinning that assurance will be the establishment of a Defence Serious Crime Capability. We are making progress to build a stronger, more effective and collaborative approach to policing across Defence, building a means of maintaining the capability and skills of the Service Police along with further joint working with the civilian police forces.

On another note, I thank the Committee for welcoming Defence's efforts to speed up the Service Complaints process, though the Committee still has concerns as to possible delays to appeals and has suggested that priority should be given to implementing all the recommendations of the Wigston review within 6 months. However, let me reassure the Committee that Service Complaints Reform aims to tackle the main areas of delay in the Service Complaints system, through increased efficiency and other measures aimed to increase confidence in the system.

The ability to set a reduced appeal timeframe where it is appropriate to do so will further align the SC system with other public sector and MOD's civilian grievance system timeframes. Regulations will continue to ensure that those who need extra time due to the unique elements of service life will continue to have access to the system, by allowing extra time where it is just and equitable to do so. We will work closely with the Service Complaints Ombudsman on the detail of the regulations that will be brought forward.

Defence is committed to delivering the Wigston recommendations. As set out in the Gray review, out of the 36 Wigston recommendations, 34 had either been implemented or were in progress. The remaining are in progress and being prioritised, with some linked to the reform of the Service Complaints system and implementation dependent on the AF Bill being passed.

I welcome the Committee's finding that the experience of people in the Armed Forces with protected characteristics has improved. I also recognise there is more to be done. While the Committee recommends that a metric be added to the Annual Report on the Armed Forces Covenant to report on the experience of those with protected characteristics, we report on this in other ways. I wish to assure the Committee that we continue to explore how better to identify the issues affecting our people and this remains a central issue for Defence. The recent Defence Command Paper set out our intent to tangibly, rapidly and significantly improve the lived experience of all those working in Defence, including those with protected characteristics. The MOD already reports progress against this intent through departmental Performance and Risk Reporting processes, as well as mainstream Defence feedback mechanisms and regular localised Climate Assessments, all of which is subject to regular review by the Chief of Defence Staff and the Permanent Secretary. Diversity is a source of strength for the Armed Forces and we welcome and encourage absolutely a more diverse Armed Forces.

I welcome the Committee's recommendation that the Government urgently sets out how it plans to meet targets for the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, Complex Treatment Services and Improving Access to Psychological Therapy. The Government remains wholly committed to its ambitions set out in the NHS Long Term Plan to expand and transform mental health services in England and to investing an additional £2.3 billion a year in mental health services by 2023-24. This will give 380,000 more adults access to psychological therapies by 2023-24. All but one of the four regional areas are meeting or exceeding targets for the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, and activity is already in hand to further improve performance in those few areas where targets are not yet being met. The number of days that a patient waits from initial referral to being offered an assessment for referral in 2020-21 (up to the end of January 2021) was on average 12 days, which falls within the 14-day target. All four regional areas are meeting this target and it is an improvement from the waiting times in 2019-20. Following an assessment, a patient is offered an initial clinical appointment, if the outcome of the assessment is to be seen within the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service. The target for this is also 14 days and in England on average so far in 2020-21 this target is being met. Only one regional area is not currently meeting the target but has seen a reduction in average wait of 11 days since 2019-20.

Launched in 2017, the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service and the Complex Treatment Services, and more recently the High Intensity Service, has been offering support to Serving personnel, veterans, and their families, dealing with complex mental health issues. These services have now been brought together under the collective name Op COURAGE, providing a single point of entry for veterans looking to access support for their mental health needs.

We are doing our utmost to ensure that our mental health services are there for everyone who needs them during the pandemic. Talking therapies are being made available remotely so people can access help safely from home. And the NHS is working to ensure the option of face-to-face support is provided to people with serious mental health illnesses across all ages where it is clinically safe to do so.

This leads me on to the Committee's next recommendation that further work must be done to ensure that the principle of "priority treatment" is better understood by both veterans and service providers. In 2018, the MOD/UK Department of Health's Partnership Board established the Priority Treatment Working Group. The group's membership is made up of both patient and clinical representatives from all four nations, MOD, Office for Veterans' Affairs and the Service Charities sector. The group continues to meet to share best practice of priority treatment and will discuss the action from the Committee – to address the lack of clarity and understanding amongst veterans, family members, and service providers and develop methods to improve understanding.

Within its report the Committee has recommended that work be undertaken to minimise variation in the level of services across the UK, with specific reference to Northern Ireland to deal with the challenges faced by veterans attempting to access mental health services there. We believe that by improving awareness and understanding of the Covenant among public bodies, our proposed legislation, will help to reduce disadvantage to the Armed Forces Community and minimise variation in service across UK.

The unique circumstances in Northern Ireland mean delivery is approached in a different way from the rest of the UK. The Government is making good progress in delivering the Covenant in Northern Ireland. For example, the first Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner has been appointed and will jointly chair (with the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Reserve Forces & Cadets Association) a Mental Health Committee, bringing together key statutory and third-sector providers of mental health services and support. The Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office, which has been provided with additional funding by Her Majesty's Government to assist in delivery of the Covenant, continues to work directly with the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to ensure that all funding programmes in support of Veterans' mental health are fully promoted and accessible to the widest range of eligible, trusted organisations, in order to enhance those services available statutorily.

The Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish (Home Service) Aftercare Service includes provision of mental health support. The Government has committed, as set out in the New Decade New Approach agreement, that the MOD will consider whether this should be widened to cover all Veterans living in Northern Ireland. In addition, projects that benefit the Armed Forces Community in Northern Ireland received over £1.6 million last year from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

I turn to the recommendation of the Committee that work should be undertaken to improve data collection with regard to the numbers of serving personnel and veterans requiring treatment for addiction and other mental health illnesses. I wish to reassure the Committee that the MOD is committed to the mental health and wellbeing of its Service personnel and provides dedicated and comprehensive services, including support for alcohol, drugs and gambling related disorders. Serving personnel requiring any form of healthcare, including treatment for drug and alcohol addiction, are cared for within the Defence Medical Services establishment.

For those accessing Defence Medical Services care, we already collate and publish statistics on those accessing specialist mental healthcare for substance abuse (alcohol and drugs). These figures are published annually in the mental health official statistics where we make specific reference to those assessed with alcohol-related substance abuse.

In the Strategy for our Veterans, the Government committed to improve the collection and analysis of data on veterans' needs and experiences to inform future policy and services. The Government is developing a veterans' data strategy which will achieve this across a wide range of topics, such as veterans' health and wellbeing, mental health, employment, housing and relationships.

Wherever they live in the UK, all Veterans are able to receive specialist support if they need it. Each Devolved Administration provides support in a way that best suits their region. The majority of Veterans access the same healthcare support as the general population through NHS services.

In England, each part of the country now has specialist mental health services designed for Service leavers, ex-Service personnel, Reservists and their families through the recently launched Op COURAGE - the Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service. This is the new overarching name for the Veterans' Mental Health Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, Veterans' Mental Health Complex Treatment Service and Veterans' Mental Health High Intensity Service. Op COURAGE provides a single front door to dedicated services for Veterans and make it easier for Veterans and their families to get help.

Further, I observe the Committee touched upon the area of Service housing and in its conclusions felt that the Government may wish

Further, I observe the Committee touched upon the area of service housing and in its conclusions felt that the Government may wish to consider adding Service accommodation to the list of functions to which the duty of due regard under the Armed Forces Covenant applies. Whilst I thank the Committee for its well-intended suggestion, we feel this is unnecessary. The purpose of the Covenant duty is to raise awareness among providers of public services relating to housing, education and healthcare of how Service life can disadvantage the Armed Forces Community in accessing those key public services. MOD is fully aware of the issues impacting the

Armed Forces Community and works with other Departments and Devolved Administrations to raise awareness across all service providers. Accommodation forms part of the Secretary of State's annual statutory report to Parliament on the Covenant and is included in the Armed Forces, Reserves and Families Continuous Attitude Surveys conducted each year.

The provision of high-quality subsidised accommodation remains a fundamental part of the overall MOD offer to Service personnel and their families and is supported by annual improvement programmes and 24/7 repair and maintenance services. Over the last decade, £1.2 billion has been invested on construction and upgrades of MOD Service accommodation. There is continued investment in a range of new-build and renovation projects. All accommodation at the point of occupancy meets the Decent Homes Standard as a minimum with the vast majority exceeding this. In addition, we are developing the Future Accommodation Model to give Service personnel more choice over where, with whom and how they can live, reflecting modern family life, with entitlement based on need not rank. This model is currently being piloted at three sites. We recognise that many service personnel seek stability for their families. A key part of this is helping personnel buy their own home. The Forces Help to Buy Scheme, first launched in 1 April 2014, is open to new applicants until 31 December 2022.

Statement from

Ministry of Defence

