

Our Community – Our Covenant

Improving the delivery of local Covenant pledges



Shared Intelligence



FOREWORD



Air Vice-Marshal Tony Stables CBE,
Chairman, Forces in Mind Trust

The Armed Forces Covenant is a much misunderstood concept, which owes its history at least to the Peloponnesian wars of the fifth century BC. In the United Kingdom, it is only in recent times that it has taken the form of a written document, and it is just a few years since it entered statute.

The Covenant describes the transaction whereby the nation provides its support to the Armed Forces, and those who have served previously, together with their families, in return for which it expects to be defended, at the cost of personal liberty and even life. Whilst within the serving community much can be, and is being done working with the Ministry of Defence and councils, supporting those in need in the ex-serving community is a far harder task.

First and foremost, ex-Service personnel and their families are primarily citizens of the state, and should expect to be supported in the same way as the rest of the population. Only where they have been disadvantaged by their service should they, and their needs, be highlighted. But in many cases, such as housing, education, employment and health, the means whereby this extra support is delivered will to a large extent also be the same – fair treatment, but not generally a different type of treatment.

The exception to this is, of course, the military charities sector, funded as it is by a mixture of statutory provision and the extraordinary and sustained generosity of the British public. Even here though, most charities can be selective in what they undertake, limited as much by resources as by any concerns about 'charitable objects'. It's also fair to reflect that the state of public finances is such that the resources available to local authorities across the United Kingdom are also severely constrained, and stark choices are having to be made on a daily basis.

Hardly surprising then that by attempting to codify the Covenant, the United Kingdom's Government, which has limited authority in certain aspects of support provided by individual countries, soon to include regions, has set broad principles rather than specifics with the associated resources being centrally allocated.

Equally foreseeable, and as this report clearly shows, is that the expectation of the Armed Forces Community has in some cases grown to exceed the modest 'fairness' the Covenant calls for.

At the front line of delivering the Covenant are local authorities through the medium of local pledges, without perfect clarity and additional centrally derived resources. The role of Forces in Mind Trust has been to fund an independent and credible examination of how these pledges can be better delivered. Improved delivery would help in the successful and sustainable transition of ex-Service personnel and their families, the Trust's mission.

But improved delivery requires honesty: from Government in what the Covenant does not seek to do as much as in what it does; from local authorities to recognize where they could, and should take further steps to help the Armed Forces Community; and from individuals leaving the Services, who in accepting individual responsibility must ask whether they have done everything in their power to make that successful transition.

The Armed Forces Covenant is an imperfect vehicle operating in an ambiguous environment. This report 'Our Community, Our Covenant', will not on its own fix either. If diligently read, if sensibly and vigorously led, the report will make a substantial contribution to improving the delivery of local Covenant pledges.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T Stables'.

Air Vice-Marshal Tony Stables CBE
Chairman, Forces in Mind Trust

FOREWORD



Councillor Izzi Seccombe,
Chair of the Local Government
Association Community
Wellbeing Board

Our Armed Forces Community, including those who are serving, their spouses, children and families, our community who have served, and our reservists, are all important members of our whole community.

This report shows the tremendous work that councils have been doing before the Armed Forces covenant and as a result of the Armed Forces covenant; in housing, education, liaison, and so forth. There are areas to work on, and as the LGA Chair of the Community Wellbeing Board, with the lead on health and social care, I'll be taking a particular interest in how we can support councils looking to incorporate the needs of serving families and Veterans in their health and care policies. For councils to do this well, and for such an important and high profile national issue, having access to information with regards to families with needs, those transitioning out of the Armed Forces who may need our support, and our Veteran populations is essential.

I'm particularly thankful to Forces in Mind Trust for their leadership and investment of resources and time in this report, and we look forward to working closely with them and other third sector and charitable organisations, alongside national government, to jointly give our Armed Forces Community the opportunities and support they need to be active members of our local communities.

I would also like to thank the council officers and member champions who contributed to the survey and deep dives, which meant that we could start identifying good practice and start sharing it, and to Shared Intelligence for doing the hard work. I hope this report provides a practical resource for every council and that it is the platform for further work at a national and local level for creating a better mutual understanding of the practicalities and opportunities of the Armed Forces covenant.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Izzi Seccombe', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Cllr Izzi Seccombe
Chair of the LGA Community Wellbeing Board
Leader of Warwickshire County Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Forces in Mind Trust and the Local Government Association commissioned Shared Intelligence to carry out research into ways of improving the local delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant. The research, which was supported by the Ministry of Defence, was commissioned in the context of concerns nationally that implementation of the Covenant locally was inconsistent.

Our main sources of evidence were:

- A literature review;
- Surveys of council Chief Executives, council Armed Forces Covenant Champions, stakeholders and members of the Armed Forces Community;
- “Deep dive” research visits to: Cornwall, Glasgow, Gloucestershire, Moray, Oxfordshire, Plymouth, Surrey, Westminster, West Yorkshire, Wigan, Wiltshire and Wrexham.

We also had the benefit of interviews with a number of key stakeholders, a discussion with an advisory group and a sense-making event with members of the advisory group and other people with an interest in the delivery of the Covenant.

The Covenant: awareness and expectations

The Armed Forces Covenant was introduced in 2011. It is a “promise by the nation ensuring that those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, are treated fairly”. The Covenant focusses on helping members of the Armed Forces Community “have the same access to government and commercial services and products as any other citizen”.

The Covenant also states that:

- “The Armed Forces Community *should not face disadvantage compared to other citizens* in the provision of services; and that

- “*Special consideration* is appropriate in some cases especially for those who have given the most.”

Our survey of Council Chief Executives shows that councils consider that they have a good understanding of the Covenant, with 48 per cent reporting that they have a good understanding and 39 per cent a moderate understanding. According to our survey of the Armed Forces Community, awareness is also high

among members of that Community, with 81 per cent of respondents saying that they were aware of the Covenant.

Through our deep dives and stakeholder interviews we have found significant evidence of mixed expectations about what the Covenant means. Some members of the Armed Forces Community think that it gives them a right to a service, as opposed to not being disadvantaged compared with others in the delivery

Table 1

Core infrastructure to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant	
Individuals	Collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An elected member Champion • An officer point of contact within the council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An outward-facing forum • A mechanism for collaboration with partners
Communication	Vision and commitment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A web page with key information and links • A clear public statement of expectations • A route through which concerns can be raised • Training of frontline staff • The production of an annual report highlighting the key actions taken that year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An action plan that leads to action and is monitored and reviewed • Policy reviews • Enthusiasm and commitment

of that service. This is a particularly significant issue in relation to housing, with some people leaving the Armed Forces believing that the Covenant gives them the right to social housing.

Our survey of members of the Armed Forces Community also revealed that over 38 per cent of respondents felt that they had been disadvantaged as a result of their service at least once. Almost a quarter felt that their council did not understand their needs. These findings demonstrate the importance of the Covenant.

Councils and the Covenant

Drawing on the findings of our research we have developed a description of a core infrastructure reflecting the action taken by councils that have successfully implemented the Covenant. It is summarised in table 1.

We tested our first draft of this core infrastructure through our surveys and deep dives. The vast majority of councils report that they have a champion, an officer point of contact and a forum in place. Around half of councils report that they have an action plan, but only 20 per cent say that the plan is active. Similarly, only a quarter of councils report that they have an active webpage. Our survey of stakeholders paints a similar picture of the extent to which our core infrastructure is in place. Councils with no significant Armed Forces presence in their area are less likely to have the core infrastructure in place.

Our survey of council Chief Executives showed that councils are most likely to ensure that expectations flowing from the Covenant are reflected in the relevant policies rather than through the provision of targeted support or special entitlements. Over 90 per cent of councils with responsibility for housing report that they have reflected the Covenant in their policies and 70 per

cent report that they offer targeted support and special entitlements. Adult social care has emerged as the area in which the Covenant is least likely to be reflected in policies and strategies.

We have developed a typology of places reflecting the extent and type of the presence of the Armed Forces Community in different areas. It is summarised in table 2.

In our deep dives we have found that the relationships between local councils, their partners and the Armed Forces Community work best in places that match our categories 1 and 4. In these places good relationships are “how things are done round here”. This is often the case in our second category, but some of these places find it challenging to establish a shared understanding of the most appropriate arrangements – for example the frequency of forum meetings. Delivering the Covenant is most challenging in our third and fifth categories: in these places an understanding of the Armed Forces is often not “in the blood stream.”

The impact of the Covenant

In the vast majority of places where we carried out deep dives, action to meet the needs of members of the Armed Forces Community was already in place before the Covenant was introduced. The Covenant has, however, encouraged a more collaborative and comprehensive approach. In most places the driving force for achieving the outcomes envisaged has been one or two individuals who have used the Covenant to reinforce the case for action. These people are often either former members of the Armed Forces or have close links to a member of that community.

Our survey of council Chief Executives asked what steps could be taken at a national level to improve the delivery of the Covenant. The most popular steps were: the publication of a checklist of issues to be addressed (68.7 per cent); a clearer statement of the expectations associated with the Covenant (67.3 per cent) and advice on how to meet those expectations (66.8 per cent).

Table 2

1. Major Armed Forces Community presence	2. Significant Armed Forces Community presence	3. Modest Armed Forces Community presence	4. Significant known presence of Veterans	5. Minimal known Armed Forces Community presence
The Armed Forces Community is a very important presence in the area. Many of these places have a major serving and Veteran community. For example, Wiltshire, Moray and Plymouth.	The Armed Forces Community is a significant presence in the area. Many of these places have a significant serving and Veteran community. For example, Cornwall, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.	There is a smaller but nonetheless important Armed Forces Community presence. For example, Surrey.	Often important areas from which members of the Armed Forces are recruited and to which many resettle. There is no serving presence in these places. For example, Wigan and Glasgow.	Places where the only presence comprises Reservists and a Veteran population of unknown size.

We have identified a number of steps that could be taken by the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces to enable more effective delivery of the Covenant. They are:

- Improving the processes for preparing members of the Armed Forces and their families for transition and resettlement;
- Improving the data available to councils, particularly in areas to which significant numbers of former serving people and their families move or return after leaving the Armed Forces;
- Addressing the variability in the priority that Base Commanders give to relations with civil society and the delivery of the Covenant in particular.

Recommendations

Our report includes a number of recommendations aimed at Government, the Ministry of Defence, the LGA, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and councils and their partners.

The LGA, COSLA and Government

We recommend that:

- The LGA, COSLA and Government agree a statement on the legitimate expectations flowing from the Covenant, including what it can and cannot deliver, which should form the core text of national and local statements on the Covenant.
- The core wording on the Covenant is strengthened by including the following question as a way of testing whether or not a person or family is suffering from comparative disadvantage as a result of their mobility and deployment through service in the Armed Forces:

“Had the person/family been a long-term resident of the area would the decision have been different?”

Councils and their partners

We recommend that:

- A core infrastructure is adopted by councils seeking to successfully implement the Covenant at a local level.
- To be effective a Covenant co-ordinating group:
 - Meets at least twice a year;
 - Regularly reviews how it works, including frequency of meetings and any sub-groups;
 - Evolves in term of its membership to reflect energy and interest.
- Councils identify people on their staff and council who have a personal link with the Armed Forces and use their understanding and commitment to help galvanise the delivery of the Covenant.

The LGA, COSLA and the MoD

We recommend that:

- The LGA and COSLA explore the factors underlying our finding that councils are less likely to have adjusted their policies and strategies on adult social care to reflect the Covenant than other service areas.
- The LGA and COSLA work with the MoD, the Forces in Mind Trust and other key partners to put in place an action research framework to enable councils which are seeking to improve their delivery of the Covenant to work collectively to develop and implement ways of doing so.

- The MoD and the Armed Forces explore ways of improving the transition process by:
 - Putting more effort into identifying people who are at risk of facing challenging circumstances and to whom additional support could be offered;
 - Ensuring people leaving the Armed Forces are well briefed on the realities of civilian life and that spouses are at least as well-briefed as their serving partner;
 - Involving more outside organisations in the transition process.
- The LGA, COSLA and MoD explore ways in which communications could be improved between significant Armed Forces bases and councils in whose areas people leaving the Armed Forces seek to live in order to facilitate effective briefing and preparation for resettlement.
- Whilst there is an imperative on councils to build good relations with new senior officers, the MoD ensures that Base Commanders and their equivalents are briefed on the importance of their role in relation to the Covenant.
- The opportunities and implications of devolution are reviewed in any further research on the delivery of the Covenant.

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