

Armed Forces Covenant

House of Commons debate

6 February 2019



Key Messages

- Armed Forces serving personnel, veterans and their families are valued members of our communities. All councils have signed the voluntary Armed Forces Covenant and are committed to honouring their obligations to those who have served their country.
- Councils work with partner organisations to provide a range of services that support serving personnel and their families. They also help veterans and their families adjust from the Armed Forces to civilian life.
- Good progress has been made embedding the principles of the Covenant across local services, especially in housing, education, employment support and health.
- The vast majority of councils have appointed an Armed Forces Champion who helps to embed the Covenant across local services. While the Champion role is working well, we also need to ensure sufficient resources to enable councils to meet their Covenant obligations.
- The LGA has found that a recurring challenge for councils is identifying veterans. More information about the number of veterans in our communities would help councils better plan their local services to make sure we have the right services in place. We look forward to this issue being addressed through the Government's veterans strategy.
- We welcome the additional £10 million funding for the mental health of veterans announced in the Chancellor's Budget last year. This will help to ensure that veterans in need of mental health support can access timely, effective and integrated services. The funding should be available to veterans and managed through councils who want to work with armed forces charities, health and other local partners to further strengthen mental health support for veterans and ensure it links to wider mental health activity.
- Despite the new money, councils still face an overall funding gap of almost £8 billion by 2025 just to maintain services at current levels. It is becoming increasingly challenging to maintain the current level of support for the Armed Forces Community.
- This year's Spending Review is an opportunity to tackle the urgent funding gap facing local government. It is important the Government continues with its Ministry of Defence (MoD) Covenant funding for councils.
- It is a great concern that the (MoD) Covenant funding for councils starts to end from March 2019 as this will impact upon future capacity to deliver specific projects that further the Covenant locally. We want to support councils to share the learning from Covenant funded projects and embed Covenant activity across councils and partners.

Briefing

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Background

The Armed Forces Covenant

All councils in England have signed the voluntary Armed Forces Covenant and are committed to honouring their obligations to those who have served their country. Councils are helping serving and ex-service personnel and their families to have the same equality of access to public services as their civilian neighbours in areas such as housing, health, employment, education, welfare and transport. For example, service families are typically mobile, living in different locations across the country or abroad. This means they often have short periods in a new location. There are significant pressures on school places, and those councils with high numbers of Armed Forces families are working with Armed Forces charities, schools, academy trusts and other partners to help ensure children and young people are not disadvantaged because of their family's service and that schools understand the potential impact of prolonged parental absence, injury or death.

Councils are often the first port of call for veterans who have left active service and their families. It is important to note that veterans' needs are often interlinked and cannot be addressed in isolation. This is particularly the case for more complex cases where veterans may face a number of related housing, health and financial challenges. Councils play a key role ensuring that peoples' needs are identified in the round and that personalised support is put in place working with public and voluntary and community sector partners. This includes signposting to other sources of support, such as the Veterans' Gateway.

We also need to recognise and respond to the diverse veteran population, which has different needs that change over time. For example, we know there is a high number of older veterans who have particular needs around social care, mobility, loneliness and social isolation. The number of working age veterans is also increasing. We also need to ensure support is in place for early service leavers (especially if subject to a disciplinary discharge) because they will receive little support to resettle and will be amongst the most vulnerable of service leavers as they may leave with little notice.

A recurring challenge is identifying veterans. More information about the number of veterans in our communities would help councils better plan their local services to make sure we have the right services in place. We are aware of several projects underway that should improve the availability of local information about the veteran population, and how it is projected to change in the future. We are keen to support this so that councils have the most accurate and recent information at their disposal. We called for the Veterans Strategy to commit MoD to working with councils across the full spectrum of service leavers to help smooth transitions for individual and families.

Armed Forces veterans and their families will often face a range of challenges around housing, health and wellbeing, school provision and employment and skills support. Armed Forces veterans may also experience a period of crisis that requires intensive support from a number of public agencies as well as the voluntary and community sector. Local authorities have a key role to play in the provision or commissioning of a range of these services.

Housing pressures are often already acute in areas with a significant Armed Forces presence and in which members of the Armed Forces Community wish to stay when they leave service. An important role for council housing teams is to provide advice and support to households leaving the Armed Forces. Their ability to do so effectively depends on them receiving as much notice as possible of people leaving service and of their housing needs and aspirations. The task is particularly challenging in circumstances where a family or household is seeking to settle in another part of the country or where the housing need is a result of a divorce or separation.

The number of households approaching councils as homeless has been increasing as housing costs rise above incomes. Councils are currently providing temporary housing to over 200,000 homeless people, over half of whom are children.¹ Last year there were 4,751 rough sleepers living on our streets – more than double the number recorded in 2010. In addition, rough sleeping has doubled since 2010. There are varying estimates of the number of veterans sleeping rough in the UK, with press reports varying from around 7,000 to around 13,000.⁷⁴ In addition, these reports often refer to mental health problems which affect these veterans, suggesting that these conditions often appear a long time after the individual has left the service.²

Councils also have a role as employers and work with the Armed Forces and businesses to help equip veterans and their spouses with vital skills to help transition into other employment. Councils are keen to strengthen local relationships with Career Transition Partnerships areas with high veteran populations, not just in high service areas. In particular, where recruitment is focused because it is likely veterans will return to those places.

In England, Scotland and Wales, 10 councils were recently awarded 'gold' for the support they provide as employers to the Armed Forces Community, bringing the total to 20 councils.³ In 2016, Surrey County Council was awarded 'gold' for their commitment to the Armed Forces in not only recruiting ex-military personnel and reservists but also for the support they offer for their current employees. We are keen to work with the MoD to encourage even more councils to join the scheme.

We are, however, concerned that MoD Covenant funding for councils starts to end from March 2019. This will impact upon future capacity. 23 individual and partnerships of councils secured £3.5 million of MoD funding to recruit Covenant Officers and fund specific projects. We would welcome working with MoD to share the learning from these projects as widely as possible (especially with councils who did not secure funding) and support councils to embed Covenant activity across the council and partners.

LGA work in improving local delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant

In 2016, LGA worked with Forces in Mind Trust to publish the second edition of the 'Our Community – Our Covenant' [report](#).⁴ This included commissioning Shared Intelligence to carry out research into ways of improving the local delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant.

Key overall findings from 'Our Community Our Covenant', include:

- The vast majority of councils have appointed an Armed Forces Champion, usually a councillor.
- Good progress has been made embedding the Covenant principles across local services, especially housing, education, employment support and health.
- Engagement with the Covenant varies according to the size of the Armed Forces Community in a particular place (a key issue is identifying veterans).
- There is sometimes a mismatch between expectations of the Armed Forces Community and what councils are able to do, particularly in relation to housing.
- Going forward, there is a need to ensure that Covenant action plans and web pages are kept active and relevant.

The report also focuses on the views of specific members of the Armed Forces Community. The Armed Forces Community survey received a total of 349 responses from the following:

- 32.9 per cent were working age Veterans;
- 18.4 per cent were family members of serving personnel;
- 13.2 per cent were serving personnel;
- 9.7 per cent were reservists; and
- 8.1 per cent were non-working age Veterans.

Awareness of the national Armed Forces Covenant was high, with 81 per cent of respondents saying they were aware of it, and 19 per cent saying they were not. Levels of awareness were similar across all groups surveyed, regardless of whether they were family, veterans, serving personnel or reservists.

Levels of awareness that their local council had signed the Covenant were lower with 45 per cent of respondents saying they were not aware. This was an important finding and suggests the Armed Forces Community, including veterans, might not be aware of how their council can potentially help them. The finding prompted us to encourage councils to raise awareness about their role supporting the local delivery of the Covenant.

The report also includes a practical self-assessment tool to help councils understand their progress with implementing local Covenant pledges and a 'core infrastructure' framework to assist councils who want to strengthen support for the Armed Forces Community. We encouraged all councils to sign-up to the 'core infrastructure'. Many councils have gone further than this and have embedded supporting the Covenant across local services.

One theme from the work was the impact of the nature and scale of the Armed Forces Community presence in an area on a council's understanding of the Armed Forces, and the opportunities and challenges that arise from that presence. The relationships between local councils, their partners and the Armed Forces Community work best in places where there is a significant Armed Forces Community / presence of veterans.

There is often a proactive approach to meeting the needs of veterans in challenging circumstances. Action is aided by the fact that there is often a significant presence of veterans on the council and among its staff. In places with a very limited Armed Forces Community the report found that there is sometimes further work to be done to move away from a reactive approach to supporting veterans, and that is something we are supporting councils to do.

How councils respond to the Covenant will necessarily vary depending upon local circumstances and the population profile. We are working to increase the already high level of awareness in local government of the Armed Forces Covenant. Our new national Covenant Officer network helps to find and share good practice in order to help councils who want to improve how they support the Armed Forces Community, including veterans. Armed Forces champions - usually councillors - play a particularly important role, helping to embed the Covenant across local services, galvanising partners and providing challenge.

¹ LGA, Housing, planning and homelessness: Moving the conversation on, 2018, <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Housing%20-%20Moving%20the%20conversation%20on.pdf>

² House of Lords, Veterans Strategy: Background to Government Policy Debate 15 November 2018 <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2018-0118/LLN-2018-0118.pdf>

³ Ministry of Defence, 50 employers awarded gold for supporting the armed forces, 2 August 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/50-employers-awarded-gold-for-supporting-the-armed-forces>

⁴ LGA, Our Community – Our Covenant: improving the delivery of local Covenant pledges, 30 Aug 2016, <http://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Our-Community-Our-Covenant-Report-30.08.16.pdf>