



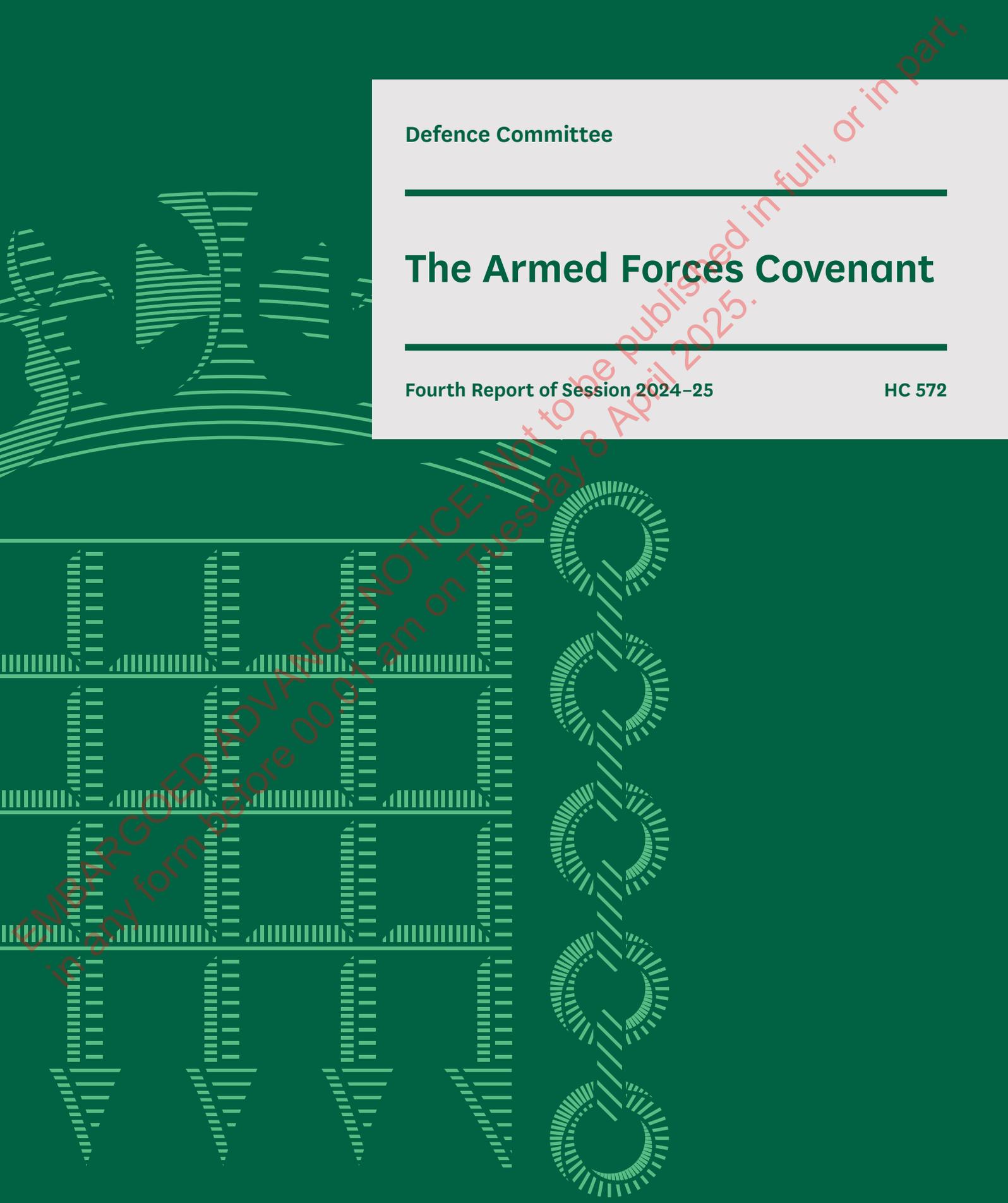
House of
Commons

Defence Committee

The Armed Forces Covenant

Fourth Report of Session 2024–25

HC 572



Defence Committee

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Summary

The Armed Forces Covenant is a solemn commitment by our whole society to recognise the courage and dedication of our Armed Forces. The Covenant commits to ensuring that former and serving members of the Armed Forces and their families should not be disadvantaged as a result of service life, and in some cases should be entitled to special recognition or treatment in acknowledgement of their service. Since the Covenant's principles were first enshrined in law in 2011, a lot of good work has been done by public service providers, by businesses and by the charitable sector to address disadvantages faced by people in the Armed Forces community. However, the Covenant is still not consistently understood or implemented and so in too many cases is falling short of the promise made to those who have served. The Government has said it wants to address the shortcomings of the Covenant by putting it 'fully into law.' We launched our inquiry to inform and influence the development of this legislation.

We decided that we needed to hear the perspectives of Service Personnel and their families in order to understand how the Covenant was making a difference for them, and we invited serving individuals to share their experiences with us. While some people had positive experiences to share, a worrying number felt that the Covenant had been ineffective—or worse yet, had been disregarded—when they had cited it. As a result, many continued to face disadvantages as a result of their service in areas like healthcare, education, employment and welfare. We are very grateful to everyone who took the time to share their experiences with us.

We conclude that, while the Covenant has had a positive influence on the lives of the Armed Forces community, it remains a work in progress. We welcome the Government's intention to extend the Covenant Legal Duty, which currently requires some public service providers to give due regard to the Covenant's principles when providing certain housing, healthcare and education services. We conclude that this duty should be extended to all central government departments and the devolved administrations, and should cover the breadth of areas in which the Armed Forces community regularly experiences disadvantage. However, this will not on its own address the fundamental issues that exist with inconsistent implementation, and so the Government needs to give equal attention to ensuring that those subject to the Covenant Legal Duty understand what is being asked of them. This can be achieved through designing clearer standards and guidance, and creating better mechanisms for measuring success so that

good practice can be identified and shared. It is this process of embedding understanding of the Covenant into our institutions and into wider society, rather than any single piece of legislation, that will make our society live up to the Covenant's promise to our Armed Forces.

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1 Introduction

Background to the inquiry

1. The Armed Forces Covenant is a statement of the moral obligation which exists between the nation, the Government and the Armed Forces. The Covenant seeks to recognise the sacrifices made by current and former members of the Armed Forces and their families, to ensure that they do not face disadvantage in everyday life as a consequence of having served, and to give special consideration in certain circumstances.¹ The Covenant was published in May 2011 and its core principles were enshrined in law, for the first time, in the Armed Forces Act 2011.² The Armed Forces Act 2021 introduced a new Legal Duty on some public bodies, such as local authorities and the NHS, to pay due regard to the principles of the Covenant when delivering some of their functions in the areas of education, housing and healthcare.³ However, debate has continued about the Covenant's effectiveness and how best to ensure that it delivers on the nation's promise to the Armed Forces community. The Labour Party, in its General Election manifesto, committed to bringing the Covenant "fully into law"⁴ and since taking office Ministers have reaffirmed this commitment.⁵

The Committee's inquiry

2. The Secretary of State confirmed to us on 21 November 2024 that the Government planned to legislate to put the Covenant "fully into law" in the next Armed Forces Bill; he said this Bill would be introduced in the next session of Parliament, starting in 2025.⁶ The Secretary of State invited

1 GOV.UK, [The Armed Forces Covenant](#), Accessed 18 March 2025

2 [Armed Forces Act 2006](#) (As amended), Section 343A

3 [Armed Forces Act 2006](#) (As amended), Section 343AA. The introduction of the Legal Duty was scrutinised in detail during the passage of the 2021 Act by the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, see: Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, [The Armed Forces Bill](#), Special Report of Session 2019–21, HC 1281

4 [Labour Party Manifesto](#), 13 June 2024

5 [HC Deb](#), Monday 28 October 2024, col. 589

6 An Armed Forces Bill is required to be passed before the end of 2026 in order to provide the continuing legal basis for the Armed Forces and military law in the UK. This legal basis must be renewed every five years. The focus of the Bill is usually the service justice system, but the Government has sometimes used the Bill as an opportunity to legislate on other matters relating to the Armed Forces.

our input, and recommended that this be shared in “the next four or five months.”⁷ Given this, we decided that to inform the development of the Government’s proposals we should hold an inquiry looking at the current state of the Armed Forces Covenant and seeking views on how it might be expanded and improved.

3. We launched our inquiry on 13 December 2024, and issued a call for written evidence. The terms of reference for the inquiry were as follows:

- In what areas is the Armed Forces Covenant working well?
- Where is the Armed Forces Covenant failing the Armed Forces Community?
 - What are the main causes for these failings?
- Are there areas which the Armed Forces Covenant ought to be extended to and why?
 - If so, which are the priority areas?
- What legislative changes should be made and why?
- What impact would the extension of the Armed Forces Covenant Legal Duty to central government and devolved administrations have?

As it was important that we hear from people who are currently serving in the Armed Forces, we requested that the Secretary of State grant serving personnel permission to submit written evidence, which he did, for which we are grateful. Because of the sensitivity of some of the issues, we have respected all requests for submissions to be kept in confidence or to be published anonymously. Altogether we published 78 pieces of written evidence. We are very grateful to all those who shared their experiences, which have given us a richer understanding of where the Covenant is succeeding and failing, based on powerful personal stories from some of those affected.

4. We held three oral evidence sessions as part of our inquiry, in which we took evidence from: armed forces charities; the service families federations; veterans commissioners; local government representatives; and NHS England; as well as from the Minister for Veterans and People, alongside the Chief of Defence People and Ministry of Defence officials. Although there are other stakeholder groups from whom it would have been valuable to hear evidence, the Government’s legislative timetable meant this was

7 Oral evidence taken on 21 November, [Q37](#); The Minister for Veterans and People subsequently told us the Government’s intention was to introduce the Armed Forces Bill in 2026.

not possible. A full list of witnesses is included at the end of this report. We greatly appreciate the time taken by all our witnesses to contribute to the inquiry.

5.

CONCLUSION

The timetable presented to us by the Secretary of State for producing a report meant there were fewer opportunities to take oral evidence on this subject than we would have preferred.

6.

RECOMMENDATION

Assuming precedent is followed, a Select Committee will be appointed to consider the Armed Forces Bill, with the opportunity to hear oral evidence before considering the Bill line by line. We recommend that the Government allow time for that Committee to hear from a broad range of organisations with an interest in the Armed Forces Covenant, as well as on other issues that may be within the scope of the Bill.

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2 The Covenant today

Perceptions of the Covenant

7. Our call for evidence asked for views on how well the Armed Forces Covenant in its current form was supporting the Armed Forces community. The responses we received were mixed.
8. Several organisations told us that the Covenant had provided a valuable framework for supporting the Armed Forces community.⁸ The Royal British Legion's evidence quoted their 2021 review of the Covenant's first decade, which stated:

For many, the Covenant's greatest success was not any individual policy or action, but the framework it has provided for opening conversations to drive change between all actors in society who support the Armed Forces community.⁹

We heard this had resulted in tangible improvements for the forces community. Help for Heroes wrote that "undoubtedly, the Armed Forces Covenant has delivered real progress for veterans, serving personnel and their families."¹⁰ Air Vice-Marshal David McLoughlin, the Director of Defence Healthcare at the Ministry of Defence, explained that the Covenant Legal Duty (see paragraph 1) gave him leverage to influence decision-makers in healthcare and thereby address issues where service personnel and their families were disadvantaged.¹¹ Since the Covenant was created, several public services have developed that provide tailored support to the Armed Forces community, such as Op COURAGE, a specialist mental health service, and Op FORTITUDE, which supports veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The contribution of these services to improving the lives of veterans in particular was welcomed by those who contributed to our inquiry.¹²

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- 8 E.g. Cobseo - The Confederation of Service Charities ([AFC0033](#)); Forces in Mind Trust ([AFC0052](#)); Help for Heroes ([AFC0023](#)); East Ayrshire Council ([AFC0048](#)); [Q57](#) [Lt Cdr Susie Hamilton, Scottish Veterans Commissioner]
 - 9 Royal British Legion ([AFC0047](#))
 - 10 Help for Heroes ([AFC0023](#))
 - 11 David McLoughlin ([AFC0045](#))
 - 12 E.g. Forces in Mind Trust ([AFC0052](#)); Dr Michelle Moffat (Research Associate at Manchester Metropolitan University) ([AFC0065](#))

9. At the same time, there was general agreement that the Covenant was a work in progress with significant room for improvement. Lt Gen. Sir Nick Pope, giving evidence on behalf of the confederation of service charities Cobseo, described the Covenant as “a bit of a curate’s egg: in some areas good, and in some areas work still to do.”¹³ #JoiningForces Group, a group of ‘forces friendly’ organisations, said that “the Covenant lacks impact and is failing to realise its potential.”¹⁴ Specific issues highlighted in the evidence we received were a perceived lack of understanding of what the Covenant entails—both on the part of those committed to delivering it and on the part of the forces community about how the Covenant is meant to benefit them¹⁵—and a lack of means by which to measure the Covenant’s impact and so provide accountability.¹⁶ We explore these issues in greater detail later in this report.
10. The evidence we received from members of the Armed Forces community showed that individuals’ experiences of the Covenant varied considerably. Some reported that the Covenant had directly helped them to resolve situations in their favour. One contributor had successfully used the Covenant to obtain a mental health assessment for their child (see Box 1) while others reported that it had helped them to secure a school place for their child, or to cancel contracts with companies when their service required them to move to a new place of duty.¹⁷ Other submissions reported that the Covenant had not supported them as they had expected (see Boxes 2 and 3). Several of these examples related to education or healthcare, public services which are specifically subject to the Covenant Legal Duty. Examples included individuals whose children’s education had been interrupted,¹⁸ and individuals who had spent many years seeking appropriate medical support to no avail¹⁹—this latter category included several submissions about the inadequacy of support for veterans suffering long-term effects as a result of Mefloquine/Lariam malaria medication taken during their service.²⁰ Many of the submissions expressed disappointment that in their case the Covenant had been, in their view, either ineffective or disregarded. (See Box 3)

13 [Q1](#)

14 #JoiningForces Group ([AFC0057](#))

15 Ministry of Defence ([AFC0068](#)); Local Government Association ([AFC0055](#)); David McLoughlin ([AFC0045](#)); Forces in Mind Trust ([AFC0052](#))

16 Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities ([AFC0033](#))

17 E.g. Mr Adam Goldie (2IC CJSU at Royal Air Force) ([AFC0007](#)); Anonymous ([AFC0018](#)); Chris Crawford (DE&S P8 DT Grd Msn System Engineer at RAF) ([AFC0027](#))

18 Mr P Tolley ([AFC0040](#))

19 Mr Jack Pollard ([AFC0069](#)); Anonymous ([AFC0018](#))

20 Anonymous ([AFC0041](#)); Lt Col (ret'd) Andrew Marriott ([AFC0024](#)); Mr David Rimmington ([AFC0060](#))

Box 1: Anonymous submission from a serving member of the Armed Forces

In 2021, my son, aged 7, was identified as needing an assessment through CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services]. We were living in [Redacted] and had been waiting for a letter to confirm an appointment for six months... After six months of waiting, we received a letter from the Trust stating that we would have to wait another 18 months for an appointment. Reading the letter, I knew with complete certainty that we would not be in the area by that time.

Fortunately, a neighbour who was a doctor advised me to write to CAMHS and to also cc in the Armed Forces Champion, stating our fear that we would be moved to another area for my next job and our son would drop to the bottom of another waiting list. I checked the Armed Forces Covenant status of the Trust and noted it was also an ERS [Employer Recognition Scheme] Silver award holder. I replied, raising this, and very quickly, my son's case was prioritised on the waiting list. My son was assessed and received a diagnosis for a neurological disorder, which allowed us to access the support and treatment he needed.

The Armed Forces Covenant played a crucial role in addressing our situation. As a family with a member serving in the armed forces, we were entitled to additional support under the Covenant. The Covenant ensured that our son's needs were prioritised, acknowledging the unique challenges faced by armed forces families.²¹

Source: Anonymous (AFC0019)

21 Anonymous ([AFC0019](#))

Box 2: Anonymous submission from a serving member of the Armed Forces

I had been referred to an NHS specialist for a specific condition that unfortunately meant I was placed on a 3-year waiting list. However, my role in the Royal Navy at the time meant I would be moving from Scotland to the south of England during this wait. I was reassured at the time that because of the Armed Forces Covenant, my position on the waiting list would transfer between the NHS trusts when I moved location.

After 2 years on the waiting list, I moved from Scotland to the South of England and I received a letter from the local trust stating I had been transferred to their waiting list, but my position was once again at the back of the list and at 3 years again.

My local military doctor and I both contacted the NHS trust and asked why the position wasn't transferred and quoted the Armed Forces Covenant. The response from the NHS trust was that "They didn't recognise and therefore follow the Armed Forces Covenant". My military doctor challenged this several times to no avail.

I ultimately had to wait 5 years for the specialist treatment and found it surprising that government departments (in this example NHS) are able to opt-out of the Armed Forces Covenant, and if they are not able to opt-out, there was no way to formally challenge their decision.²²

Source: Anonymous (AFC0046)

Box 3: Perceptions of the Covenant from members of the Armed Forces community who wrote to us

“The Covenant itself provides adequate protection if it is known about and implemented. However, it is clearly not implemented in some cases.”²³

“It seems to me that it was a gimmick that had no real substance.”²⁴

“My experience of the Armed Forces Covenant is that companies are keen to sign up, but less keen to implement or put these grand gestures into action at a tactical level.”²⁵

“This makes me wonder what the point of the AF Covenant is when it comes to being disadvantaged in terms of health care due to service life. Signing up to the AF Covenant looks good on public bodies, websites etc. but in practice means nothing at all.”²⁶

“I remain of the opinion that whilst the AFC intends to support military individuals and families, that it is of partial worth as it is not enshrined in law, and there is no obligation for companies or organisations to abide by its principles. It has been something that when I have quoted it, has been disregarded or questioned indicating a lack of knowledge of its principles.”²⁷

Source: Various (see footnotes)

11. We also heard that the existing Covenant Legal Duty does not extend to many areas of life in which the forces community experience disadvantage, meaning that little is done to address these disadvantages. Some of the examples that were shared with us included:

- **Employment:** Several submissions said that service leavers were disadvantaged in the job market because military qualifications and experience were not properly recognised by many civilian employers.²⁸ We heard that spouses of military personnel also faced disadvantages in the job market, particularly when a family is posted abroad.²⁹ While the contribution of initiatives like the Defence Employers Recognition

23 Lieutenant Colonel James Cartwright (Military Assistant to the Chief of Staff at Rapid Reaction Corps – France) ([AFC0067](#))

24 Mr Jack Pollard (Through life support at MOD) ([AFC0069](#))

25 Anonymous ([AFC0004](#))

26 Major Robert Thompson ([AFC0009](#))

27 Mr Adam Goldie (2IC CJSU at Royal Air Force) ([AFC0007](#))

28 Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities ([AFC0033](#)); Dr Michelle Moffat (Research Associate at Manchester Metropolitan University) ([AFC0065](#)); Forces in Mind Trust ([AFC0052](#)); The Welsh NHS Confederation ([AFC0071](#))

29 Royal British Legion ([AFC0047](#)); [Q41](#) [Vanessa Plumley, Army Families Federation]

Scheme (DERS) was acknowledged and welcomed, we heard examples where DERS award holders were not in fact fulfilling their obligations, particularly in cases where the person employed or seeking employment was the spouse of a serving person.³⁰ These issues were not exclusive to the private sector. One individual told us that their spouse had been unable to transfer their policing career from one part of the country to another in order to follow them to a new post, and said this had been a constraint on both of their careers.³¹ Another reported that when they accepted a post abroad in France, their spouse—a Civil Servant in the Home Office—had been refused permission to work remotely, and told us this had been an impediment to both their careers.³²

- **Social care:** we heard that many veterans, particularly those with injuries resulting from their service, found it a “constant battle to ensure their care needs are met.”³³ Royal Star & Garter, a charity which supports veterans living with long-term conditions, said that awareness of the Covenant was low in the social care sector despite the large number of veterans in care and the clear linkages between social care and health, which is covered by the Covenant Legal Duty.³⁴
- **Immigration:** We were told that the standard immigration status given to serving personnel who are not UK nationals immediately after discharge does not allow them to work or to claim benefits until their application to remain is processed. The joint submission by the RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation and Army Families Federation explained that “there is no other immigration route in which someone legally in the UK isn’t allowed to work or claim benefits whilst their application is being decided.”³⁵ Collette Musgrave of the Army Families also explained in oral evidence that it was only thanks to an intervention from the Families Federations that the changes to Minimum Income Requirements for people wishing to sponsor a family member to remain in the UK had not disadvantaged serving personnel.³⁶
- **Finances:** We heard that serving personnel had been financially disadvantaged as a result of being posted overseas, for example because this created gaps in their credit or insurance claims

30 [Q33](#) [Vanessa Plumley, RAF Families Federation]

31 Anonymous ([AFC0005](#))

32 Lieutenant Colonel James Cartwright (Military Assistant to the Chief of Staff at Rapid Reaction Corps – France) ([AFC0067](#))

33 Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities ([AFC0033](#))

34 Royal Star & Garter ([AFC0022](#))

35 RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#))

36 [Qq38–39](#)

histories,³⁷ or denied them access to certain financial products because they were not resident in the UK.³⁸ We were also told that service families were unfairly disadvantaged by rules which charge a higher rate of Stamp Duty Land Tax on properties that are not a 'main residence', which has affected families who change their family home while being posted elsewhere, because HMRC does not recognise their family home as their 'main residence'.³⁹

- **Pensions and welfare:** The Royal British Legion told us that the calculations used to determine entitlement for many benefits, such as Pension Credit, Housing Benefit, and Council Tax Support, treat military compensation awards as income, resulting in veterans qualifying for less support than they would otherwise be entitled to.⁴⁰ One individual who contacted us explained that a family member had been unable to claim Universal Credit after the family returned from an overseas posting because they were not seen as a British resident.⁴¹
- **Criminal justice:** We heard that more could be done to identify and support veterans in the criminal justice system. Contributors told us veterans can have complex needs related to their service; the specialist programme for veterans in the justice system, Op NOVA, supports veterans for whom difficulty adapting to civilian life can put them at greater risk of reoffending.⁴² The Royal British Legion told us that, because criminal justice currently sits outside the Covenant duty, there is a disconnect between the Ministry of Justice and local services who provide tailored provision for members of the Armed Forces community in the justice system.⁴³ The work of Op NOVA in this area was recognised, but witnesses pointed out that this programme extends to England only.⁴⁴

37 [Q50](#) [Collette Musgrave, Army Families Federation]; [Q64](#) [David Johnstone, Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner]; Sgt David Adam MBE (SNCO at RAF) ([AFC0064](#))

38 Wg Cdr Simon Stafford (United Kingdom Chinook Liaison Officer at Royal Air Force) ([AFC0035](#))

39 RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#)); Anonymous ([AFC0063](#))

40 Royal British Legion ([AFC0047](#))

41 Sgt David Adam MBE (SNCO at RAF) ([AFC0064](#))

42 Office of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner ([AFC0020](#)); The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust ([AFC0043](#)); The Royal British Legion, [Op Nova](#), accessed 21 March 2025; Veterans Covenant Healthcare Alliance, [Op NOVA](#), Accessed 21 March 2025

43 Royal British Legion ([AFC0047](#))

44 [Q70](#) [Lt Cdr Susie Hamilton, Scottish Veterans Commissioner]; [Q73](#) [Kate Davies, NHS England]

The majority of organisations who submitted evidence favoured expanding the Covenant Legal Duty to specifically include some or all of these areas.⁴⁵ We consider how the Legal Duty could be expanded in the next chapter of this report (Paragraph 22).

12. The stories that were shared with us represent only a small part of the Armed Forces community. However, statistics collected in the Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey (AFCAS) reinforce the impression that the record of the Covenant is mixed. Respondents to the survey are asked whether they feel advantaged, disadvantaged or neutral compared to the general public in a number of areas. In the 2024 survey, across the three services 31 per cent of respondents said they felt disadvantaged compared to the general public when it came to their family's access to NHS care, an increase from 22 per cent in 2016, when the survey began. When asked the same question about their children's education, 40 per cent said they felt disadvantaged compared with 42 per cent in 2016. For housing, the figure was 27 per cent, compared with 28 per cent in 2016. In all three areas, there has been no improvement in the proportion of respondents who consider themselves to be disadvantaged since the Covenant Legal Duty came into law in 2021. This data shows that serving personnel continue to see themselves as disadvantaged in areas subject to the Covenant Legal Duty, casting doubt on how effective the Duty has been.⁴⁶

13.

CONCLUSION

The evidence we received shows that where the Covenant is working well it is improving outcomes for service personnel, their families and veterans and is removing some of the disadvantages people face as a result of military service. However, this was not the experience of everyone who responded to our inquiry. We heard many examples where the Covenant was not working as designed, resulting in people who have served being financially disadvantaged, unable to access medical care, or unable to find an appropriate school for their children as a result of their service. In cases like these, the Government and society are falling short of their commitment to the Armed Forces community.

45 E.g.: Help for Heroes ([AFC0023](#)); Forces Children Scotland ([AFC0037](#)); David McLoughlin ([AFC0045](#)); RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#)); Royal British Legion ([AFC0047](#)); The Welsh NHS Confederation ([AFC0071](#))

46 [Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey 2024, Annex B - Reference Tables](#), Section 22, accessed 21 March 2025

Inconsistent delivery

14. The great majority of the evidence we received shared the view that the Covenant is inconsistently applied, and that the experiences of the Armed Forces community vary considerably as a result.⁴⁷
15. Witnesses told us that the Covenant Legal Duty was interpreted and applied very differently by different local authorities. Mark Atkinson, representing the Royal British Legion, said:

Some local authorities have taken the Covenant duty and gone top to bottom and thought about how that duty should be applied across the statutory services that they provide, with really clear, visible leadership and accountability for that, whereas other local authorities have said to us, “Actually, in the absence of any particular funding to support the Covenant, we are doing an absolute minimum,” and there is some content on the website but not a lot more.⁴⁸

He added that there was “a real disparity in understanding about the Covenant. When you speak to local authorities, there is a real distribution of views about what the Covenant means and how it should be applied.”⁴⁹ Some contributors to the inquiry argued that this was because the duty of ‘due regard’ was open to very different interpretations.⁵⁰ Others emphasised the role that individual personalities had to play, arguing that the impact of the Covenant often correlated with the enthusiasm and effectiveness of those individuals tasked with implementing it.⁵¹

16. The inconsistent application of the Covenant across the country is particularly challenging for serving personnel and their families because of the mobile nature of service life. We received many submissions from individuals who had faced disadvantage when moving from one area to another. A common issue reported was that each time a family moves to a new area they are placed at the bottom of the queue for medical or dental care; for many this can result in long periods without proper care. The author of one submission explained how this had resulted in some families, including his own, keeping their place on their original practice’s patient list and driving across the country for their check-ups. (See Box 4).

47 E.g. Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities ([AFC0033](#)); Forces in Mind Trust ([AFC0052](#)); Help for Heroes ([AFC0023](#)); Portsmouth City Council ([AFC0049](#)); RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#)); South East Reserve Forces’ and Cadets’ Association (SERFCA) ([AFC0002](#))

48 [Q3](#)

49 [Q16](#)

50 RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#)); [Q56](#) [Col. (Retd) James Phillips, Veterans’ Commissioner for Wales]

51 South East Reserve Forces’ and Cadets’ Association (SERFCA) ([AFC0002](#)); [Q56](#) [Col. (Retd) James Phillips, Veterans’ Commissioner for Wales]

Box 4: Submission from Mr Murray (AFC0053)

Given the transient nature of many service families, access to NHS dentists is practically impossible for most. While it's well understood that many people in the UK are struggling to access NHS dentists, if they remain in one place they can join a waiting list for a practice and eventually become an NHS patient. Service families, on the other hand, often move too frequently to remain on a waiting list for long enough to get an NHS dentist to see them.

In my experience, we managed to eventually get my family onto the patient register at a practice in 2021, but since then I have changed roles/locations twice. While we join the waiting lists in each new location, to ensure my children are seen every 6 months we have maintained our place on the original practice's patient list. Which means we have to drive the entire family across the country every 6 months for their check-ups. I know many service personnel who end up doing this, taking leave from work/absences from school in order to keep their children's dental check-ups. I also know many families who just haven't seen a dentist in many years.

Source: Mr Murray (AFC0053)

Education was another area where service families encountered issues. One anonymous author said the challenge of finding a place in a good school for their children each time they moved had been so great that they had ultimately decided to send their children to a boarding school, against their preference.⁵² Families whose children have additional needs face particular challenges; a member of the Armed Forces wrote to us to say that after a move to a new local authority area it took more than six weeks to find a suitable educational setting for his child.⁵³

17. We heard evidence that the challenges service families faced when moving from one area to another were exacerbated when moving across national borders within the UK, because of the different institutional structures that exist in each of the devolved administrations and the different ways in which the Covenant is implemented in each.⁵⁴ For example, the Welsh NHS Confederation told us that the different systems that exist for maintaining patient records make it very difficult to transfer records between Wales and England, and that this disproportionately affects members of the Armed Forces community who are more likely to move across borders either as

52 Anonymous ([AFC0004](#))

53 Mr P Tolley (Soldier at British Army) ([AFC0040](#))

54 [Q7](#) [Lt Gen. Sir Nick Pope, Cobseo]; [Q54](#) [Vanessa Plumley, RAF Families Federation]; [Q78](#) [Mike Callaghan, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities]

part of service or during their transition into civilian life.⁵⁵ Differences in government policy in different parts of the UK can also create issues: the Families Federations said that the different childcare offers in England and Scotland could result in families facing additional costs if posted to Scotland—in the case of some of the families who contacted them as much as £12,000.⁵⁶ The unequal position of personnel based in Scotland with regard to childcare allowances and higher rates of income tax was raised with us during our recent visit to RAF Lossiemouth.

18. The unique circumstances of Northern Ireland make the implementation of the Covenant more complicated there. The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone, told us that the current political makeup of the Northern Ireland Executive meant there was limited implementation of the Covenant, because “the largest party [Sinn Féin] just refuses to acknowledge and engage with anything around the Armed Forces Covenant.”⁵⁷ Air Vice Marshal David McLoughlin, the Director of Defence Healthcare at MOD, said that implementation of the Covenant was complicated by the legacy of the Troubles and by the Good Friday Agreement.⁵⁸ The Veterans Commissioner said that as a result, support for veterans in Northern Ireland was “very much a bottom-up rather than top-down service.”⁵⁹ He argued that “it would be helpful if the devolved administration was required to implement the Armed Forces Covenant.”⁶⁰
19. We heard that implementation of the Covenant was also inconsistent in the private sector. More than 12,000 businesses have signed the Armed Forces Covenant, but we heard that in many cases businesses did not live up to their commitments or did not seem to be aware of what the Covenant asked of them.⁶¹ Collette Musgrave of the Army Families Federation said that engagement with the private sector was “very patchy indeed” and that the experience of service personnel “depends very largely on the nature of the individual who happens to be at the end of the telephone line at the time.” She said that while many organisations were happy to address cases of disadvantage once they were pointed out, this often required the Families Federations to intervene on behalf of their members to achieve the proper outcome.⁶² The examples we received from serving personnel illustrated this problem: the author of one anonymous submission explained how their mobile phone provider had refused to cancel a contract that was no longer

55 The Welsh NHS Confederation ([AFC0071](#))

56 RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#))

57 [Q60](#)

58 David McLoughlin ([AFC0045](#))

59 [Q59](#)

60 [Q70](#)

61 British Veteran Owned ([AFC0012](#)); Mr Adam Goldie (2IC CJSU at Royal Air Force) ([AFC0007](#))

62 [Q34](#)

required for an overseas deployment, despite the same provider having done exactly that for an earlier deployment.⁶³ Some of the contributions to the inquiry pointed to the lack of accountability mechanisms to make sure business upheld their commitments, particularly those who held a Defence Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award.⁶⁴

20. CONCLUSION

Implementation of the Covenant Legal Duty varies considerably across the UK. In some places the Legal Duty has resulted in the creation of new policies and initiatives that have tangibly improved the lives of the forces community; in others the Duty appears to have changed very little. As a result, people's experiences of the Covenant are very different depending on where they live, which services or organisations they interact with and which individual member of staff in an organisation they speak to. This is frustrating for people in the forces community, and gives them the impression that the Covenant is a hollow commitment. The Government wants to expand the scope of the Covenant, and we understand the reasons for this. However, equal attention must be given to ensuring that the Legal Duty is consistently and appropriately applied and translates into better outcomes for people in the forces community.

21. RECOMMENDATION

Alongside its plans to legislate for an expanded Covenant Legal Duty, the Government should develop a strategy for making sure the Covenant is fully and consistently applied and recognised by signatories and by those subject to the Legal Duty across the UK, including in the Devolved Administrations. Actions as part of this strategy could include establishing clear and demanding standards and mechanisms for accountability, improving guidance to those delivering services, and facilitating knowledge-sharing so that best practice can spread.

63 Anonymous ([AFC0004](#))

64 British Veteran Owned ([AFC0012](#)); [Q69](#) [Lt Cdr Susie Hamilton, Scottish Veterans Commissioner; Col. (Retd) James Phillips, Veterans' Commissioner for Wales]

3 The future of the Covenant

Putting the Covenant ‘fully into law’

22. The Labour Party’s manifesto included a commitment to “strengthen support for our Armed Forces communities by putting the Armed Forces Covenant fully into law.”⁶⁵ The Ministry of Defence’s submission to our inquiry says more about how the Government intends to update legislation on the Covenant, suggesting this will mainly be achieved by extending the Covenant Legal Duty:

A key priority is the extension of the Covenant Legal Duty. MOD officials are currently developing plans to extend the Covenant duty of due regard to UK Government departments and Devolved Governments in a list of broad policy areas. [...] The proposal is to replace the current statutory Duty, limited to Housing, Healthcare and Education, with a similar duty of due regard. The wide span will ensure all areas that can impact on the Armed Forces community will be included. It is our ambition to include these statutory changes in the next Armed Forces Bill.⁶⁶

MOD’s evidence does not say exactly how far the Legal Duty will be extended, but does say that the Minister for Veterans and People instructed officials “to take a maximalist approach when developing policy areas for inclusion.”⁶⁷ The Director of Armed Forces People Policy at the Ministry of Defence said MOD thought there would be “roughly over 10 new policy areas” covered by the extended duty.⁶⁸ The Minister would not confirm which Government departments would be made subject to the duty, but reiterated that MOD was taking a “maximalist” approach.⁶⁹ When asked whether the Treasury specifically would be included, in view of that Department’s importance in ensuring Government addresses areas of financial disadvantage and ensuring the policy is properly funded, the Minister did not commit to doing so but said MOD’s approach was “really broad.”⁷⁰

65 [Labour Party Manifesto](#), 13 June 2024

66 Ministry of Defence ([AFC0068](#))

67 Ministry of Defence ([AFC0068](#))

68 [Q121](#)

69 [Q115](#)

70 [Q115](#)

- 23.** As noted in Chapter 2, the majority of organisations who engaged with our inquiry favoured extending the Covenant Legal Duty to Whitehall departments.⁷¹ Mark Atkinson, representing the Royal British Legion, said this would require departments to think about the impact of new policies on the Armed Forces community, and so prevent the community from being unintentionally disadvantaged by new policies.⁷² Rebecca Lovell of the Navy Families Federation made the point that making the Legal Duty applicable to central government could result in clearer direction from the centre on policies that are designed to support the Armed Forces community.⁷³ Mike Callaghan of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities said it could potentially result in more resources being directed to fulfilling the Covenant Duty.⁷⁴
- 24.** There was also support for extending the Covenant Duty to the devolved administrations.⁷⁵ The Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Lt Cdr Susie Hamilton, said that giving the devolved administrations a Legal Duty might encourage them to allocate more resources towards services for the Armed Forces community.⁷⁶ David Johnstone, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, said that “in an ideal world, there should be a greater onus on the devolved administrations to implement and show that due regard ... particularly in Northern Ireland.”⁷⁷ Col. (Retd) James Phillips, the Veterans’ Commissioner for Wales, said that while in his view central and local government in Wales were implementing the Covenant well, extending the Legal Duty would still provide an incentive for the devolved administrations to ensure their application of the Covenant was comprehensive.⁷⁸
- 25.** Some contributors argued that the Legal Duty ought to be stronger, arguing that the current requirement that organisations pay ‘due regard’ to the principles of the Covenant was vague and weak. Air Vice Marshal David McLoughlin, the Director of Defence Healthcare at MOD, wrote:

71 E.g. Help for Heroes ([AFC0023](#)); Greater Manchester Combined Authority ([AFC0054](#)); East Ayrshire Council ([AFC0048](#)); Forces Children Scotland ([AFC0037](#)); David McLoughlin ([AFC0045](#))

72 [Q11](#)

73 [Q36](#)

74 [Q83](#)

75 [Q5](#) [Mark Atkinson, Royal British Legion]; [Q70](#) [David Johnstone, Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner]; The Welsh NHS Confederation ([AFC0071](#)); Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities ([AFC0033](#))

76 [Q70](#)

77 [Q70](#)

78 [Q70](#)

In practice this is a weak phrase that is open to wide interpretation. At the most flippant end I have been told that ‘due regard’ means they have given the issue a short period of thought and the answer is no to a request from me or a member of my Defence Healthcare team.⁷⁹

The joint submission from the three Families Federations said that the requirement to pay ‘due regard’ was not enforceable.⁸⁰ In oral evidence, both the Families Federations and the Veterans’ Commissioner for Wales said that the ambiguity of the phrase ‘due regard’ made it difficult to test whether the duty was being met, and difficult to challenge those who were not meeting it.⁸¹ When we asked the Minister and his team about this, they said that the Legal Duty was designed to be “deliberately flexible.” This allowed local authorities to consider their duty to the Armed Forces community alongside their duties to other groups, and so avoid potentially prioritising the community’s needs over those of more vulnerable groups.⁸²

- 26.** Although there was broad enthusiasm for extending the Covenant Legal Duty, some of the evidence we received acknowledged the potential complications of doing so. Lt Gen. Sir Nick Pope, representing the confederation of service charities Cobseo, said that while “In principle, expanding it across all aspects of Government is a good thing ... the danger of expansion is that we lose focus. If everything becomes a priority, nothing is a priority.”⁸³ Mark Atkinson, speaking on behalf of the Royal British Legion, agreed that “the risk in broadening it too far is that things will fall between the gaps and we will not get the attention and the prioritisation.”⁸⁴ At the same time, some of our evidence identified the opposite risk: that limiting the scope of the Legal Duty to only some areas would result in those areas receiving attention at the expense of others.⁸⁵ Mr Atkinson concluded that the aim should be to “have a Covenant that is sufficiently broad to meet the kind of interactions that people have with the state.”⁸⁶
- 27.** Some witnesses pointed out that an expanded Covenant Duty could be challenging for some organisations to resource.⁸⁷ The Local Government Association wrote that, even under the current duty, “local authorities face significant budget constraints and workforce challenges, which can

79 David McLoughlin ([AFC0045](#))

80 RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#))

81 [Qq46–49](#) [Collette Musgrave, Army Families Federation; Rebecca Lovell, Naval Families Federation; Vanessa Plumley, RAF Families Federation]; [Q70](#) [Col. (Retd) James Phillips, Veterans’ Commissioner for Wales]

82 [Q133](#) [Minister for Veterans and People; Director of Armed Forces People Policy]

83 [Q14](#)

84 [Q21](#)

85 Forces in Mind Trust ([AFC0052](#)); [Q21](#) [Mark Atkinson, Royal British Legion]

86 [Q21](#)

87 RAND Europe Community Interest Company, Shared Intelligence Limited ([AFC0050](#)); Royal British Legion ([AFC0047](#))

limit their ability to prioritise Covenant-related work.” They argued that the Covenant objectives should be taken into account as part of national and local funding strategies.⁸⁸ Portsmouth City Council took a similar view, and argued that “Any further extension to [the] duty needs to be supported with clear guidance and adequate funding.”⁸⁹ The Royal British Legion quoted a local government participant in one of their workshops who said “if there’s not [the] money to do it, it will not be done.”⁹⁰ When we asked MOD how they would ensure local authorities were appropriately resourced to meet their legal duties, the Head of Armed Forces People Support told us that the department “cannot offer a blank cheque” but he pointed to examples where local authorities had made creative use of resources, for example by pooling resources together.⁹¹ The Minister agreed with the suggestion that new responsibilities ought to be “co-developed” so that they are properly defined and can be supported.⁹²

28. CONCLUSION

We welcome the proposal to extend the Covenant Legal Duty to areas of central government. If this duty is properly implemented, we would expect to see Whitehall departments taking the needs of the forces community into account during policy development, so that the forces community are not unintentionally disadvantaged by new policies.

29. RECOMMENDATION

The Government should extend the application of the Armed Forces Covenant so that all Government departments and the devolved administrations are required to give due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant. As the current duty of ‘due regard’ is inconsistently interpreted, the extended duty must be accompanied by clear guidance so that the duty is clearly understood and is not treated as a tick-box exercise.

88 Local Government Association ([AFC0055](#))

89 Portsmouth City Council ([AFC0049](#))

90 Royal British Legion ([AFC0047](#))

91 [Q152](#)

92 [Q153](#)

30. CONCLUSION

The Government is right to recognise that the existing Covenant Duty does not reach into many areas of life in which the service community faces disadvantage, and to consider expanding the scope of the Covenant Legal Duty. As noted in the previous chapter, extending the Legal Duty will only achieve meaningful results if it is also deliverable. The extension of the Duty must therefore be co-designed with those who will be bound by it and expected to deliver it, and they must be appropriately resourced to enable them to do so. Otherwise there is a risk that existing commitments will be diluted and that those who deliver the Covenant will only be able to provide the bare minimum of support. Such an outcome would let down the forces community.

31. RECOMMENDATION

The Covenant Legal Duty should be expanded to cover the breadth of areas in which members of the Armed Forces community regularly experience disadvantage. The Government should work closely with local authorities and other bodies who might be required to deliver an expanded Covenant Duty to co-design a Duty that meets the needs of the forces community and that can be delivered in the context of severe constraints on their resources.

Measuring success

- 32.** Several submissions discussed the challenges that exist in measuring the impact of the Covenant and holding organisations accountable for its delivery. The Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Lt Cdr Susie Hamilton, summarised the issue:

There is no real mechanism for public bodies to be held accountable for their covenant actions. There is no real reporting or scrutiny. If we want to have consistent services, a mechanism to have accountability that can be scrutinised for all public bodies would be really helpful in bringing in that consistency.⁹³

Some linked the absence of measurement and accountability to the variability in support that the Armed Forces community receives.⁹⁴ As Cllr Lis Burnett, representing the Welsh Local Government Association, put it, “if you do not measure something, it tends not to happen.”⁹⁵

93 [Q63](#)

94 The Welsh NHS Confederation ([AFC0071](#))

95 [Q83](#)

33. Many of the organisations who provided us with written evidence felt that existing data collection and reporting requirements were inadequate.⁹⁶ RAND Europe and Shared Intelligence’s submission said:

there is a lack of robust and consistent data on the impact of the Covenant, the levels of disadvantage faced by the Armed Forces Community, how the risk of disadvantage is changing, and the underpinning drivers of such disadvantage.

RAND and Shared Intelligence’s evidence included the findings of a study they had conducted of local authorities, which concluded that “the vast majority of local authorities [who participated in the study] either did not know or did not measure the impact of the Covenant in their service area.” At the same time, they acknowledged that the Covenant’s impact was not something that could be straightforwardly measured, because the Legal Duty is intentionally not prescriptive and is implemented differently by different bodies, so does not lend itself to standardised evaluation.⁹⁷

34. Some of our evidence said that new data collection and reporting requirements would create new demands on the resources of organisations bound by the Covenant Legal Duty. The Local Government Association said that “Rather than mandating new reporting requirements, central government could streamline existing data collection and monitoring processes to avoid duplication.” They added that “any reporting mechanisms should be aligned with existing systems and focus on outcomes rather than processes.”⁹⁸
35. At the moment, the main document through which the impact of the Armed Forces Covenant is shared with the public and Parliament is the Armed Forces Covenant annual report. Some submissions commented on the merits and the shortcomings of the annual report. Cobseo and the #JoiningForces group both wrote that the report tends to be focused on inputs rather than outcomes: it is often able to point to initiatives that have been launched or actions that have been taken, but is less able to demonstrate the results of these actions and how they have affected the experiences of people in the Armed Forces community.⁹⁹ Lt Gen. Sir Nick Pope, giving evidence on behalf of Cobseo, also highlighted that the annual report tended to concentrate on the actions of the state, and was less able to report on actions taken by the private sector and the third

96 E.g. Forces Children Scotland ([AFC0037](#)); Forces in Mind Trust ([AFC0052](#)); RAF Families Federation, Naval Families Federation, Army Families Federation ([AFC0031](#)); RAND Europe Community Interest Company, Shared Intelligence Limited ([AFC0050](#))

97 RAND Europe Community Interest Company, Shared Intelligence Limited ([AFC0050](#))

98 Local Government Association ([AFC0055](#))

99 Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities ([AFC0033](#))#JoiningForces Group ([AFC0057](#))

sector and so does not capture the full spectrum of work being done to deliver the Covenant.¹⁰⁰ #JoiningForces Group, a group of ‘forces friendly’ organisations, recommended that the annual report “include assessments of the Covenant’s impact on members of the military community, in addition to or instead of measures of activity.”¹⁰¹ When we asked the Minister how the annual report could better demonstrate the Covenant’s performance, he acknowledged that it would be “very difficult to capture that data” because there was currently no structure for bringing together all the data from the various places in which the Covenant is delivered. He said the Government “have to improve our data capture” and that “we have a couple of plans moving forward on it.”¹⁰²

36. CONCLUSION

The evidence available to help us understand how well the Covenant is working is currently very fragmented. This makes recognising success, learning lessons and holding organisations to account difficult. The Minister told us there were ‘plans afoot’¹⁰³ to create structures that can improve Government’s understanding of how well the Covenant is working.

37. RECOMMENDATION

The Government should provide the Committee with an update, in its response to this Report and when it gives evidence to the Committee on the Covenant Annual Report in the future, on the work it is doing to improve data collection and sharing of how the Covenant is being delivered.

38. RECOMMENDATION

To enable proper scrutiny of cross-government efforts to implement the Covenant, Whitehall departments should provide an annual update on actions they have taken to uphold the Covenant as part of the Covenant Annual Report, along with outcomes. Departments should—when requested to do so by the Committee—make themselves available to give evidence as supporting witnesses alongside MOD as part of the Committee’s scrutiny of the Covenant Annual Report.

100 [Q2](#)

101 [#JoiningForces Group \(AFC0057\)](#)

102 [Q134](#)

103 [Q145](#)

4 Conclusion

39. CONCLUSION

The Armed Forces Covenant is a solemn commitment by our whole society to recognise the courage and dedication of our Armed Forces. While progress has been made since the Covenant was introduced, it is still not consistently implemented and as a result our society is falling short of that commitment far too often. The upcoming Armed Forces Bill is an opportunity to renew and reinforce the nation's promise to those who serve, but this is only part of the change that needs to occur. Understanding of the Covenant needs to be deeply embedded in our institutions and in wider society so that those who have served can be in no doubt that the Covenant is there to support them. The Covenant gives us all a duty to our service men and women; we must take it as seriously as they have taken their duty to us.

EMBARGOED ADVANCE NOTICE: Not to be published in full, or in part, in any form before 00.01 am on Tuesday 8 April 2015.

Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

1. The timetable presented to us by the Secretary of State for producing a report meant there were fewer opportunities to take oral evidence on this subject than we would have preferred. (Conclusion, Paragraph 5)
2. Assuming precedent is followed, a Select Committee will be appointed to consider the Armed Forces Bill, with the opportunity to hear oral evidence before considering the Bill line by line. We recommend that the Government allow time for that Committee to hear from a broad range of organisations with an interest in the Armed Forces Covenant, as well as on other issues that may be within the scope of the Bill. (Recommendation, Paragraph 6)

The Covenant today

3. The evidence we received shows that where the Covenant is working well it is improving outcomes for service personnel, their families and veterans and is removing some of the disadvantages people face as a result of military service. However, this was not the experience of everyone who responded to our inquiry. We heard many examples where the Covenant was not working as designed, resulting in people who have served being financially disadvantaged, unable to access medical care, or unable to find an appropriate school for their children as a result of their service. In cases like these, the Government and society are falling short of their commitment to the Armed Forces community. (Conclusion, Paragraph 13)
4. Implementation of the Covenant Legal Duty varies considerably across the UK. In some places the Legal Duty has resulted in the creation of new policies and initiatives that have tangibly improved the lives of the forces community; in others the Duty appears to have changed very little. As a result, people's experiences of the Covenant are very different depending on where they live, which services or organisations they interact with and which individual member of staff in an organisation they speak to. This is frustrating for people in the forces community, and gives them the impression that the Covenant is a hollow commitment. The Government wants to expand the scope of the Covenant, and we understand the reasons

for this. However, equal attention must be given to ensuring that the Legal Duty is consistently and appropriately applied and translates into better outcomes for people in the forces community. (Conclusion, Paragraph 20)

5. Alongside its plans to legislate for an expanded Covenant Legal Duty, the Government should develop a strategy for making sure the Covenant is fully and consistently applied and recognised by signatories and by those subject to the Legal Duty across the UK, including in the Devolved Administrations. Actions as part of this strategy could include establishing clear and demanding standards and mechanisms for accountability, improving guidance to those delivering services, and facilitating knowledge-sharing so that best practice can spread. (Recommendation, Paragraph 21)

The future of the Covenant

6. We welcome the proposal to extend the Covenant Legal Duty to areas of central government. If this duty is properly implemented, we would expect to see Whitehall departments taking the needs of the forces community into account during policy development, so that the forces community are not unintentionally disadvantaged by new policies. (Conclusion, Paragraph 28)
7. The Government should extend the application of the Armed Forces Covenant so that all Government departments and the devolved administrations are required to give due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant. As the current duty of 'due regard' is inconsistently interpreted, the extended duty must be accompanied by clear guidance so that the duty is clearly understood and is not treated as a tick-box exercise. (Recommendation, Paragraph 29)
8. The Government is right to recognise that the existing Covenant Duty does not reach into many areas of life in which the service community faces disadvantage, and to consider expanding the scope of the Covenant Legal Duty. As noted in the previous chapter, extending the Legal Duty will only achieve meaningful results if it is also deliverable. The extension of the Duty must therefore be co-designed with those who will be bound by it and expected to deliver it, and they must be appropriately resourced to enable them to do so. Otherwise there is a risk that existing commitments will be diluted and that those who deliver the Covenant will only be able to provide the bare minimum of support. Such an outcome would let down the forces community. (Conclusion, Paragraph 30)
9. The Covenant Legal Duty should be expanded to cover the breadth of areas in which members of the Armed Forces community regularly experience disadvantage. The Government should work closely with local authorities and other bodies who might be required to deliver an expanded Covenant

Duty to co-design a Duty that meets the needs of the forces community and that can be delivered in the context of severe constraints on their resources. (Recommendation, Paragraph 31)

10. The evidence available to help us understand how well the Covenant is working is currently very fragmented. This makes recognising success, learning lessons and holding organisations to account difficult. The Minister told us there were ‘plans afoot’ to create structures that can improve Government’s understanding of how well the Covenant is working. (Conclusion, Paragraph 36)
11. The Government should provide the Committee with an update, in its response to this Report and when it gives evidence to the Committee on the Covenant Annual Report in the future, on the work it is doing to improve data collection and sharing of how the Covenant is being delivered. (Recommendation, Paragraph 37)
12. To enable proper scrutiny of cross-government efforts to implement the Covenant, Whitehall departments should provide an annual update on actions they have taken to uphold the Covenant as part of the Covenant Annual Report, along with outcomes. Departments should—when requested to do so by the Committee—make themselves available to give evidence as supporting witnesses alongside MOD as part of the Committee’s scrutiny of the Covenant Annual Report. (Recommendation, Paragraph 38)

Conclusion

13. The Armed Forces Covenant is a solemn commitment by our whole society to recognise the courage and dedication of our Armed Forces. While progress has been made since the Covenant was introduced, it is still not consistently implemented and as a result our society is falling short of that commitment far too often. The upcoming Armed Forces Bill is an opportunity to renew and reinforce the nation’s promise to those who serve, but this is only part of the change that needs to occur. Understanding of the Covenant needs to be deeply embedded in our institutions and in wider society so that those who have served can be in no doubt that the Covenant is there to support them. The Covenant gives us all a duty to our service men and women; we must take it as seriously as they have taken their duty to us. (Conclusion, Paragraph 39)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 1 April 2025

Members present

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, in the Chair

Calvin Bailey

Alex Baker

Lincoln Jopp

Emma Lewell-Buck

Mike Martin

Jesse Norman

Ian Roome

Michelle Scrogam

Fred Thomas

The Armed Forces Covenant

Draft Report (*The Armed Forces Covenant*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 39 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That The Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134)

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 29 April 2025 at 10.00am.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 4 February 2025

Mark Atkinson, Director General, The Royal British Legion; **Lieutenant General Sir Nick Pope KCB CBE**, Chair, Cobseo [Q1-22](#)

Rebecca Lovell, Head of Policy, Naval Families Federation; **Collette Musgrave**, Chief Executive, Army Families Federation; **Vanessa Plumley**, Acting Director, RAF Families Federation [Q23-55](#)

Tuesday 25 February 2025

Lt Cdr (Retd) Susie Hamilton, Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Office of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner; **David Johnstone**, Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, Office of the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner; **Col. James Phillips**, Veterans Commissioner for Wales, Office of the Veterans Commissioner for Wales [Q56-71](#)

Mike Callaghan, Policy Manager, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA); **Councillor Lis Burnett**, Presiding Member, Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA); **Kate Davies**, Director of Health and Justice, Armed Forces and Sexual Assault Services Commissioning, NHS England; **Cllr Gillian Ford**, Deputy Chair of the Wellbeing Board, Local Government Association (LGA) [Q72-83](#)

Tuesday 11 March 2025

Alistair Carns DSO OBE MC MP, Minister for Veterans and People, Ministry of Defence; **Sarah Houghton**, Director of Armed Forces People Policy, Ministry of Defence; **James Greenrod**, Head of Armed Forces People Support, Ministry of Defence; **Vice Admiral Phillip Hally CB MBE**, Chief of Defence People, Ministry of Defence [Q84-155](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

AFC numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1	#JoiningForces Group	AFC0057
2	Adam, Sgt David, MBE,	AFC0064
3	Amey	AFC0059
4	Anonymised	AFC0025
5	Anonymised	AFC0018
6	Anonymised	AFC0006
7	Anonymised	AFC0005
8	Anonymised	AFC0019
9	Anonymised	AFC0063
10	Anonymised	AFC0046
11	Anonymised	AFC0041
12	Anonymised	AFC0032
13	Anonymised	AFC0026
14	Anonymised	AFC0004
15	Atherton, Mrs Samantha	AFC0038
16	Barrett, Sgt David Edward,	AFC0036
17	Bolt Burdon Kemp LLP	AFC0039
18	British Veteran Owned	AFC0012
19	Cartwright, Lieutenant Colonel James	AFC0067
20	Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities	AFC0033
21	Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)	AFC0070
22	Crawford, Chris	AFC0027
23	Department of Health and Social Care	AFC0079
24	Department for Work and Pensions	AFC0076

25	East Ayrshire Council	AFC0048
26	Forces Children Scotland	AFC0037
27	Forces in Mind Trust	AFC0052
28	Goldie, Mr Adam	AFC0007
29	Greater Manchester Combined Authority	AFC0054
30	Help for Heroes	AFC0023
31	HM Revenue and Customs	AFC0077
32	Home Office	AFC0078
33	Hughes, Mr Graham	AFC0008
34	King's Centre for Military Health Research	AFC0062
35	Local Government Association	AFC0055
36	McLoughlin, David	AFC0045
37	Marriott, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew (retd), MBE PhDt	AFC0024
38	Ministry of Defence	AFC0068
39	Moffat, Dr Michelle	AFC0065
40	Moore, Mr Richard	AFC0021
41	Murray, Mr	AFC0053
42	NHS Employers	AFC0058
43	NHS England	AFC0072
44	Office of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner	AFC0020
45	Office of the Veterans Commissioner for Wales	AFC0073
46	Priest, JP	AFC0011
47	Pollard, Mr Jack	AFC0069
48	Portsmouth City Council	AFC0049
49	RAF Families Federation; Naval Families Federation; and Army Families Federation	AFC0031
50	RAND Europe Community Interest Company; and Shared Intelligence Limited	AFC0050
51	Rimmington, Mr David	AFC0060
52	Rooftop Housing Association	AFC0044
53	Royal British Legion	AFC0047
54	Royal Star & Garter	AFC0022
55	Scottish Government	AFC0081

56	Secretary of State for Northern Ireland	AFC0075
57	Secretary of State for Scotland	AFC0082
58	Secretary of State for Wales	AFC0080
59	Solomon, Dr Solon	AFC0042
60	South East Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association (SERFCA)	AFC0002
61	Spice, Mr Jamie	AFC0030
62	Stafford, Wg Cdr Simon	AFC0035
63	Stark, Mr Ian	AFC0056
64	Stonehill-Hammond, Craig	AFC0016
65	Surrey County Council; and Kent County Council	AFC0010
66	The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust	AFC0043
67	The UK Council of VAPC Chairs; and The Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committees	AFC0034
68	The Ulster Unionist Party	AFC0066
69	The Welsh Government	AFC0074
70	The Welsh NHS Confederation	AFC0071
71	Thompson, Major Robert	AFC0009
72	Thomson, Mr Grant	AFC0003
73	Tolley, Mr P	AFC0040
74	Tom Harrison House	AFC0017
75	Welsh Local Government Association	AFC0029

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2024–25

Number	Title	Reference
3rd	The Global Combat Air Programme	HC 598
2nd	Developing AI capacity and expertise in UK defence	HC 590
1st	Service Accommodation	HC 406
3rd Special	Developing AI capacity and expertise in UK Defence: Government Response	HC 812
2nd Special	The Global Combat Air Programme: Government Response	HC 799
1st Special	Service Accommodation: Government Response	HC 751