

## Written evidence submitted by Forces in Mind Trust to the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill

Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) was established in 2011 by a £35 million endowment from the Big Lottery Fund (now The National Lottery Community Fund). Our vision is for all ex-Service personnel and their families to lead fulfilled civilian lives, and our mission is to enable successful sustainable transition by funding evidence generation and influence activities that help to further our mission, and by strengthening the capability of the Armed Forces charities sector.

FiMT's goal is one of successful transition and the research we fund is UK-wide with specialist reports in each of the devolved nations. FiMT funds research in seven areas: Housing, Employment, Health, Finance, Criminal Justice System, Relationships, and our Enabler Programme.

We believe that no ex-Service personnel or their family should be disadvantaged as a result of service, and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases. We have funded several research projects on the Armed Forces Covenant including the popular *Our Community - Our Covenant*<sup>1</sup> and *Benefit not Burden*<sup>2</sup> reports. These reports highlight areas of good practice and the challenges encountered by public and private organisations in delivering the Armed Forces Covenant.

### Overview

Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) welcomes the Armed Forces Bill 2021 and the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant into legislation. If implemented successfully, with clear guidance and communication, the legislation should increase awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant and the Armed Forces Community, prevent the Community from being disadvantaged by their service and ensure that they receive the support they are entitled to.

The Armed Forces Covenant seeks to ensure that the Armed Forces Community faces no disadvantage as a result of their service. Research has shown however that this is not being achieved in some cases. Below we have identified challenges in delivering the Covenant and included recommendations to improve implementation. Across all areas it is essential that there is sufficient expertise, awareness and understanding of the Armed Forces Community by the organisations and staff that are expected to deliver on the Covenant pledges. It is also essential that that they have the resources needed carry out their obligations, particularly if this legislation will create an additional burden.

### Disadvantage

We welcome the recent initiatives in the healthcare sector, such as the NHS Long Term plan, Op Courage and veteran friendly GP practices, which seek to better support the Armed Forces Community. We also recognise the significant amount of specialist mental health support available through the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service (TILS), the Complex Treatment Service (CTS) and the High Intensity Service (HIS), as well as the support provided by Armed Forces charities sector.

Despite the new initiatives, care pathways for the ex-Service community remain confusing and complex<sup>3</sup>. Research has shown that there remains a limited awareness and

understanding of the Armed Forces Covenant across the NHS<sup>4</sup> and that this has resulted in some ex-Service personnel and their families being disadvantaged when trying to access healthcare<sup>5</sup>. Ex-Service personnel and their families are not routinely identified within the healthcare system and are therefore not receiving, or being made aware of, the support they may be entitled to<sup>6</sup>. Variations and inconsistencies in provision and veteran-specific health care have also been found across the UK, particularly between the devolved nations<sup>7</sup> with some referring to the receipt of care as a 'postcode lottery'. It has also been reported that ex-Service personnel and family members can experience mental health concerns that 'do not meet the criteria' for a recognised diagnosis and NHS treatments and instead turn to third sector organisations for support<sup>8</sup>.

Limited awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant has also been found within local authorities with less than half of local authority chief executives considering themselves to have a good understanding of the Covenant<sup>9</sup>. While the majority of the Armed Forces Community are aware of the Covenant, many do not know what it means in practice<sup>10</sup> which can result in them not accessing the support they are entitled to or expecting too much.

In the housing sector, significant steps have been taken since the inception of the Armed Forces Covenant to improve housing outcomes and to remove barriers for ex-Service personnel when accessing social housing. However, some Service leavers are still transitioning into civilian life with insufficient knowledge of the complex civilian housing system and do not understand what they are entitled to under the Covenant<sup>11</sup>.

### **Priority treatment**

The Armed Forces Covenant states that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, such as those who have been bereaved or injured. In effect, this means that ex-Service personnel should receive priority treatment where an injury or condition is a result of their service in the Armed Forces, subject to clinical need. However, there are concerns about the implementation of this policy and issues persist around a lack of awareness and understanding, inconsistencies in implementation and a lack of clarity about the interpretation of the policy by government<sup>12</sup>. There is also evidence to suggest that ex-Service personnel and their families are not always informed of their entitlements to priority healthcare access for conditions associated with their time in the Armed Forces<sup>13</sup>. In contrast however, some ex-Service personnel may expect the same level of treatment that they received whilst still in service and their expectations may be set too high going into the civilian healthcare system.

### **Scope of the Armed Forces Bill**

While the three areas that fall within the scope of the Armed Forces Bill (health, housing, and education) are important areas to focus on, it is important that this Bill does not create a two-tier Covenant. It will be essential therefore to ensure that other areas such as social care, criminal justice and welfare are not forgotten, or perceived to be less important. We anticipate that the Statutory Guidance and other supporting information will need to be framed in a way that helps to ensure awareness and understanding of the areas of the Covenant that fall within and outside the legislation, and to make clear the need to recognise and deliver against the Covenant as a whole, so that the original intent of the Covenant is enhanced and not diluted by the introduction of legislation.

### **Effective implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant**

The *Our Community – Our Covenant* report identified areas of good practice and identified the core infrastructure needed to ensure effective implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant by local authorities. These included:

- An elected member champion and an officer point of contact.
- A Covenant Forum or co-ordinating group that meets at least twice a year and includes military charities, public sector representatives, council members, and the champion.
- A webpage or presence to support delivery of the Covenant with key information and links for the Armed Forces Community.
- A clear public statement of what members of the Armed Forces Community can expect.
- A route through which concerns can be raised.
- Training of frontline staff.
- A vehicle for reporting action and achievements.
- An action planning process that is proportionate to local needs and circumstances.
- Policy reviews.
- Enthusiasm and commitment.

While *Our Community – Our Covenant* focused on local authorities, the core infrastructure can be applied to other organisations which fall within the scope of the legislation. The report also contained a toolkit for local authorities which was well received, helping them to improve their delivery of the Covenant<sup>14</sup>. FiMT is currently in the process of commissioning a follow-on study entitled *Our Community, Our Covenant 3: Examining the impact of the Armed Forces Community* which will commence in the summer of 2021 and report in the summer of 2022. The new study will go beyond local authorities, covering public sector organisations, and will re-examine the toolkit.

### **Measuring success**

It is important that the success of the legislation is measured to ensure that it is meeting its objective and to inform the decision of whether the scope should be extended beyond health, housing, and education. We believe that the *Our Community, Our Covenant 3* project will help with this. The project will examine the impact of the Armed Forces Covenant so far and will establish a benchmark pre-legislation which we hope will be used to evaluate the impact of the legislation going forward. The research will also look at areas of best practice and any challenges in implementation. It will highlight any areas where more resource is needed and where improvements can be made. We have been working closely with the Local Government Association and the Ministry of Defence in commissioning this project and insights will be shared throughout.

### **Recommendations**

Considering the issues raised in this written submission and to ensure that the Armed Forces Bill meets its aim in improving delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant, we recommend that there is:

- Clear and robust statutory guidance, supporting information and resources available to the organisations that fall under this legislation, particularly if the legislation creates an additional burden. This should be accompanied by a strong communications plan to ensure organisations are aware of the obligations placed

on them and the resources available to them. Consideration should also be given to how this legislation can be best communicated to the Armed Forces Community so they are aware of what they can and cannot expect.

- Joined up working between the statutory guidance and how to use the legislation. This should include the benefits of the legislation alongside an understanding of what does not fall under the legislation to ensure that benefits and pledges are protected across the breadth of the Covenant.
- Greater clarity by Government about the interpretation of the priority treatment policy, better awareness and understanding of what it means in practice, and sufficient resource within the system to deliver it effectively.
- A clear process of review and evaluation to ensure the legislation is meeting its objective and to inform the future decision of whether the legislation should be extended beyond health, housing, and education.
- Better data recording, linkage and sharing to ensure that the Armed Forces Community receive the support they are entitled to and for effective delivery of the Covenant by organisations.

Thank you again for inviting me to provide evidence to the Committee on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and for the opportunity to follow up with a written submission. If you would like any further information, please get do not hesitate to get in touch.

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<sup>1</sup> Shared Intelligence (2017): Our Community – Our Covenant. Improving the delivery of local Covenant pledges

<sup>2</sup> Shared Intelligence and NatCen (2019): Benefit not Burden: How to improve delivery of organisational pledges made under the Armed Forces Covenant

<sup>3</sup> Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (2019): The Armed Forces Community Healthcare navigation Project

<sup>4</sup> Community Innovations Enterprise (2015): Call to Mind UK

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Defence (2020): Living in our shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families

<sup>6</sup> Op cit Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (2019)

<sup>7</sup> Op cit Community Innovations Enterprise (2015)

<sup>8</sup> NatCen (2020): The mental health needs of serving and ex-Service personnel: A systematic review

<sup>9</sup> Op cit Shared Intelligence (2017)

<sup>10</sup> Op cit Shared Intelligence (2017)

<sup>11</sup> University of Stirling (2020): Working Together to Meet the Housing Needs of Ex-Service Personnel: Examining the Challenges of Transition and Collaboration

<sup>12</sup> Op cit Community Innovations Enterprise (2015)

<sup>13</sup> Op cit NatCen (2020)

<sup>14</sup> Charnwood, Melton and Rushcliffe Borough Councils Partnership (2019): Bringing the Armed Forces Covenant to Life

***Written evidence submitted to the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill on April 1st***