



The Armed Forces Covenant

Reflections on a decade of
the nation's promise

rbl.org.uk





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About the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland

The Royal British Legion (RBL)

The Royal British Legion is at the heart of a national network that supports our Armed Forces community through thick and thin – ensuring their unique contribution is never forgotten. The Armed Forces community consists of serving personnel, Reservists, Veterans, and their respective family members and dependants.

As the country's largest Armed Forces charity, we couldn't be prouder of our national network of over 175,000 members and over 50,000 volunteers. Without their passion and dedication, our work would not be possible. We also work with many partners and other charities to direct support wherever and whenever it is needed, so we can help everyone who approaches us.

We support serving and ex-serving personnel of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, British Army, Royal Air Force, Reservists and their families. Our support starts after one day of service and continues long after life in the Armed Forces. We help veterans young and old transition into civilian life, helping with physical and mental wellbeing, financial and employment support, care and independent living, local community connections and expert guidance.

We give the Armed Forces community a voice by championing their interests and campaigning on key issues. We often call on members of the public to add their voice to help us make a real impact. And as part of a national network we work with other charities and organisations to amplify our voice.

For more information contact us at www.rbl.org.uk



Poppyscotland

Poppyscotland provides life-changing support to the Armed Forces community. Money raised from the Scottish Poppy Appeal and Poppyscotland's year-round fundraising enables us to deliver support to members of the Armed Forces community in Scotland by providing a wide array of welfare services in the areas of:

- Tailored support and funding
- Advice
- Employment
- Housing
- Mental Health
- Mobility

Poppyscotland is best known for running the annual Scottish Poppy Appeal, but the charity operates an extensive programme of year-round fundraising to raise the necessary funds to support the Armed Forces community across Scotland. Our Learning and Outreach team provides educational resources including Bud, our mobile learning resource that travels across Scotland sharing stories of reflection and hope.

The Lady Haig Poppy Factory is a subsidiary of Poppyscotland and a supported business, employing disabled and vulnerable veterans, who manufacture all items for the annual Scottish Poppy Appeal. They also manufacture and sell wreaths and other remembrance items throughout the year, across the UK and further afield. Furthermore, Poppyscotland campaigns for and influences public policy change on behalf of our Armed Forces community by engaging with national and local politicians regarding the key issues affecting Service personnel, veterans, and their families.

Poppyscotland is part of The Royal British Legion group of charities. For more information, please visit: www.poppyscotland.org.uk





Foreword Charles Byrne Director General, The Royal British Legion.

During an address to a committee of MPs in the aftermath of the first world war, RBL's founding president Earl Haig set out a belief that, *"no man who has served the State in this great war, and has done so much for his country should suffer because he has served his country"*. For 100 years the RBL has been at the forefront of supporting the Armed Forces community of veterans, serving personnel and their families, bound by that same belief.

Similarly, through Poppyscotland, it is our ambition that Scotland is an attractive destination for our whole Armed Forces community to settle after their service, and where their sacrifice is truly recognised and the quality of life is high.

However, throughout our histories, we have known that we cannot achieve these ambitions alone and that we exist at the heart of a national network providing lifelong support to all those who serve and their families.

Events in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s tested this support network to its limits. Many of us watched with grief and frustration as some of those returning from conflict with injuries, and some of those left bereaved, struggled to find the support they needed. It was in this climate that RBL, supported by Poppyscotland, launched a defining campaign of our history, calling on the

Government and the nation to "honour the covenant". We could not be more grateful for the cross-party political will that enshrined the Armed Forces Covenant into legislation exactly 10 years ago.

Our research shows that the Covenant's dual promise of no disadvantage and special consideration where appropriate, are as relevant and as popular today in UK society as ever. However, knowledge of the Covenant remains worryingly low, and where there have been Covenant successes, they have not been felt by all in the community.

We have come a long way since 2011, and we are pleased to report the Honour the Covenant campaign has been an unparalleled success story. Yet, if we are to continue to live up to Earl Haig's vision and keep our promise in the Armed Forces Covenant as it enters its second decade, it will require a refreshed communication, commitment and implementation to ensure it reaches all those who need its vital support.

Charles Byrne
Director General,
The Royal British Legion.



Foreword Leo Docherty MP Minister for Defence People and Veterans.

I was delighted to be asked by the Royal British Legion to contribute a few words to this comprehensive and valuable report to mark 10 years since the Armed Forces Covenant was re-built. The Covenant represents an enormous achievement for us all, within Government, the Armed Forces Community itself, and across wider society. It is across the whole of society that the Covenant's impact is felt, and it is testament to our charity partners, like the Royal British Legion and others, that ensuring our Armed Forces Community is treated fairly is now seen as a given – and this is exactly as it should be.

By working together, we have made extraordinary progress for our Armed Forces Community over the past 10 years. More than 7,000 organisations have signed the Covenant so far, including every local authority in Great Britain. The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust continues to distribute millions of pounds every year in support of our Armed Forces Community. And since 2019, the Office for Veterans' Affairs has sat at the heart of Government to co-ordinate and drive forward our efforts to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran.

There is, however, more to be done. That is why 2021 also marks the year in which we will further strengthen

the Covenant in law. The Armed Forces Bill 2021 introduces a new statutory duty on certain public bodies to ensure they pay due regard to the Covenant and its principles when carrying out specific public functions in the areas of housing, healthcare and education. Our aim is that the new duty will come into force next year, and we are hugely grateful to the Royal British Legion for working with us, and sharing their views, to create this new piece of legislation. This legislation will raise awareness of the Covenant and improve understanding of the issues the Armed Forces Community can face, and lead to better outcomes for our people.

The Royal British Legion's positive impact on the Armed Forces Community for over a century now cannot be overstated. As a Government committed to doing more for our Armed Forces, their families and our veterans, we value the Legion's long-standing role as an independent voice and a critical friend challenging us to go further, such as in this report. Long may this continue as the Armed Forces Covenant matures over the next 10 years and beyond.

Leo Docherty MP
Minister for Defence
People and Veterans.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Ten years ago, following a campaign led by the Royal British Legion (RBL), and supported by Poppyscotland, the Armed Forces Covenant became enshrined in the Armed Forces Act 2011.

The Covenant outlines the nation's obligation to look after those who have served and their families, ensuring that members of the Armed Forces community face no disadvantage because of their service, and that special consideration be given in certain circumstances, such as for those who have been injured or bereaved.

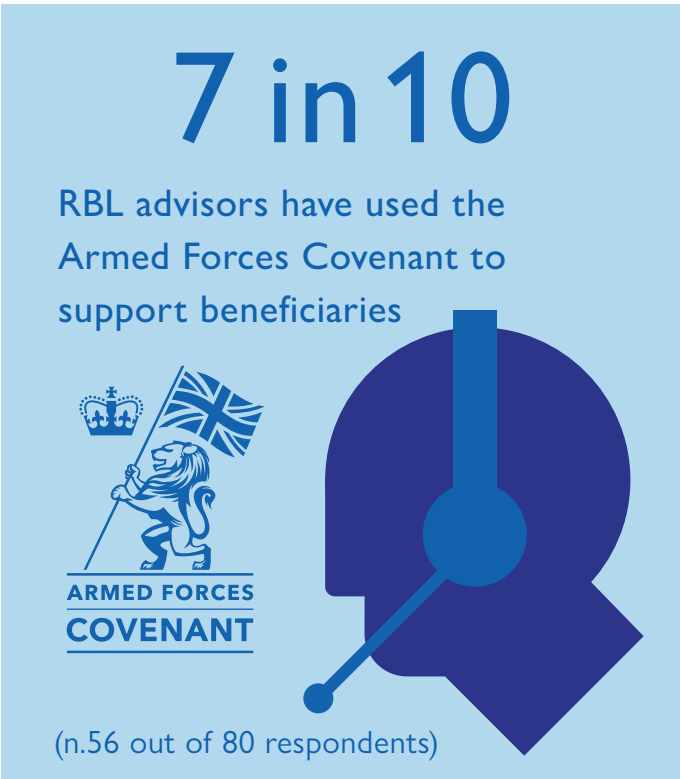
As we mark RBL's centenary, this review sets out to look at the impact of the Covenant and the extent to which our campaign's aspirations have been realised. Through focus groups, a review of existing literature, over 100 thought leader stakeholder interviews from a variety of sectors of UK society and a suite of surveys, we have gathered together a nation's reflections on the Covenant. What does the Covenant mean to people today and can it still meet the needs of the Armed Forces community as it enters its second decade?

Origins of the Covenant

The principles that underlie the Armed Forces Covenant are not necessarily new, but their articulation in its modern form is a recent development driven by long-term trends in the Armed Forces, the operational context of the time and, arguably, well-intentioned opportunism on the part of many actors.

The operational context of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and failures in policy to provide adequate support and welfare for those returning home from conflict or those left bereaved, gave the RBL the impetus to launch our 'Honour the Covenant' campaign of 2007. The campaign re-articulated a long-held belief that dates back to the origins of the RBL that the sacrifices and commitment of those who serve should be recognised and any disadvantages they face addressed. Political will coalesced with the campaign's call, and political parties of all sides stepped up to provide the legislative change necessary to enshrine it in legislation in 2011.

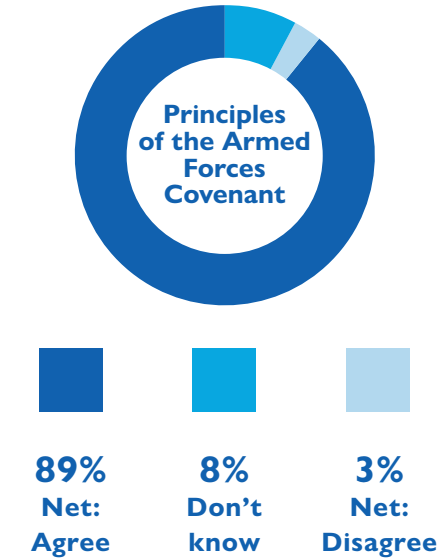
Ensuring that the broad range of topics affecting the Armed Forces community were encompassed, and underpinned by a moral framework, the introduction of the Covenant offered not just a working definition and boundaries, but a degree of flexibility that might enable it to endure over time, even while the nature of those it seeks to support may change.



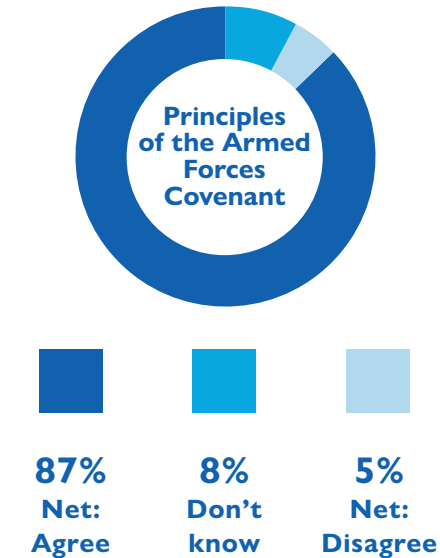
YouGov Polling – Highlights^I

Principles of the Armed Forces Covenant

When asked 'To what extent do you personally agree or disagree with each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: No member of the Armed Forces community should face disadvantage in the provision of public and commercial services compared to any other citizen.'^{II}

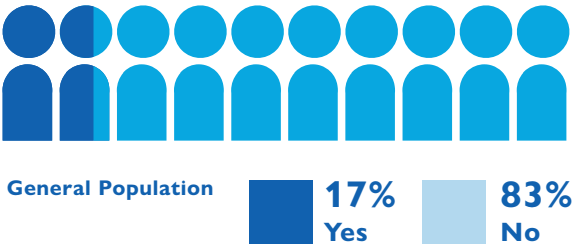


When asked 'To what extent do you personally agree or disagree with each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: In some circumstances special treatment may be appropriate, especially for the injured and the bereaved.'



I. For further details on this section please refer to Appendix 2.
II. Based on responses on 2130 UK adults, net responses. For more details see Appendix 2.

When asked 'Before taking this survey, had you ever heard of the Armed Forces Covenant?'



Knowledge of the Covenant was better amongst those with an Armed Forces Connection^{III}

Aware **Unaware**

83% of those who responded to the survey saying that they were currently serving (20 out of 24) had heard of the Covenant as opposed to **17%** of serving respondents (4 out of 24) who said they had not.

Aware **Unaware**

Amongst those who had previously served **56%** had heard of the Covenant and **44%** had not.

Aware **Unaware**

For family members with someone currently serving **36%** had heard of the Covenant, whereas **64%** had not.

Aware **Unaware**

For those members of the Armed Forces Community who had relatives who had served **25%** had hear of the Covenant and **75%** had not.

Governance^{IV}



53% of respondents currently believe that responsibility for ensuring the Covenant works as it is designed to lies with the Government, specifically departments such as the Ministry of Defence.

III. 1,090 respondents out of 2130 who responded as having a connection to the Armed Forces.
IV. Based on 2130 respondents.

An Enduring Covenant Between The People of the United Kingdom Her Majesty's Government

and

All those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their Families

The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfil that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families. They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment.

Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.

Ministry of Defence, The Armed Forces Covenant, 2011

Delivering the Covenant

Over the decade since it has been enshrined in legislation, action delivered under the Covenant has led to significant steps forward in the provision of services to Service personnel, veterans and their families. Research participants were unanimous in their support for the Covenant and what it has enabled, notably in the improved delivery of health services from where they stood in 2011.

The Armed Forces Annual Covenant report provides a yearly update on policy changes and initiatives under its banner and examples of the Covenant in action cited in research interviews were numerous. However, it was the original intent of government to enable the creation of a stable and permanent framework which, whilst the operational details may change over time, would embed the concept of the Covenant in policy development. For many, the Covenant's greatest success was not any individual policy or action, but that framework it has provided for opening conversations to drive change between all actors in society who support the Armed Forces community.

There was debate amongst research participants as to whether the Covenant provided a convenient brand for activity that would have happened anyway.

It was seen by some that those who were delivering the most did not need the Covenant to do so, and those who were not may be covering their lack of commitment behind a brand with little requirement. However, the benefit of that brand's awareness raising of the needs and profile of the Armed Forces community should not be underestimated, and the Covenant name in itself can be a key driver for the support required for its delivery.

Other contentions arose around who the Covenant has delivered for and who it has missed in its first decade. Yet despite varying opinions between stakeholders, clear consensus emerged around the lack of focus in the Covenant's first decade on Reservists and those Service personnel, veterans and their families who were born or reside overseas. Equally after a decade of political and cultural sensitivities creating barriers to implementation, those living in Northern Ireland have uncertainty as to how the Covenant relates to them. The Covenant's delivery there requires addressing, both through research and clarity within policymakers, as whilst comparable outcomes can be achieved without the need for a Covenant brand, challenges arise where responsibilities and rights remain unclear.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- To further their commitment to improving awareness of the positive contribution of the Armed Forces and to ensure veterans feel recognised for their Service, the UK and devolved governments' should place promotion of the Armed Forces Covenant at the heart of its messaging. This should include a dedicated programme of Covenant promotion activity within the next iteration of the Strategy for our Veterans Action plan.
- The Government should set out to identify and address the needs of Reservists and their families as a priority activity, with reinstatement of dedicated narrative within the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report.
- Geographical restrictions placed on the delivery of Armed Forces Covenant should be overcome with a desire to support members of the Armed Forces community wherever they reside and face disadvantage or are eligible for special consideration.
- The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office should be routinely included within the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report to update on initiatives they provide to support the Armed Forces Community overseas.
- Further research and analysis of the views of the Armed Forces community in Northern Ireland should be carried out to establish their views on the Covenant being more openly discussed and the principles of the Covenant.
- Following research the Northern Ireland Assembly and the UK Government should produce a roadmap for the implementation of the Covenant in Northern Ireland, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for delivery bodies. This should be supported by an information campaign that sets out what the Covenant is and is not.
- The UK Government should explore how the outcomes focussed approach to Armed Forces community support across the island of Ireland can provide best practice for wider implementation of the Covenant's principles overseas.
- The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust should create a multi-year funding stream for initiatives and activities in Northern Ireland to help embed Covenant activity via apolitical funding and resourcing.
- The UK Government should clarify the applicability of the Armed Forces Covenant in Crown Dependencies, with a desire for resident members of the UK Armed Forces community to have parity in the protections of the Covenant as their UK based contemporaries.

The Principles of the Covenant

The Armed Forces Covenant contains two key principles:

“Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.”

“Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.”¹

Given equal billing in the Covenant, between them the principles lay at the heart of all that has been, and all that will be, delivered under its name. One decade on and both principles continue to command significant support both within stakeholders interviewed for our research but also within the general public.

For the first 10 years of the Covenant, it is the principle of no disadvantage that has driven the

majority of policy change within the UK. It is a concept supported by 9 out of 10 (89%) of the general public, albeit with lower levels within the younger population than the older where 94% personally agree with the principle.² However, in their support for the principle, there is a tendency amongst some to equate no disadvantage with a more subjective concept of fairness, and steps should be taken to ensure that such a driver for change does not get diluted through a desire for brevity.

The principle of special consideration has received less attention in Covenant delivery over the decade, with reservations expressed from those designing policy that it could be a double-edged sword and breed resentment if fully implemented. Yet just over 8 out of 10 (83%) of the public agree with the principle and a quarter (26%) felt it could go further compared to 3% who felt it went too far.³ As the Covenant enters the 2020s and beyond, there is an opportunity to look again at this principle and what more can be done to fulfil its promise.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Authors of any publication or statement that references the Covenant should ensure that they use the specific wording of the principles as outlined in the Covenant itself to avoid confusion and dilution of them.
- The UK Government and the wider Armed Forces charity sector should conduct research into the attitudes towards the UK military community amongst younger age groups, especially those aged 18-24, with the aim of creating bespoke marketing and information materials about the importance of the Armed Forces Covenant.
- Further research should be carried out into the impact on attitudes towards the Armed Forces of the implementation of instances of special consideration as set out in the principles of the Covenant.
- The MoD should develop a best practice guide on the application of special consideration within national and devolved government policy making ensuring that it goes beyond just addressing disadvantages.
- Armed Forces Covenant Annual Reports should outline which principle of the Armed Forces Covenant a policy relates to, with an emphasis on ensuring that the principle of special consideration is honoured.

Knowledge and Understanding

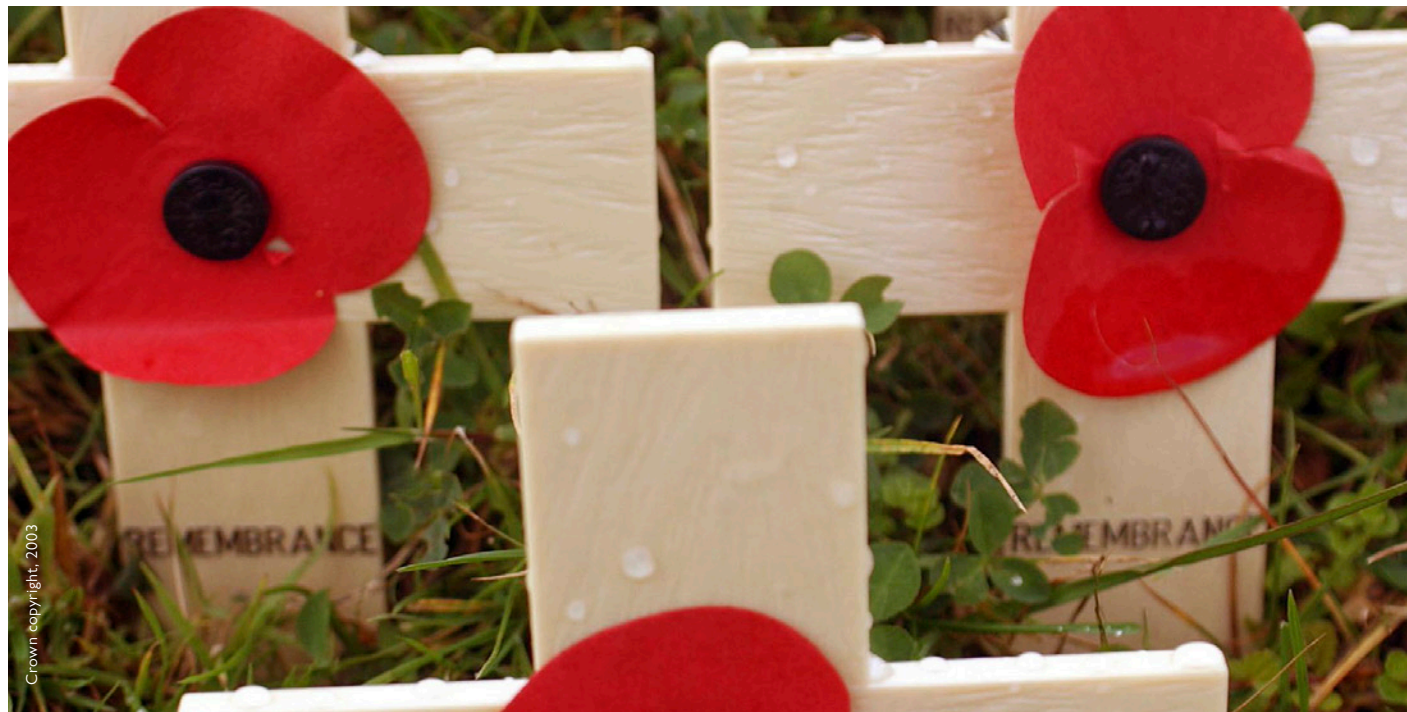
When the Covenant was introduced in 2011, the Armed Forces and the care provided for wounded veterans and the bereaved were prominent within the media and society. In a changed political and media landscape, the principles and ethos of the Covenant continue to remain secure and garner significant public support in 2021. However, it is clear that knowledge and understanding has not significantly increased and may have become more inconsistent within sectors of society. Less than 1 in 5 (17%) of the UK general public have heard of the Covenant, dropping to 1 in 10 (10%) amongst those who do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces.⁴ Even within those who have heard of the Covenant there is little consistent understanding of its functions or who it is there to support.

Individual sectors of society have varying degrees of knowledge and even more varied understanding. The Armed Forces charity sector may have a high level of knowledge and understanding but struggle to gain recognition for their commitment to it through the Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS). Conversely businesses and corporate bodies continue to progress through the ERS scheme, and gain award status for that progression, however, do so on an interpretation of the Covenant misaligned with its original intent by focussing on the Armed Forces community as employees rather than a customer base due special consideration.

Similarly, within national and local government and the services they provide, understanding and knowledge vary, leading to worrying gaps in continuity in provision of vital services and support. Some government departments may lead the way each year in demonstrating their knowledge of Covenant delivery via the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, yet knowledge of the practicalities of delivering the Covenant within front-line roles is neither consistent nor sustained.

Lastly, and arguably most importantly, serving personnel, veterans and their families may display some of the highest levels of awareness of the Covenant, but qualitative evidence gathered for our research shows that it is not universal and more can be done. A need for simplified language, greater clarity and better promotion were consistent themes from those the Covenant is there to recognise and support.

As the Covenant enters its second decade, complacency in promotion of the Covenant and what it can practically deliver risks nullifying its admirable aims. The support exists, especially in the general public, but it goes untapped unless a more consistent mechanism for creating, improving and sustaining awareness and knowledge is introduced.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- All government departments should conduct proactive and positive social media campaigns with content outlining measures being taken under the Armed Forces Covenant to support the Armed Forces community or services already available to them, incorporating the rationale for the measure alongside accurate and engaging stories and facts about the Armed Forces community.
- The Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo) should work with Defence Relationship Management to ensure the Employer Recognition Scheme is aligned to the work of the Armed Forces charity sector and enables member organisations to pursue scheme awards.
- Armed Forces charities with award status from the Employer Recognition Scheme should promote the Covenant by highlighting the ERS award status branding on external communications and providing internal training and communications on embedding the Covenant into workplace practices and values.
- The Armed Forces charity sector should support the UK and devolved governments in any Covenant publicity drive by promoting real life examples of where the Covenant has worked for the Armed Forces community, explaining the benefits.
- The Single Services should provide greater awareness training of the Armed Forces Covenant as part of phase one training, with further training and awareness sessions through career for all ranks and Services, including real life examples of how it can and has supported serving personnel. Materials should also be made more available for, and promoted to families.
- Defence Relationship Management should place more of an emphasis on rewarding special consideration and what commercial signatories can do for the community as customers alongside employees within a relaunch of the Defence Employer Recognition award scheme, as the Covenant Recognition scheme.
- The Armed Forces Covenant should be included in the induction training process for all elected parliamentary and assembly politicians, their caseworkers, and policy roles within the UK and devolved civil service to ensure a base level of awareness across all departments and policymakers.
- All statutory bodies and those delivering statutory services should ask all individuals whether they or a member of their family have served in the UK Armed Forces, with internal guidance provided on how the body meets its commitment to the principles of the Covenant.
- Alongside the guidance for the Armed Forces Bill 2021 on any new Covenant duties for local authorities there should be a clear framework for Covenant delivery, drawing on the *Our Community, Our Covenant* toolkit, and including all policy areas beyond just health, housing and education.

Reporting and Governance

In a statement to Parliament in 2011, just after the Armed Forces Act became law, the then Defence Secretary stated that:

“The Armed Forces Covenant is a matter for the whole of Government, and sustained progress requires both close collaboration across Whitehall and clear ministerial leadership.”⁵

Yet governance structures have had a mixed record during the Covenant’s lifetime.

As devolution continues to shift the underlying political structures of the UK, a labyrinth of boards, accountability structures, commissioners and groups have sprung up over the decade of the Covenant’s lifespan. Some structures have been downgraded over time, such as the Cabinet Sub-Committee becoming the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board. Others have endured such as the Covenant Reference Group, although the attention it has received from the higher echelons of government appear to have waned in recent years.

Throughout, the legally mandated Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report has provided an update on steps government has taken to meet the promise of the Covenant each year. Yet even here metrics used between tiers of government across the UK suffer from a lack of alignment, and at times risk focussing on outputs rather than outcomes.

With ten years of goodwill and support behind it, a lack of clarity in governance and reporting could cause confusion of ownership and mean momentum lost. Referenced in interviews for this report, it has been argued that it is inevitable and necessary that structures will evolve over time along with the Covenant, and that the change in focus represents success by demonstrating that there are not crisis issues that require immediate attention from the top of government. However, this needs to be balanced by the message that is sent about the salience of the Covenant in policy-making, and efforts are made to ensure that the structures continue to perform their original intent of facilitating mobilisation across government in response to arising Covenant issues.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The UK Government should work with local and devolved governments to develop and publish a consistent and comparable suite of metrics to improve our understanding of the Armed Forces community and improve targeting of support.
- The Scottish Government should undertake research with stakeholders to establish practical steps to improve reporting on the Covenant in Scotland so that understanding of the commitment to the Armed Forces community improves.
- The Covenant Reference Group secretariat should work with the Northern Ireland Veterans Support Office and Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to ensure that there is consistent Northern Ireland representation on the CRG.
- The Covenant Reference Group should reacquire a collaborative focus as a source of external expert reference for government as measures to deliver the Covenant are developed.
- Minutes or records of decisions from the Covenant Reference Group should be published, subject to appropriate security and privacy considerations.
- The Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board should meet at the earliest opportunity, and continue to do so a minimum of twice a year in order to provide ministerial oversight and direction.
- Each year’s Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report should set out the current governance structure for the Covenant and veterans issues, including an organogram, so that lines of decision-making and accountability are clear externally.
- The Welsh Government should provide longer term funding for Armed Forces Liaison Officers in Wales.
- As ownership is a matter for all of government, each UK and devolved government department should have a named minister responsible for its department’s Covenant commitments, and a list published in the Covenant Annual Report.
- There should be a consistent approach for members of the Armed Forces community to seek external accountability on the Covenant, with an annual inquiry into the Covenant Annual Report by the Defence Select Committee, an annual debate in each UK Parliament and agreed priorities shared between the UK Veterans Commissioners.

Finance and Funding

When the Covenant was launched, whilst there was consideration of the practical implications, precise financial effects were not outlined. Nevertheless, it was stated that “In many areas, doing more to honour the Covenant depends on attitudes and actions rather than resources, and the Government will take action where it can. But in others there is little alternative to sustained investment.”⁶

Over the decade funding for Covenant commitments from all sectors of society should not be underestimated, millions of pounds have been invested in targeted Covenant aligned policy change and initiatives. However, there is debate as to whether that funding has always been sustainable and efficiently targeted.

The most prominent Covenant branded funding source, the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, can provide grant funding, but for many interviewed, a one-off time limited grant is not enough to provide sustainability in delivery nor

outcomes. There is also a risk that external funding streams risk alienating Armed Forces community support from mainstream business-as-usual resource allocation.

Over time, an implied shift of responsibility may have occurred away from the UK Government onto other actors, like local government, who have more limited financial means or manoeuvrability to be able to fund new Covenant initiatives on their own in the same fashion as UK Government departments.

There are differences of perception at national and local levels about the nature of responsibility and resourcing for the Covenant. Whilst these differences are found in many other policy areas, the distinction is largely irrelevant to the member of the Armed Forces community who is trying to access public services without disadvantage. The overriding priority therefore is for funding that is well coordinated and well targeted across all those who have made public commitments to the principles of the Covenant.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- In order to promote innovation within Covenant delivery, it should be ensured that Covenant funds are not used for business-as-usual activity or meeting statutory guidance.
- The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust should consider more multi-year grants to projects in order to increase the impact and sustainability of funded work.



A Covenant for the Next Decade

As the Covenant in legislation turns ten years old, support for the principles, the spirit and the wording of the Covenant remain high within the general population, policymakers and interested stakeholders. Around it, the political, legal, and societal context has evolved considerably over those first ten years, and the Covenant must evolve with it if that support is to translate into tangible change. As we progress into the 2020s, the Covenant's journey to meeting its promise is far from over.

In the decade since the Armed Forces Covenant was written into legislation, the social context has changed markedly. Whilst HM Armed Forces continue to be engaged in operations around the world, and indeed closer to home as part of the nation's pandemic response, the intensity of deployments has been on a downward trajectory. With reduced sight of the work of the Armed Forces, and in the thankful absence of significant casualty numbers, public demand for action from political representatives has lessened as other policy issues take precedence.

The Armed Forces community itself in 2021 also looks very different to that of 2011. The size and footprint of the serving community has altered, with fewer Regulars, more Reservists, greater use of non-UK personnel, more people living off base in local communities, and shorter enlistments than a decade ago. The veteran population has shrunk from an estimated 4.6m people in 2010 to around 2m in 2021, increasingly leaving a majority professional,

volunteer veteran base, as opposed to one overwhelmingly comprised of conscripts.⁷ Changing demographics will result in changing needs, and a relevant Covenant promise must be a responsive one.

Finally, it must be noted that at the time of writing this review, the Armed Forces Bill 2021 is proceeding through Parliament with an aim to introduce potentially the most significant change to the Covenant since it was laid out in legislation ten years ago. The bill will introduce a legal duty on some aspects of local authorities and local services to pay due regard to the Covenant. Unavoidable in our research, discussion of the bill threw up concerns around a limited scope, associated funding and unclear legal rights for the Armed Forces community. However, the concept of a legally binding Covenant was roundly welcomed and brings the nation one step closer to fulfilling the campaign asks RBL set out over a decade previous.

Born out of perceived failures in support for those who sacrificed the most, the Covenant has become an enduring success story for the nation. A covenant for the next decade doesn't require fundamental change to its wording or principles to continue to be that success, it requires only renewed vigour in communication and a determination to ensure that it meets the needs of all those in the Armed Forces community who need it. For each barrier identified within this report, recommendations for solutions have been proposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **The Secretary of State for Defence should use the powers in the Armed Forces Bill 2021 to extend the scope of the new Covenant duty.**
- **There should be appropriate and clear procedures and mechanisms for the Armed Forces community to pursue any breaches of the Covenant duty without incurring prohibitive legal costs.**



Chapter 1: Introduction

Ten years ago, following a campaign led by the Royal British Legion (RBL), and supported by Poppyscotland, the Armed Forces Covenant became enshrined in the Armed Forces Act 2011.

The Covenant outlines the nation's obligation to look after those who have served and their families, ensuring that members of the Armed Forces community face no disadvantage because of their service, and that special consideration be given in certain circumstances, such as for those who have been injured or bereaved.

Since its introduction, national, devolved, and local government have sought to uphold the principles of the Covenant, along with thousands of businesses and voluntary organisations, helping to improve the everyday lives of millions of members of the Armed Forces Community. With its tenth anniversary, and as we mark our own centenary, RBL and Poppyscotland undertook research to review the impact of the Covenant and the extent to which the 'Honour the Covenant' campaign's aspirations have been realised.

This exercise sets out to gather reflections on how the Covenant came to exist, how it has been delivered in the ten years since its introduction, and whether it has enabled the nation to meet its obligation to look after those who have served in HM Armed Forces, and those who have supported them. To understand progress and challenges the review also looks to the future, ensuring the Covenant is fit for purpose to meet the needs of today's Armed Forces community over the next ten years and beyond.

Methodology

Research Aim

To review whether the Covenant has delivered on its original objectives, to celebrate advancements in support, to develop understanding and provision of services over the past decade and identify areas where more work needs to be done.

Research Objectives

- Seek reflections on, and deliver an evaluation of, the first ten years of the Armed Forces Covenant being enshrined in legislation, where appropriate celebrating successes and identifying tangible recommendations for improvement in delivery.

- Take stock of Covenant achievements including the delivery of new policies, services and funding; or the renewed relationships between the military and civilian communities.
- Identify areas where implementation of the Covenant has not met its original intent, and the reasons for this. Propose recommendations on improving delivery of the Covenant for key policymakers and stakeholders.

To deliver the research objectives, the Armed Forces Covenant Review has been conducted by the RBL and Poppyscotland over an 18 month period beginning in summer 2020.

Mixed Methods Research

RBL and Poppyscotland adopted a mixed methods research⁸ approach utilising and integrating both quantitative data from a range of surveys, with qualitative data derived from interviews and focus groups.

Research Questions

The research focused on the following two questions:

1. Over the last ten years, has the Armed Forces Covenant enabled the nation to meet its obligation to look after those who have served, and those who have supported those who have served, in HM Armed Forces?

- What progress over the past decade can be attributed to the Covenant?
- Which principle of the Armed Forces Covenant do these measures relate to?
- Where has the Covenant failed to deliver? Why is this?

2. Is the Covenant still fit for purpose: what role does the Covenant have in meeting the changing needs of the Armed Forces community in the 2020s?



Research Methods and Data Gathering Sources

- Initial desk-based research to provide an historical context and overview to determine where gaps may exist and inform the fieldwork strategy.
- Thematic analysis⁹ extracted from over 100 expert interviews with thought leaders and stakeholders representing charities, national and local government, academia, businesses, and the statutory sector including central government policy officials,¹⁰ and two focus groups, including with currently serving personnel. Quotations taken from interviewees are referenced in the text by stakeholder sector.
- YouGov on behalf of The Royal British Legion, *The Armed Forces Covenant*, 2130 respondents (full results can be found in Appendix 2).
- Scottish Armed Forces Champions Survey, 11 respondents.
- RBL and Poppyscotland Welfare Staff Survey, 60 respondents.
- RBL Members Survey, 165 respondents.
- Westminster MP survey, 18 respondents.

Strengths and limitations of the research

Through setting such a broad research objective and question set, looking at every sector of society and a decade of policy announcements, the research findings can only skim the surface of the details that are alluded to within the report.

Over the last decade there has been a wealth of research on specific cohorts and policy issues linked to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant. A single summary report will fail to do these justice, nor would it be productive to revisit topics explored elsewhere in greater detail. Therefore, the research team took the decision to use a review of the available literature to frame the research questions within the parameters of looking at the Covenant as an entity rather than any particular policy area. This framing informed the structure of the interviews and surveys carried out. Between the interviews carried out across all sectors of UK society, public polling, focus groups and the surveys, we believe that this represents the largest research exercise carried out to date focussed specifically on the wording and principles of the Covenant document itself.

The research provides a comprehensive overview of the delivery of the Covenant over the last ten years, and before, as well as evidence-based recommendations for the future. However, there is always more research to be done. For example future research would benefit from hearing international perspectives, or more from those currently still serving beyond what we were able to establish from representative agencies, a focus group and a small in-Service sample contained within a general population survey.



Chapter 2: Origins of the Covenant

As part of UK public and political discourse for over a decade, to some observers it may seem as if the Armed Forces Covenant is a foundational tenet of the UK's relationship with its Armed Forces community. However, its origins are more complicated, and its existence in its current form is also the result of public, stakeholder and political will and pressure, including significant campaigns by RBL and Poppyscotland over a decade ago.

The road to the Covenant



This review marks ten years since the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant were first placed in legislation in the Armed Forces Act 2011, but the origins of the Covenant stretch back much further. The idea of a form of contract with those who serve has been traced to Ancient Greece and Rome¹¹ and domestically to the reign of Elizabeth I and the Act for the Relief of Soldiers, which provided for payment for injured soldiers in recognition of their service to the Crown and the nation.¹²

However, by the time of the First World War, the prevailing view both publicly and politically was that support for soldiers and sailors in need was principally a matter for voluntary action, rather than the direct responsibility of the government. This assumption came under direct challenge from the scope of the First World War, the scale of conscription and injury, and the expansion of the franchise that had begun in the nineteenth century and continued during and after the war. Whilst there was a dramatic growth during the war in the number of voluntary organisations supporting those who had served and their families – including the creation of the Royal British Legion's predecessor bodies – sole reliance on voluntary action came to be seen as inadequate and inappropriate. A new system of war pensions was consequently the principal lasting government action, and the ground was laid for the mixed model of state and charitable support for the Armed Forces community that has endured since, albeit with shifting boundaries.

The modern form of the Covenant as a written document has a shorter history - as the historian, and longest serving external member of the Armed Forces Covenant Reference Group, Sir Hew Strachan has noted, "the Covenant is undoubtedly an invented tradition, and a very recent one."¹³ Its origins lie in an internal Army Doctrine Publication written by Colonel (later Major General Sir) Sebastian Roberts and produced in February 2000.¹⁴ It declared that:

"British soldiers must be able always to expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they (and their families) will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service...This mutual obligation forms the Military Covenant between the nation, the Army and each individual soldier..."¹⁵

In an article on the Covenant and its relevance to civil military relations, Professor Anthony Forster argued that this exposition of the Covenant reflected a strand of thinking and was designed to be “an antidote to the threat of civilianisation of the Army”¹⁶, but that from 2006 onwards the concept took on a life of its own beyond the confines of Army doctrine. In the context of major military conflicts that had begun after the publication, and the resulting intense public, political and media interest, the Covenant became an “important social, political, and quasi-legal reference point in shaping almost every debate about civil–military relations in the United Kingdom.”¹⁷

The involvement of the UK Armed Forces in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq significantly increased the salience of issues affecting the Armed Forces community and altered perceptions of veterans that may previously have been associated with much earlier events and operations. The effect was that whilst there was lively debate about the adequacy of support for this group during and after Service, there developed a strong political consensus behind the ideas that would eventually be expressed in the Covenant – that those who serve their country in the Armed Forces, and their families, are due recognition and fair treatment from the nation. This was the context in which important steps were taken to articulate and entrench these principles. The RBL launched a high-profile campaign on the topic and subsequently there was a flurry of activity from both government and opposition. The then Labour government published a command paper in 2008 on the nation’s commitment to the Armed Forces¹⁸, and a green paper the following year that outlined proposals for building on the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant.¹⁹ Both the Conservative Party²⁰ and the Liberal Democrats²¹ also published papers on the issue in the same period.

Following the election of a new government in 2010, the Coalition Programme for Government reflected this consensus and incorporated the respective commitments of both parties in this area. Two early moves were made with the establishment of a Task Force on the Military Covenant led by Hew Strachan, and a public commitment by the then Prime Minister in a speech aboard HMS Ark Royal to place the Covenant in law:

“It is time for us to rewrite that Military Covenant, to make sure that we are doing everything we can for you and your families at home, whether it is the schools you send you children to, whether it is the healthcare that you can expect, whether it is the fact that there should be a dedicated military ward for anyone who gets injured or wounded in Afghanistan or elsewhere. I want all of these things refreshed and renewed and written down in a new Military Covenant that we write into the law of our land.”²²

Strachan’s Task Force²³ was aimed at generating new policy ideas on the Covenant in a limited time frame and ideally at low cost. It reported in September 2010 and focused its recommendations around six key themes:

- **The Community Covenant** – drawing on US experience, encouraging local service providers to pledge their support for the Armed Forces community
- **Recognition for the Armed Forces Family** – largely to be delivered through bespoke privilege or ID cards for veterans, families and reservists
- **Increasing home ownership for Service families**
- **Coordination of veterans’ policy and charities** – including a Veterans’ Commissioner, an MoD Advisory Board, a coordinating framework and guide to areas of greatest need
- **Education through Service career**
- **Strengthening links between civilians and military** – including building on the then innovation of Armed Forces Day, and greater community and cultural engagement

These recommendations had mixed fortunes as far as implementation was concerned. Some were quickly adopted and have stood the test of time – most notably what were initially known as Community Covenants, eventually adopted by every local authority in Great Britain and some in Northern Ireland. However, some issues highlighted, such as immigration issues affecting non-UK personnel or the veterans ID card, remain unresolved over ten years later.

The Coalition Programme for Government, the Prime Minister’s Ark Royal speech, and the recommendations of the Military Covenant Task Force eventually led the following year to the Armed Forces Bill 2011, the legislation required every five years to maintain legal authority for the Armed Forces, which on this occasion also formed the vehicle for delivering on the government’s commitments on the Covenant.



The Royal British Legion and the Covenant

RBL led the campaign to ensure that the Covenant was recognised as a concept and was placed in legislation in 2011. The campaign reflected the principles and campaigning of the organisation since its inception, and indeed before, building on the call during the First World War for 'Justice, not charity' for those who had served our country. Indeed, an object of one of the RBL's predecessor bodies, the National Association of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers, was

“to educate public opinion to the belief that the maintenance and welfare of the disabled sailor and soldier and his dependants is the direct duty of the State and should be its first care, and that they should in no way be dependent upon charity for their livelihood.”²⁴

The principles that we now understand as forming those of the Covenant have been articulated by RBL and its representatives across its history. The Legion's founding President, Sir Douglas (later Earl) Haig described the debt owed by the country to those who had served, and the responsibility – particularly of government – in return:

“How can the nation think about holding peace celebrations and rejoicing when those who have given their all in the struggle are in such a terrible state of want?... I maintain that no man who has served the State in this great war, and has done so much for his country should suffer because he has served his country... We do not want to pauperise people, but we do want the State to be generous. [And just?] And just, yes.”²⁵

Following the Second World War, the RBL also reflected these principles, even using the term 'special consideration' in its campaigning for the 1950 general election, and highlighting disadvantage a few years later:

“Do you agree as a general principle that those who served in the Armed Forces in War have a right to special consideration on their return to civil life? Do you support the Legion in its claim that special consideration should be given to ex-servicemen and women in the allocation of the tenancy of houses by Local Authorities?”²⁶

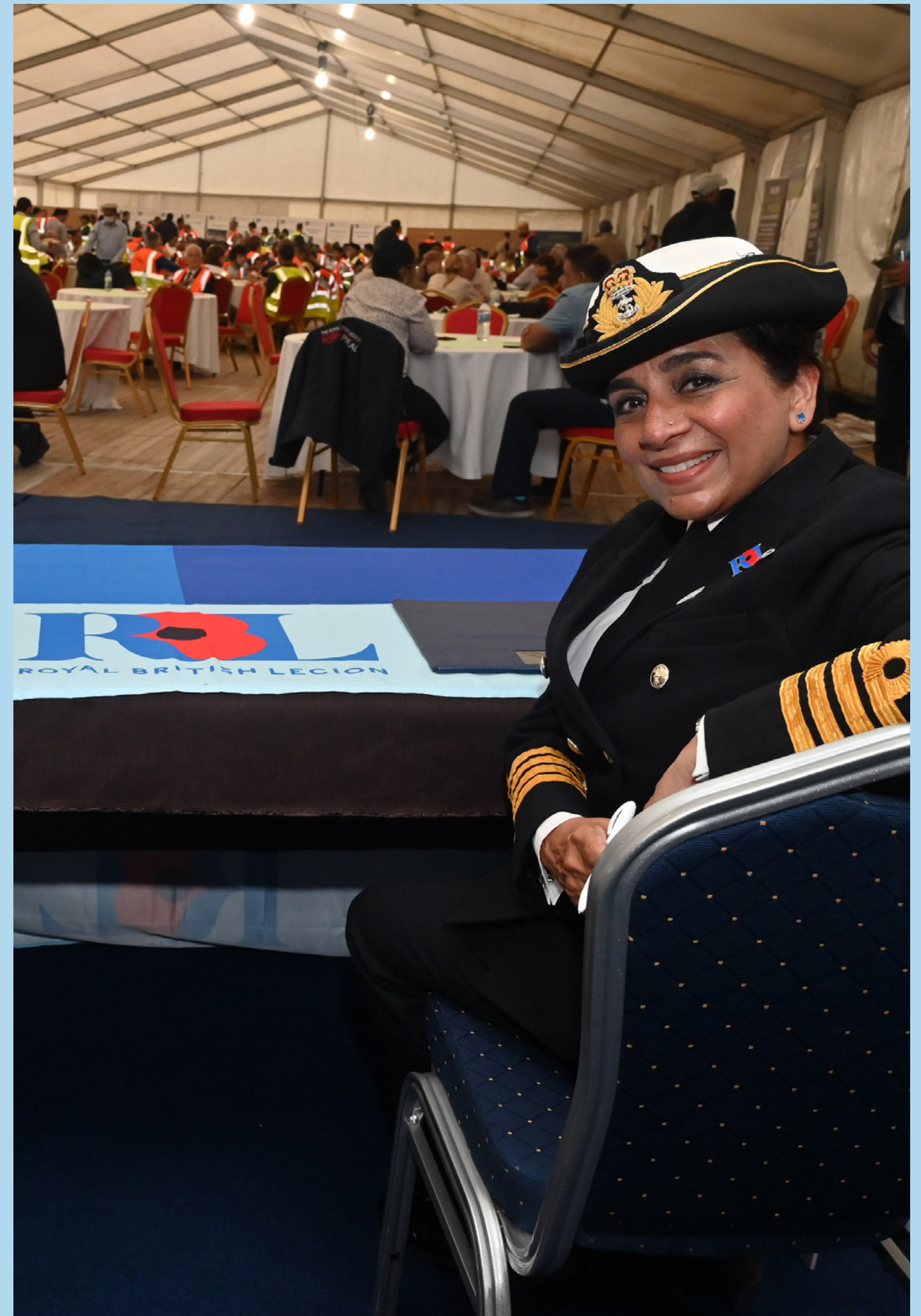
“War pensioners who cannot work average £6 5s 0d a week – while the average male wage packet in Britain is £8 13s 7d. Shattering isn't it? Hardly encouraging to the morale of the serviceman of today. And this does not reflect on any particular political party but on all of us as a nation!!”²⁷

As noted above, in the 21st century the challenges of the issues raised by the UK Armed Forces' involvement in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan prompted renewed focus by RBL on these principles, which eventually manifested itself in a major campaign launched in September 2007 entitled 'Honour the Covenant'. This had three main calls:

- **A just compensation scheme:** increasing the value of awards, reversing the burden of proof and the abolition of time limits
- **Greater physical and mental health support:** improved transition to NHS care, accommodation for families of the injured in treatment, ongoing health surveillance for serving personnel, and proper delivery of priority treatment on the NHS for veterans
- **More support for bereaved families:** dealing with the inquest backlog, providing legal representation, and a commissioner to look at in-service deaths

Whilst not all of RBL's demands were met, this campaign was a major step in driving the idea of the Covenant up the agenda and beginning to frame its broad scope. Within a year of the launch of RBL's campaign, the government's command paper and policy initiatives from opposition parties were published, and shortly thereafter the government's External Reference Group was established, which later became the Covenant Reference Group that exists to this day. As the Legion's then Director General reflected to us during this research, the power of the Covenant as a concept went beyond a simple policy recommendation, but offered a framework and an imperative to consider the range of issues affecting the Armed Forces community:

“The Covenant's growing power and appeal was because of its moral underpinning – it didn't bind politicians to specific outputs and they weren't legally compelled to do anything, but it could nevertheless force them to reflect on, and try to reconcile, the images on the news with the services offered at home: it was a tool to chip away at a guilty conscience or question one's moral compass.”²⁸



The Armed Forces Act 2011 and the Covenant

The Armed Forces Bill 2011 was intended to give effect to the then Prime Minister's pledge that the Covenant would become part of 'the law of our land'. However, the Royal British Legion argued at the time that it did not go far enough. As originally introduced, the only provision in the Bill was for an annual report by government on progress against the Covenant, with no actual reference to those principles which underpinned the Covenant.

RBL and others made representations, including calling for policy areas outside of health, housing and education to be covered, stating

"Service life can affect every facet of one's life, not just the principal ones of health, education and housing, which we all recognise and hold dear. Housing and health issues can have effects on other elements and departmental responsibilities."²⁹

In May 2011 the government published 'The Armed Forces Covenant'³⁰, which laid out the principles of the Covenant and the government's commitments. This is a fundamental document that lays out the precise wording of the Covenant principles, which were subject to considerable discussion and negotiation at the time to agree the exact wording.



An Enduring Covenant Between The People of the United Kingdom Her Majesty's Government

and

All those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their Families

The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfil that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families. They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment.

Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.

Ministry of Defence, The Armed Forces Covenant, 2011

The document defined the Armed Forces community covered by the Covenant: Regular Personnel; Reservists; Veterans; Families of Regular Personnel, Reservists and Veterans; and the Bereaved.³¹

It also clarified the broad scope of the Covenant, noting that “In many cases these will be a responsibility of Central Government Departments and Devolved Administrations”³², but also noting that responsibility can lie with local, voluntary and commercial service providers. 15 areas were identified where the Covenant should influence policy, service delivery and standards:³³

- 1. Terms and Conditions of Service
- 2. Healthcare
- 3. Education
- 4. Housing
- 5. Benefits and Tax
- 6. Responsibility of Care
- 7. Deployment
- 8. Family Life
- 9. Commercial Products and Services
- 10. Transition
- 11. Support After Service
- 12. Recognition
- 13. Participation as Citizens
- 14. Changes in Defence
- 15. Recourse

Following the publication of this document, the Armed Forces Bill was amended during its passage to include specific reference to the Covenant principles. In discerning the intent of Parliament with these amendments, it is worth noting the Minister’s explanation at the time. On the ‘no disadvantage’ principle, the then Minister for Defence Veterans, Reserves and Personnel, said:

“We can never remove all disadvantage that results from membership of the Armed Forces—the very nature of the job prevents it—but we can, and must, do all we can to minimise disadvantages, particularly when it concerns access to public services.”³⁴

On the ‘special consideration’ principle, he further explained:

“Members of the Armed Forces community do not, as a rule, want special favours. They accept that they are citizens like their civilian neighbours. They expect fair treatment. They do not like finding themselves at the back of the queue because they have joined the services, but they do not insist on being at the front of the queue. However, there may be times when we wish to place them at the front of the queue.”³⁵

The Bill also maintained the requirement on the government to publish an Annual Report on the Covenant, which it has done each year since. The RBL, along with external partners including Cobseo, SSAFA and the three service Family Federations, are represented on the government’s Covenant Reference Group, and our independent observations on progress against the Covenant are included unedited in each Annual Report.³⁶

Looking beyond 2021

The principles that underlie the Armed Forces Covenant are not necessarily new, but their articulation in its modern form is a recent development driven by long-term trends in the Armed Forces, the operational context of the time and, arguably, well-intentioned opportunism on the part of many actors. The RBL’s ‘Honour the Covenant’ campaign of 2007 then further played a significant part in highlighting and framing the issue. All these elements provided momentum and enabled the creation of a political consensus around the concept (if not the details) far faster than might normally be the case in public policy. Ensuring that the broad range of topics affecting the Armed Forces community were encompassed, and underpinned by a moral framework, the introduction of the Covenant offered both a working definition and boundaries but a degree of flexibility that might enable it to endure over time, even while the nature of those it seeks to support may change.



Crown copyright, 2011

Chapter 3: Delivering the Covenant

Since the introduction of the Covenant, it has been contingent upon the ability of policy makers, practitioners, businesses and stakeholders to translate its wording and principles into tangible outcomes for the Armed Forces community. Over the decade since it has been enshrined in legislation, the delivery of the Covenant has led to significant steps forward in the provision of services to Service personnel, veterans and their families, notably in the delivery of health services. However, there are areas which have not received as great a focus or political will and there is an ongoing debate as to whether the Covenant is a symptom or a cause of the UK's admiration and commitment to its Armed Forces community.

The Covenant as a driver for change

After ten years, the Armed Forces Covenant claims a considerable track record of delivering demonstrable improvements to the lives of the Armed Forces community in the UK. At the time of writing over 7,000 organisations and every local authority in Great Britain, along with four in Northern Ireland, have made pledges to support the Armed Forces community via the Covenant.

Almost universally within the interviews carried out for this research, contributors were positive about the "significant contribution"³⁷ that the Armed Forces Covenant has had over the decade. Many pointed towards specific improvements that they directly attributed to the Covenant, whether at a local level:

"There has always been a really positive forward leaning attitude from local authorities with regards to the Covenant and trying to do the right thing by the Armed Forces that live in their areas."
(Charity sector stakeholder)

Or on the national stage:

"I can tell you for a fact, the reason why (the Government) changed a long-standing policy on widows' pensions issue was absolutely due to the Covenant. So, we knew we wanted to do it, we had to find an argument... So that change was made purely and simply because of the Covenant."
(Political stakeholder)

As alluded to in the quote above, for policy makers, Covenant leads in business and charities alike, the weight of the Armed Forces Covenant has often been the factor that can bring an issue to the table, or a solution found:

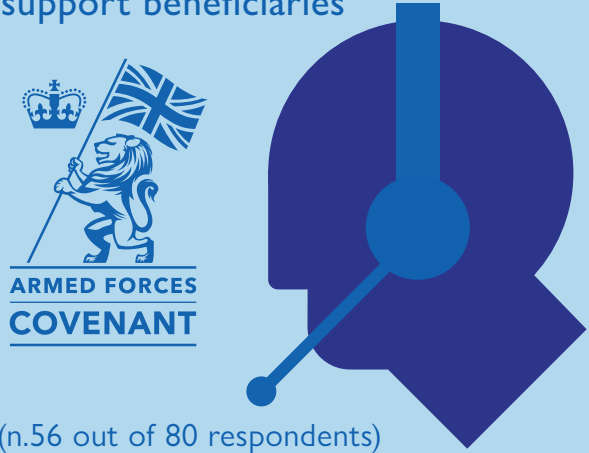
"We can use the Covenant as a springboard because it's within the [NHS] Constitution to enable us to put on the services to meet those needs"
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

"If I identify a breach of the Covenant and say, look, we're breaching the Covenant with this policy or this process, this is how we change it, do you agree? It's going to be difficult to say no."
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

"It's because of the Covenant. I can say 'look, we have promised to do something about this. What are we doing about it?'"
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

7 in 10

RBL advisors have used the Armed Forces Covenant to support beneficiaries



Crown copyright, 2009

Mandated by the original legislation, the Government annually publishes an Armed Forces Covenant Report summarising policy announcements each year under its banner. Achievements attributed to the Covenant in interviews and focus groups during this research included: the Strategy for our Veterans; Armed Forces Liaison Officers; the Office for Veterans' Affairs; amended reservist policies in businesses; guaranteed interview schemes; the suspension of mobile phone contracts whilst personnel are deployed overseas; and improvements in education policy. However, the highest praise for the impact of the Covenant was in health policy and delivery, at times attributed to the higher visibility of health issues in personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan at the time of the Covenant's introduction:

“If you look at health then I think there’s no doubt, I don’t know anyone who disagrees that health has improved enormously over the decade.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

“Before the Covenant and the Murrison Report, the NHS was doing next to nothing to support the Armed Forces community. We have come a long way from then to now.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

Whilst there may be further still to go in healthcare, one measure of its success can be found in that by 2015 the Covenant was written into the NHS constitution in England ensuring that its principles are embedded in health service delivery.³⁸

However, where health policy may have been referenced as a success story in general, areas of policy were highlighted where there was still further to go. For some, the success of the first decade of the Covenant was the “low hanging fruit”³⁹, whilst the more complex issues remain.

“The Covenant has played some part in helping sustain community support and public support for veterans, and the current serving community, so I think it’s done some good... but I’ve no doubt whatever that there are still very real shortcomings in the way the nation looks after those who serve and have served and to that extent I don’t think the Covenant has been a magic bullet.”
(Political stakeholder)

Whether it is persistent issues with accessing dental treatment due to mobility, the treatment of non-UK personnel, veterans and their families in the immigration

system, or the provision of in-Service accommodation, examples of areas where there was an enduring perception that the Covenant has not made an impact were repeatedly referenced by charitable stakeholders in research interviews. Additionally, a review of the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Reports over the last decade reveals unresolved issues from observer comments repeated year on year, whilst commitments outlined by HM Government appear inconsistently over the years without always clear resolution. For example, a commitment to tackling alcohol misuse appears in the Covenant tracker in 2014, 2016 and 2018 before being dropped from future reports with no tangible outcome reported.⁴⁰

Yet the Covenant’s achievement may not be best demonstrated through the prism of specific policy improvements and initiatives that risk being subject to political will. A theme that permeated the interviews from all sectors was that the Covenant provided a conversation starter, or a framework, for discussions and action:

“Covenant links with the local community have been great and I think if nothing else it builds dialogue between local authorities, local councils and all of that kind of thing and bigger business.”
(Serving personnel focus group)

“I can’t emphasize enough that as policy maker working across government with the third sector, with the private sector, having a framework that is signed up to by everybody is really really useful.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

“Yeah, it’s made government ministers and all devolved governments sit up and think about veterans. Which they probably weren’t doing before, and it’s given them a framework and a statutory responsibility now.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

As outlined in the previous chapter, it was the original intent of government to enable the creation of a stable and permanent framework which, whilst the operational details may change over time, would embed the concept of the Covenant in policy development. As one charity stakeholder put it, “the Covenant in and of itself doesn’t achieve anything; it’s a moral force and common parlance that gains meaning based on political or public sentiment.”⁴¹ For welfare staff in the charity sector and local authorities, this has enabled the delivery of local forums and boards providing a holistic package of support to locally resident members of the Armed Forces community.



The Covenant as a presentational tool

For all the progress of the last decade however, there is considerable debate as to whether the Covenant is a cause or just a symptom of a prominent desire to support the Armed Forces, veterans and their families. Whilst progress may have been attributed to the Covenant, for some interviewees a question remained as to whether the Covenant was largely a marketing device for activities and initiatives that would have happened whether a Covenant was present or not.

Businesses who had signed it were viewed, both externally and sometimes internally, as having done so for presentational reasons, not because it obliged them to take action, with it noted that lower-tier Covenant recognition award schemes were easy to obtain without much commitment.

“Corporate Covenants, meanwhile, seem to be little more than a promotional exercise for Government and business, with few meaningful commitments and mostly lip service being paid to the Armed Forces community and Covenant.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

Within local and national Governments, a similar query was posed. A previous minister of the Scottish Government who held the veterans brief remarked to us that issues that made it to the fore and were addressed, were done so due to political and external influences, not due to the Covenant. Equally policy makers and deliverers interviewed referenced that although the Covenant spells it out, the principle of addressing iniquity is not unique to the Armed Forces.

“It is difficult to say whether back when those provisions would be made, was it specifically [due to] the Covenant, or was it just the right thing to do?”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

Where local government was excelling at delivering against the promise of the Covenant, it was noted that “you could map almost identically people who are good at the Covenant were good because they were just good local authorities, full stop. It was nothing to do with how many people you had with [Covenant] champions.”⁴² As the 2017 Shared intelligence report, *Our Community, Our Covenant* outlines:

“In the vast majority of places in which we carried out the initial deep dives, action to meet the needs of members of the Armed Forces Community was already in place before the Covenant was introduced. This reflects our perception that where the councils are seen to be successful in meeting the needs of the Armed Forces Community it is because it is seen as core council business rather than an add on in response to the introduction of the Covenant... In only one of our initial deep dive sites was the Covenant itself reported to have had a galvanising effect on action locally. In most cases the driving force for achieving the outcomes envisaged in the Covenant has been one or two individuals in the place who have used the Covenant to reinforce the need for action. In the vast majority of cases these individuals, often council officers, are former members of the Armed Forces or have close family links with a member or former member of the Armed Forces. The Covenant has been important in providing a clear context for discussions within the council, for action with service departments, particularly those concerned with housing, schools and employment, and as the underpinning of and focus for collaboration with the Armed Forces, the relevant charities and partner organisations.”⁴³

Yet even if the Armed Forces Covenant is seen as a marketing tool on which to hang achievements and policies, that in itself provides a mechanism for change. Indeed, if as earlier referenced, it exists as a “common parlance that gains meaning based on political or public sentiment”, it was noted in our interviews that it is a relationship that feeds into itself and drives the improvements it sets out to facilitate:

“The Covenant has contributed to the recognition of veterans ... Generally, it’s raised awareness.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

“The Covenant has helped to raise the profile of the Armed Forces and the problems that service leavers/families have in these difficult times, as well as those families constantly moving around. Awareness of the unique needs of veterans in organisations such as the NHS has improved.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

“I think where the Covenant started to make a real difference was in that profile, in that awareness raising and finding the focal point.”
(Political stakeholder)



Crown copyright, 2013

A focus on the positive contribution of the Armed Forces community to UK society has both been a key recommendation of charities and academics, as well as a policy desire of the UK Government over the last few years.⁴⁴ The UK Government's *Strategy for our Veterans* published in 2018, set out to both ensure, "the UK population value veterans and understand their diverse experiences and culture" and that "veterans feel that their service and experience is recognised and valued by society."⁴⁵ Delivery and understanding of the Covenant relies on the positive sentiment of the public and policy makers to achieve its outcomes, yet can drive that sentiment higher. Any attempt to achieve the *Strategy for our Veterans* aims in this arena therefore would benefit from placing the Covenant at its core.

RECOMMENDATION:

To further their commitment to improving awareness of the positive contribution of the Armed Forces and to ensure veterans feel recognised for their Service, the UK and devolved governments' should place promotion of the Armed Forces Covenant at the heart of its messaging. This should include a dedicated programme of Covenant promotion activity within the next iteration of the Strategy for our Veterans Action plan.

Delivering for the whole community



The policy initiatives and awareness raising activity that the Covenant has delivered will have undoubtedly benefited thousands of members of the Armed Forces community in the UK. However, interviewees varied in their allocation of who within that community has benefited most and who has been left behind. Whilst one interviewee queried

whether it has done anything for those that have "just done OK"⁴⁶, for others the contrasts fell more starkly but with little consensus:

"I think a lot of the early work of the Covenant has actually been about families, and, you know things like access to education and access to health care and what have you which has been great."
(Charity sector stakeholder)

"Greater focus is now afforded to serving personnel under the Covenant, whereas in the early years the focus had been predominately on veterans."
(Serving personnel focus group)

"I would say that probably serving personnel have benefitted the most."
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

"Too much of a mindset that the Covenant is just about Veterans and forget it covers those serving."
(Local government stakeholder)

However, there were some specific groups where opinion coalesced that not enough has been done over the initial lifespan of the Covenant. The injured and bereaved were highlighted as where "we are failing more."⁴⁷ Equally on Reservists, multiple stakeholders expressed a similar view to one local government stakeholder that the "Covenant [has] not always caught up with that change in focus".⁴⁸ The Armed Forces Covenant annual reports similarly reflect a reduced focus on Reserves over time, with dedicated narrative sections in early years falling away over the decade. For many however, it was the needs of serving personnel, veterans and their families living in, or originating from, other countries that had suffered through being overlooked:

"But the challenges for that cohort are unbelievable. minimum income threshold, the cost of visas, all of that stuff. And somehow over the last few years, we just got nowhere. We've got absolutely nowhere."
(Charity sector stakeholder)

"[Non-UK] serving personnel... have to pay for settlement status. And surely that means that their status as serving personnel is putting them at a disadvantage, and I would therefore think that the Covenant would have something to say about it, but historically it hasn't."
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

Whilst some issues for those who live in other countries, or are non-UK by birth, fall within the jurisdiction of the UK's borders, and therefore the direct influence of authorities and Government departments, there are others which may originate overseas. Over the first decade of the Covenant, activity has been on the whole restricted to the former, and to the exclusion of the latter. It is undoubtedly more difficult for a UK based government or authority to provide a commitment against disadvantage between citizens where the comparators span borders and oceans. Yet a failure to address these issues can result in serving families impacted on accessing health and benefits when stationed or resident overseas, or veterans unable to access treatment pathways for a Service-related injury due to differing healthcare structures. It is also an exclusion by choice rather than policy design. The Covenant remains unrestricted by geographical boundaries in its wording, and if the "low hanging fruit"⁴⁹ were the focus of address in the first decade, the complexities of supporting those who reside overseas are a challenge that could be addressed in the next.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Government should set out to identify and address the needs of reservists and their families as a priority activity, with reinstatement of dedicated narrative within the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report.

RECOMMENDATION:

Geographical restrictions placed on the delivery of Armed Forces Covenant should be overcome with a desire to support members of the Armed Forces community wherever they reside and face disadvantage or are eligible for special consideration.

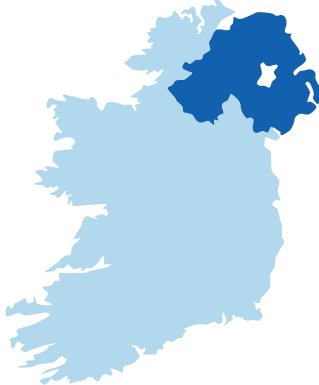
RECOMMENDATION:

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office should be routinely included within the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report to update on initiatives they provide to support the Armed Forces Community overseas.

Barriers to successful delivery
Whether it is a cohort within the Armed Forces community who may have missed out on a focus of activity or a repeatedly promised improvement that fails to materialise, each perceived incident where the Covenant has failed to deliver is an incident where the promise of the nation has not been met.

Our research highlighted several barriers to the successful delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant over the first ten years of its life. Whether it was a lack of knowledge, resources, definition, or political will, each barrier will require extra attention over the next decade if the promise is to be fulfilled. These barriers are explored in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Northern Ireland – a different story



Whilst much of the discussion of this report is applicable to the delivery of the Covenant across the UK, one part stood out repeatedly in our research as a unique story. Northern Ireland has not implemented the Covenant in the same way as England, Wales and Scotland despite the Covenant being a pledge of the UK Government to the Armed Forces.

From the RBL's own campaigns, we are aware that where implementation of policy to address a Covenant disadvantage happens in England, Wales and Scotland, it rarely produces a correlative result in Northern Ireland. In 2017 as a result of the RBL and Poppyscotland's 'Insult to Injury' campaign calling for a correction to social care charging guidance to protect the compensation payments of injured veterans, the UK, Scottish and Welsh governments updated their guidance accordingly, yet veterans in Northern Ireland are still subject to the legacy rules. Similarly, RBL and Poppyscotland's successful census question campaign, 'Count Them In', produced a census question on veteran status in England, Wales (2021) and Scotland (2022) but only a data linkage exercise in Northern Ireland.

Interviewees in our research highlighted: the non-existence of the concept of priority treatment in Northern Ireland for veterans, a key pledge within the Armed Forces Covenant's health commitment; ongoing issues with housing allocation and adaptations; legacy investigation issues; and a lack of forums for Covenant progress within the structures of civil society. It was suggested that for veterans and their families, seeing such contrast between the nations of the UK can leave them disillusioned that the Covenant is not working for them. In our interviews, lack of progress in line with their UK devolved counterparts, was acknowledged, in many cases regretted, but not universally condemned. Both the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the equality legislation of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act⁵⁰ were alluded to by interviewees as perceived unsurpassable barriers to the implementation of the Covenant, with some expressing incredulity that the full implementation of the Covenant in Northern Ireland would materially change much, as a result of other factors.

Other barriers identified included a reluctance to self-

identify as a member of the Armed Forces community to statutory providers, as well as a lack of infrastructure for recording such a status should it be declared preventing targeted support to be delivered, whilst a lack of resources and powers within support agencies and local authorities for some negated any goodwill to implement Covenant activities.

Further adding to the confusion of the Covenant's status, progress that in a Great Britain context may be referred to under a Covenant banner was evidenced. Councils in Northern Ireland are statutorily required to appoint a veterans' champion, who can act as an advocate on behalf of veterans who are reluctant to self-identify or can provide informal support solutions to Armed Forces specific concerns and issues. The Northern Ireland Veterans Support Office and the recent introduction of a Veterans' Commissioner were also highlighted as aids to co-ordination and awareness.

Northern Ireland's approach was suggested as a model for the implementation of the Covenant for those living

overseas. Through focussing on outcomes as opposed to a particular brand, as Northern Ireland stakeholders reported happens across the island of Ireland, it was suggested that delivery of a Covenant in spirit, if not name, could provide support around the world for UK Armed Forces veterans and their families living overseas.

Finding a solution to the variable implementation of the Covenant in Northern Ireland is a challenge, and one that is beset by political and cultural barriers. However, there are barriers that it is within the remit of Governments to address. Increased support and resourcing to bespoke veterans and Armed Forces community services, such as veterans' champions, through UK agencies such as Veterans UK or arms-length charities such as the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, may have a tangible impact on the ground whilst avoiding accusations of political preferential treatment within Northern Ireland's political establishment. The first decade of the

Covenant has also created ambiguity of the Covenant's status in Northern Ireland. This has caused confusion, a lack of co-ordination and risks engendering resentment between veterans residing across the UK. If the Covenant is to be delivered for the entire UK Armed Forces community there must also be clarity as to whether the Armed Forces Covenant exists in Northern Ireland or not, and if it does, how it will be implemented. Due to the political concerns, this review should be led by the Northern Ireland Assembly with support from the UK Government as appropriate. This review should not be undertaken lightly, and we are cognisant of the political implications that a misplaced step along this road may cause. However, the narrative that emerges from our research is that the second decade of the Covenant should be one where the thornier issues come to the fore and are not pushed further down the road at the expense of clarity for those who need support the most.



Crown dependencies and the Covenant

The Covenant is between the people of the United Kingdom, HM Government and the Armed Forces. However, one last note on delivery must go to the Crown dependencies of the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey who are not part of the UK and so not formally part of the Covenant. However, they have all mirrored and applied the Covenant locally, including through the appointment of Armed Forces Champions, steering groups and various initiatives. Also, although not part of the UK, they have been eligible to apply for grants under the Armed Forces Covenant Fund. This would appear to create something of an anomaly, as other locations that may contain members of the Armed Forces community but are not part of the UK do not sit within the scope of the Covenant.

The Armed Forces Act 2011 that introduced the Covenant into legislation allows that, “Her Majesty may by Order in Council [to] provide for any of the provisions of this Act”⁵¹ to extend to any of the Channel Islands; the Isle of Man; and any of the British overseas territories.

Clarity on the position of the Covenant in Crown dependencies, overseas territories, and other states in which members of the Armed Forces community may reside would be desirable.



Crown copyright, 2008

RECOMMENDATION:
Further research and analysis of the views of the Armed Forces community in Northern Ireland should be carried out to establish their views on the Covenant being more openly discussed and the principles of the Covenant.

RECOMMENDATION:
Following research, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the UK Government should produce a roadmap for the implementation of the Covenant in Northern Ireland, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for delivery bodies supported by an information campaign that sets out what the Covenant is and is not.

RECOMMENDATION:
The UK Government should explore how the outcomes focussed approach to Armed Forces community support across the island of Ireland can provide best practice for wider implementation of the Covenant’s principles overseas.

RECOMMENDATION:
The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust should create a multi-year funding stream for initiatives and activities in Northern Ireland to help embed Covenant activity via apolitical funding and resourcing.

RECOMMENDATION:
The UK Government should clarify the applicability of the Armed Forces Covenant in Crown Dependencies, with a desire for resident members of the UK Armed Forces Community to have parity in the protections of the Covenant as their UK based contemporaries.



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Chapter 4: The Principles of the Covenant

The Armed Forces Covenant contains two key principles:

“Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.”

“Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.”⁵²

Given equal billing in the Covenant, between them the principles⁵³ lay at the heart of all that has been, and will be, delivered under its name. One decade on however the question arises as to whether these principles are still the correct underpinning for the evolving needs of the community.

Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services

The principle of no disadvantage as a result of Service is for many the principle that encapsulates the Covenant and what it sets out to achieve. It is where many interviewees in our research attributed most of the progress of the lifespan of the Covenant.

“No disadvantage, I think there’s been a lot of work over the last 10 years that has helped move things on.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

“How there is disadvantage, why there is disadvantage and what you can do for the service families in order to close that disadvantage and in that, this particular pillar, I think it’s been very, very successful, because it’s given that framework to the conversation.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

Correspondingly, it was to this principle that businesses interviewed were more inclined to adhere in the provision of products and services to the Armed Forces community, rather than providing concessions such as discount schemes that delivered beyond addressing a disadvantage.

Reflecting the progress and policy developments noted in the previous chapter, a feeling of success within the principle of no disadvantage is borne out through analysis of the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Reports of the last decade. With few exceptions, the achievements listed are framed within a narrative of removing disadvantages from the Armed Forces community:

“For several years the [Schools’ Admission] Code has included provisions intended to benefit Service children, as well as a general requirement on admission authorities to ensure that arrangements in their area support the Government’s commitment to removing disadvantage for Service children”⁵⁴

“This is in recognition of the fact that members of the Armed Forces may be particularly disadvantaged by a local connection requirement because of the need to move from base to base”⁵⁵

Within the previously noted improvements in health provision over the course of the first decade of the Covenant, it was noted that it was the principle of no disadvantage that provided “the ability to use the hook for the disadvantage against a potentially vulnerable cohort” (*Statutory sector stakeholder*) rather than introducing any form of perceived advantage within the health service.

Whilst the concept of no disadvantage bears fruit in an exploration of practical implementation of the Covenant, it equally resonates with all sectors of society interviewed as a principle they could support. Within our interviews the terminology of labelling the Armed Forces community as a potentially ‘disadvantaged’ group was critiqued by one contributor for the impact it could have on veteran wellbeing, but overall, our interviewees found it useful as a framework for deciding on the application of the Covenant. For one councillor from an area with a significant Armed Forces community, it represented an idea of treating People “fairly”⁵⁷, a term that does not appear in the original text of the Covenant but was oft repeated by others in discussion of the principle.



Whilst in isolation, it may be meant benignly as shorthand for the principle, the interchangeable nature of a definable concept of no disadvantage with a much more subjective and abstract notion of fairness risks an unnecessary and potentially harmful dilution of the Covenant.

RECOMMENDATION:
Authors of any publication or statement that references the Covenant should ensure that they use the specific wording of the principles as outlined in the Covenant itself to avoid confusion and dilution of them.

Polling of the UK general public showed a similarly strong level of support for this principle, with a net total of 89% agreeing with the principle. This percentage rose as respondents got older, from 76% of those aged 18-24 strongly or somewhat agreeing with the principle rising to peak at net 94% of those aged over 55.⁵⁸



To what extent do you personally agree or disagree with each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: No member of the Armed Forces community should face disadvantage in the provision of public and commercial services compared to any other citizen.⁵⁹

	Gen Pop	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Strongly agree	68%	49%	61%	64%	71%	77%
Somewhat agree	21%	28%	25%	23%	20%	17%
Somewhat disagree	3%	9%	3%	2%	1%	1%
Strongly disagree	1%	0%	1%	2%	1%	1%
Don't know	8%	15%	10%	8%	8%	5%

RECOMMENDATION:
The UK Government and the wider Armed Forces Charity Sector should conduct further research into the attitudes towards the UK military community amongst those aged 18-24 with the aim of creating bespoke marketing and information materials about the importance of the Armed Forces Covenant.

Furthermore, when asked whether the support this principle sets out to provide goes far enough, just over a fifth of respondents (22%) believed that it did not, compared to just 1% who felt it went too far.⁶⁰

“Principle 1: The Armed Forces community should not only ‘face no disadvantage compared to other citizens...’ They should be in a way more advantageous position.”
(YouGov survey respondent)

It is a desire for outcomes beyond a concept of no disadvantage mirrored by a policy official interviewed in our research:

“The principles of the Covenant are really important and ensuring that veterans and their families are not at disadvantage through their service is really, really, really important and the country has made a commitment to ensure that. But in order to deliver for veterans. I think we need to go beyond the Covenant.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)



Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

Where there is a potential concern that the principle of no disadvantage may not go far enough, the Covenant’s second principle allows for special consideration to be applied. Yet particularly within current policy makers and officials that we spoke to there appeared a reluctance to engage with this principle to the same degree as the first. For some, there was a lack of knowledge that the Covenant would allow for a degree of priority or special treatment:

“The big thing is everyone is treated as a local, everyone treated fairly - not special treatment.”
(Local government stakeholder)

“That doesn’t necessarily always mean you get an advantageous deal, because it’s not about advantage it’s about stopping disadvantage.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

However, within those who acknowledged it, a common concern articulated was that it was a “double-edged sword”⁶¹ and that offering a degree of special consideration to the Armed Forces community would “breed resentment”⁶² within the general population.

“...society may question whether a veteran having served for one day is strong enough. If they’re getting access to specific pathways it will be seen as a positive advantage rather than removing discrimination.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

To what extent do you personally agree or disagree with each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.⁶⁴

	Gen Pop	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Strongly agree	57%	34%	42%	53%	61%	70%
Somewhat agree	29%	38%	39%	30%	29%	23%
Somewhat disagree	4%	11%	5%	4%	2%	2%
Strongly disagree	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Don’t know	8%	16%	12%	10%	7%	4%

The perception that the application of the principle of special treatment will negatively impact on goodwill and support for the Armed Forces community is not universally held, nor borne out in existing evidence. In contrast, for former Defence ministers of the UK Government we spoke to, the concept of special treatment not only continues to be fundamental to delivering on the Covenant’s aims but would be welcomed by the general public:

“What I would be less certain about is that the hopes and aspirations we had back at the time the Covenant was put in place that there would be a degree of priority for veterans and Service personnel across the NHS. I’m not at all confident that has happened in any comprehensive or meaningful sense, so I would say that’s still very much unfinished business.”
(Political stakeholder)

“I think that if you said to the public, do you think a member of our Armed Forces who suffered an injury whilst on duty, in the course of their service, they’d say well they should go to the front of the queue.”
(Political stakeholder)

The polling carried out by YouGov for this research, echoes the notion that the principle of special consideration carries support amongst the public. Only 5% of the UK general public somewhat or strongly disagree with it as a principle, whilst a net 87% agree. Even amongst those who do not know anyone who has served, where support for the principle was lowest, 83% still somewhat or strongly agreed with it. Furthermore, over a quarter (26%) of the

public felt the support delivered via this principle should go further compared to just 3% who felt it went too far.⁶³

Furthermore, where there was criticism of the principle from others in our research, it was not concerned with the contention of the principle, but that it would benefit from greater clarity and understanding:

“The principle of priority treatment for veteran’s attributable health conditions (under special consideration) is poorly understood by some within the veteran community as well as some health care providers.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

“On special consideration. It would be more helpful to have a better sort of definition of what that means because of the murkiness of the Covenant. I think specifically people have been singled out for warranting special consideration. You know the widows, the physically and mentally harmed by their service. I think having singled them out it seems to me wholly unfair not to actually then describe what that special consideration will be. I think in that respect it should be more explicit.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

Further research may be necessary to ascertain whether specific examples of special treatment are as welcomed as our research, including the polling of the general public, indicates. However, the findings imply that the second decade of the Covenant allows for an opportunity to move beyond just addressing disadvantage and exploring further what practical delivery of special consideration can entail.

“Both these principles are critical to the delivery of support to veterans. Special consideration however needs to continue to be given to those significantly affected by their service where they have been severely injured in combat as the memory of conflict diminishes.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

“Principle 2: most definitely those, and/or their dependants, who have given lives or been injured should get support. “Special consideration” in some, but not all cases, means individuals and their families could lose out despite having given a lot for their country.”
(YouGov survey respondent)

RECOMMENDATION:
Further research should be carried out into the impact on attitudes towards the Armed Forces of the implementation of instances of special consideration as set out in the principles of the Covenant.

RECOMMENDATION:
MoD should develop a best practice guide on the application of special consideration within national and devolved government policy making ensuring that it goes beyond just addressing disadvantages.

RECOMMENDATION:
Armed Forces Covenant Annual Reports should outline which principle of the Armed Forces Covenant a policy relates to, with an emphasis on ensuring that the principle of special consideration is honoured.

Chapter 5: Knowledge and Understanding

When the Covenant was introduced in 2011, the UK was heavily engaged in military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, placing the Armed Forces and the care provided for the wounded, injured and sick prominently within the media and society. Whilst these operations have ended and the Armed Forces community is no longer at the forefront of the public discourse, recent support to the nation’s response to the Coronavirus pandemic and the withdrawal of the last troops from Afghanistan in 2021 continue to maintain their visibility albeit through an ever-changing context. The Covenant now finds itself in a changed political and societal backdrop to that which it was born and after a decade of implementation, a question remains as to how well it is understood.

Public perceptions

In conjunction with YouGov, RBL and Poppyscotland carried out UK wide public polling on awareness and understanding of the Covenant in May 2021. Only 17 percent, or one in five, of the general population had heard of the Armed Forces Covenant prior to taking the survey. Whilst just over half of veterans of the UK Armed Forces had heard of the Covenant, for those who had no links to the Armed Forces community, this level of awareness dropped to just 1 in 10.



Have you ever heard of the Armed Forces Covenant? By relationship to the Armed Forces Community⁶⁵

	Yes	No
Total Gen Population^	17%	83%
I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve*	83%	17%
I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	56%	44%
A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	36%	64%
A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	25%	75%
I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	29%	71%
I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	20%	80%
I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	10%	90%
Don't know	12%	88%

[^]Base of 2130 UK Adults

^{*NB} Currently serving included for reference however it should be noted that only 1% of survey respondents identified as currently serving

The above findings are in line with previous research by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) on awareness of the Covenant. In 2018, FiMT conducted research into public perceptions of veterans and the Armed Forces. When asked about the awareness of the Covenant, a similar 16% of the survey respondents had ‘heard of it and know a little about it.’⁶⁶

After 10 years in legislation, annual reports to Parliament, and millions of pounds in funding and initiatives from all sectors of society under its banner, overall awareness of it remains low. If the Covenant is to be a promise from all of society, the general public needs to have a stronger awareness of what the Covenant is and what support it can offer.

**“I think more should be known about it
- I believe it is a good idea”**
(YouGov survey respondent)

The underpinning ethos of the Covenant is a recognition of the sacrifices and contribution of those who have served and their families on

behalf of the nation and in many respects public perceptions of the contribution of veterans to society are positive and accurate. Research has found that respondents recognise veterans’ strong team working skills, resilience under pressure, and effective leadership qualities, with positive word associations also often felt more keenly than negative word associations.⁶⁷ The same survey also found that respondents across all age groups registered above 60% (between 68%-87%) when asked if veterans make a valuable contribution to society.⁶⁸ All of the above suggests that messaging concerning the positive attributes of Service personnel and veterans is successfully cutting through. However, in other areas that may be vital to reinforcing that recognition of the sacrifices of Service life that provide a justification for the Covenant, progress is slower. A survey carried out for RBL in 2019 found that 69% of people said they know little or very little about what the Armed Forces do on a day-to-day basis.⁶⁹ A similar poll carried out by Lord Ashcroft in 2012 found that a marginally lower 62% of UK adults had little or very little understanding of what the Armed Forces do on a day-to-day basis.⁷⁰



Furthermore, previous research has highlighted how public perceptions of sacrifices and negative impacts of Service may not be aligned with the reality of veteran life. Research by Ipsos MORI, revealed that a large majority of the public (65%) think that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is much more common among the Armed Forces than the general public, with only 6% correctly identifying that PTSD levels at that time were generally similar across the civilian population and the Armed Forces community, with the exception of certain groups.⁷¹ The Ipsos MORI research further revealed that a majority (53%) think that the suicide rate is higher among the Armed Forces population than the public, when research suggested that it was lower overall, despite some exceptions in certain cohorts⁷², and that 40% of the public think that homelessness is higher among the Armed Forces than the general public, when robust data is limited to London, where veterans of the UK Armed Forces constitute around 2% of the rough sleeping population.⁷³ Rates of PTSD amongst certain cohorts may have grown since 2016 and new evidence is being produced on suicide rates within the community, but if the construct of the Armed Forces Covenant relies on public and political will, it must also meet the needs where research and evidence shows they exist, and not just where they are perceived to exist. In RBL and Poppyscotland's response to the UK Government's Veterans Strategy we called for support to break through the echo chambers, by recommending that all government departments conduct proactive and positive social media campaigns with content outlining measures being taken to support veterans or services already available to them, incorporating accurate and engaging stories and facts about the veteran community. Whilst we recognise the efforts and progress that have been made, it is a recommendation that still stands today.

The research also suggests that awareness of the Armed Forces must extend beyond just promoting the positive

contribution to society of the Armed Forces community: for the Covenant to be a promise in which the whole of society has a stake, understanding of the Armed Forces' work and the sacrifices involved must be brought closer to home. Promoting the Armed Forces and their unique contribution provides an opportunity to explain the role of the Covenant and why it is necessary for the Armed Forces community. This would be beneficial especially in those sections of the population that do not have a connection to the Armed Forces community.

“...This covenant needs to be publicised. I knew nothing about it until now, and sadly, I bet I don't come across it again for some time.”
(YouGov survey respondent)

“Should be better publicised and know about and referred to”
(YouGov survey respondent)

“The Armed Forces having the Covenant is great, it's good and it's absolutely right thing to do because it's helped to raise our profile across society.”
(YouGov survey respondent)

Although only 17% of the general public had heard of the Covenant prior to our YouGov survey, respondents were asked what they thought the function of the Armed Forces Covenant was. A similar question was asked in the FiMT funded YouGov survey to those who had heard of the Covenant in 2018. In the three years interim, understanding of the Covenant may have decreased, with those familiar with it returning lower recognition of its functions by 2021.

Which, if any, of the following do you think are functions of the Armed Forces Covenant? (Please select all that apply)⁷⁶

	General Population (%)	General population (previously heard of the Covenant) (%)	2018 FiMT/Yougov general population (previously heard of the covenant)* (%)
Looks after/supports people who have served in the UK Armed Forces	29%	48%	66%
Looks after/supports people currently serving in the UK Armed Forces	24%	42%	63%
Looks after/supports the family of people currently or previously in the UK Armed forces	27%	46%	60%
Looks after widows/widowers of people who served in the Armed Forces	27%	42%	58%
Looks after the families (e.g. children, parents, etc.) of people who have been killed in service in the Armed Forces	27%	45%	n/a
Upholds the nations obligations to the Armed Forces (e.g. recognition of the sacrifices made by those who have performed military duty)	24%	54%	55%
It is a way of showing support for the Armed Forces	18%	37%	32%
Gives advantages to serving personnel over other sectors of society	7%	15%	15%
Legally enforceable rights (e.g. freedom from discrimination, the right to education, etc.) for members of the Armed Forces community	15%	28%	n/a
Other	0%	1%	3%
Don't know	48%	13%	n/a

⁷⁶N.B FiMT/YouGov question: Which, if any, of the following are things you think the Armed Forces Covenant is/ does? Please select all that apply. Survey results included for indicative reference only as whilst efforts were made to align the question, options for answers included two extra options (“It's a Government Organisation” and “It's a Charity/fund”) and the preceding questions were not aligned.

As the survey found that 83% of respondents had not heard about the Covenant, it may be expected that nearly half (48%) of the public didn't know what role it played in supporting the Armed Forces. However even amongst those who had heard of it prior to our polling, less than half of respondents believed it was there to provide any particular cohort within the Armed Forces Community with support.⁷⁷ This raises issues around how easily the Covenant can be explained to the general public. It is clear that the statement commonly given as 'a promise by the nation' does not adequately elucidate the Covenant and how it supports the Armed Forces community. Survey respondents were positive of the concept if unsure of what it means in practice:

“It should be had for people who lost their families and the people who have served to connect with society after serving”
(YouGov survey respondent)

“I’d like to know what its main purpose is”
(YouGov survey respondent)

“It is a good concept but needs to be more widely known”
(YouGov survey respondent)

The findings of the YouGov polling and previous research show that it is necessary to increase awareness of the Covenant amongst the general population but drawing attention to a statement of intent is insufficient. Any publicity drive should focus on how and where the Covenant provides support. As the Armed Forces Bill 2021⁷⁸ is set to introduce further complexity on the differing levels of accountability within the Covenant's delivery, this need is likely to be exacerbated. Using specific events such as Armed Forces Day, Remembrance in November and other prominent anniversaries, there are good opportunities to both raise the profile of the Armed Forces and explain the Covenant in more detail and how it supports the wider community.

RECOMMENDATION:
All government departments should conduct proactive and positive social media campaigns with content outlining measures being taken under the Armed Forces Covenant to support the Armed Forces community or services already available to them, incorporating the rationale for the measure alongside accurate and engaging stories and facts about the Armed Forces community.

The Charitable Sector
In contrast to the general population surveyed, Armed Forces charitable sector representatives interviewed for this research were familiar with, and held a good understanding of the Covenant, seeing it as a positive for the Armed Forces community. As outlined in preceding chapters, they credit it with developing services for veterans and increasing awareness and understanding of the community.

Beneficiary facing RBL welfare staff surveyed for this research, equally had a strong awareness of the Covenant and how it could support those who come to the RBL for support.

“As a housing specialist, I have used the AFC to ensure a higher banding priority is applied and most Council’s do comply with this. However, the application of the commitment is not consistent across all Local Authorities.”
(RBL welfare staff survey respondent)

“In the early days we worked with the local Covenant to get childcare and nursery places for families on deployment. Latterly it has been to use the influence of the local team to push for housing for vulnerable veterans.”
(RBL welfare staff survey respondent)

Whilst the Covenant has been instrumental in improving and developing services for veterans, it was suggested by one charity interviewee that it was widely misunderstood by service providers and the Armed Forces when it was first introduced but research and work done by the charities has helped to increase understanding of the Covenant.

However, whilst staff at Armed Forces charities may have a strong understanding of the Covenant, there is more that they can do on a corporate level to highlight the role of the Covenant. Analysis of the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme, which highlights commitments to the principles of the Covenant in business, found that only a small number of Armed Forces charities have received either Bronze, Silver or Gold Award status.⁷⁹ Whilst of the estimated 1,888 Armed Forces charities⁸⁰, not all will be in a position where they are eligible to apply for the scheme, these low numbers may also reflect the scheme's focus on and orientation towards the private sector. This means its parameters do not always fit well with Armed Forces charities despite their evident daily commitment to the principles of the Covenant. These issues around the scheme's scope are considered further below.



Charities, along with government, can have a role in increasing awareness of the Covenant in wider society. Through promoting real life examples of where the Covenant has worked for veterans and explaining the benefits, they can support a public campaign promoting the Covenant.

RECOMMENDATION:
The Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo) should work with Defence Relationship Management to ensure the Employer Recognition Scheme is aligned to the work of the Armed Forces charity sector and enables member organisations to pursue scheme awards.

RECOMMENDATION:
Armed Forces charities with award status from the Employer Recognition Scheme should promote the Covenant by highlighting the ERS award status branding on external communications and providing internal training and communications on embedding the Covenant into workplace practices and values.

RECOMMENDATION:
The Armed Forces charity sector should support the UK and devolved governments in any Covenant publicity drive by promoting real life examples of where the Covenant has worked for the Armed Forces community, explaining the benefits.

The Armed Forces Community

If the Covenant is a promise between the UK and the Armed Forces community, one arguable measure of success is the understanding of its remit and impact amongst those for whom it is tasked to provide. It is worrying therefore that 67% of RBL welfare staff surveyed felt that there was not enough awareness of the Covenant amongst the Armed Forces community.⁸¹ More positively, although only 1% of respondents to RBL and Poppyscotland’s YouGov general population survey for this research reported that they were currently serving, and 5% had previously served in the UK Armed Forces, these cohorts within the respondents were those most likely to have heard of it (56% and 36% respectively). Yet, free text respondents to the survey from individuals who know someone who is or has served indicated there were gaps in awareness:



“I have never heard of it, despite my partner serving in the Navy, so it does not appear to be a particular prominent feature of public life.”
(YouGov survey respondent)

“My partner is currently in the Armed Forces and I’ve never heard of this Covenant so that leads me to believe that perhaps not enough is being done.”
(YouGov survey respondent)

However, the Armed Forces community is not a homogenous group, consisting of current and ex-servicemen and women both regular and reserve, and their families. Within this diverse population, knowledge and awareness of the Covenant varies.

The Ministry of Defence’s internal barometer of opinion within the serving population, the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS), reports that over three quarters of personnel (77%) have at least heard of the Armed Forces Covenant. Royal Navy and Royal Air Force personnel are more likely to have heard of the Covenant (81% and 82% respectively) compared to the Army and Royal Marines (75% and 73% respectively). Officers nearly universally report that they were more likely to have heard of the Armed Forces Covenant (97%) compared to Other Ranks (72%).⁸²





Crown copyright, 2011

These figures show a strong awareness of the Covenant within the Services, but throughout research for this report, stakeholders pointed to the current serving community as not always being as aware as the AFCAS indicates, or if it is, the knowledge is not as ubiquitous on the practicalities of how it can support them. In interviews with serving personnel, the Covenant was something that they referred to as being in the background and of which they had some awareness.

“I was vaguely aware about the Covenant when it kicked off 10 years ago. And to be honest, that stayed pretty vague until I got involved with it myself. I think it’s for most Service personnel. I think it’s something that people are aware of in the background, but probably don’t necessarily know what it does for them.”

(Serving personnel focus group)

Other stakeholders argued that it did not matter whether they understood the role of the Covenant so long as the outcomes were known. As with the general public, charitable sector stakeholders and current serving personnel both noted that one of the challenges around improving understanding of the Covenant is the accessibility of the language used.

“Sometimes I think does it matter that they’ve heard of the Covenant or is it more important that they know that their family member can be guaranteed a place on hospital waiting list and still their kid will get pupil premium at the school, do they need to know that’s because of the Covenant?”

(Charity sector stakeholder)

“I think that I mean the name itself. I realise that the name is probably, it’s not possible to do anything about it, but it is quite a difficult thing. So, I think if you’re talking on a policy level with, you know, whatever part of government it’s fine. But actually, when you start to go beyond that, it doesn’t really work because what do what do we really mean by that?”

(Charity sector stakeholder)

Making the Covenant relevant to those in Service requires a reframing of the narrative. It was also apparent in our research that for those in Service it is often perceived to only be of relevance to veterans, hampering meaningful engagement.

“There’s such a strong focus in all of the comms around the Covenant in relation to veterans...I think you know we need to change the culture and the understanding of the Covenant so that we embed it in those that are serving so that they take it with.” *(Serving personnel focus group)*

“I know I could probably walk around this morning and stop five or six people and they wouldn’t really have any idea of what the Covenant is or what it does despite you know, communicating in briefing etc.”

(Serving personnel focus group)

If this review is to look back at whether the Covenant has achieved its aims, it is worth remembering that the original intent of the Covenant covered in-Service issues such as education for families and Terms and Conditions of Service, areas that should place it firmly in the experiences of those still in uniform. There have been areas as expressed in earlier chapters, where in-Service policies have been introduced such as the Service Pupil Premium. However, a lack of understanding of the Armed Forces Covenant within those that it is designed to protect, and members of the community being unaware of the recognition that the nation bestows through the pledges, brings into question that original aim. Furthermore, and arguably of more importance, it can lead to members of the community unsure of their rights, their responsibilities or their entitlements which in turn can lead to a negative experience when the reality of service provision fails to meet an unrealistic expectation.

“I think that serving personnel are most unaware of the Covenant or what it could do for them, so I think when they are approaching government services, I don’t think many wouldn’t know about it to be able to say about it, and I don’t think that many people on the other end of that frontline delivery and government services know about”

(Charity sector stakeholder)

RECOMMENDATION:

The Single Services should provide greater awareness training of the Armed Forces Covenant as part of phase one training, with further training and awareness sessions through career for all ranks and Services, including real life examples of how it can and has supported serving personnel. Materials should also be made more available for, and promoted to, families.



Crown copyright, 2012

To aid understanding of the ex-Service population's knowledge of the Covenant, we carried out a survey of the RBL membership. Initially when the RBL began to work on a campaign for the Covenant, the RBL's membership was heavily involved, lobbying their local councils and seeing the Covenant as a force for good.

“There was considerable public awareness of and support for the Covenant in the early days, and it certainly motivated the RBL's membership like never before, who went out and lobbied their councils to sign their own Covenant commitments.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

Ten years on, and the Covenant is still something that evokes strong emotions. As with the levels of understanding within the ex-Service community within the YouGov findings (56%), overall knowledge of the existence of the Covenant was high at 9 out of 10 (90%) of members surveyed stating a pre-existing awareness of it. However, members still felt that there wasn't enough awareness of the Covenant (70%) and over 80% do not believe it provides enough support for the community.⁸³

Beyond general awareness there are also issues around understanding and comprehension of the Covenant. In line with the serving population, members pointed to the language, some pointing to a long-standing issue within the Armed Forces around literacy and understanding, again noting repeatedly that the language was potentially inaccessible.

Via free text answers, many members pointed to their membership of RBL as being the only way that they were aware of the Covenant and recommended that it needs to be better promoted both within the Armed Forces community and amongst those without a Service connection.⁸⁴

In terms of understanding the Covenant many members felt that the responsibility of the Covenant was to support veterans with mental health problems and housing with many references to long-held beliefs, similar to the general population, that veterans have higher rates of street homelessness and suicide compared to the general population.

As with the Serving population, there is a risk of misunderstanding fostering negative perceptions where there may be a lack of knowledge of what the Covenant's principles entail. Some respondents pointed to the concept of "prioritisation" as falling under the principles of the Covenant but equally acknowledged that commitments such as this were "woolly and misunderstood."⁸⁵ It may not be surprising therefore that the suggestions for the next decade of the Covenant focussed largely on the Covenant

needing to be better promoted to improve awareness and understanding of the Covenant in both the Armed Forces, but also the general population:

“Broader promotion - TV etc. to explain and instil it into the populations' DNA”
(RBL membership survey respondent)

“Covenant fine. It is how it is promoted”
(RBL membership survey respondent)

Businesses and the commercial world
The Covenant seeks to deliver no disadvantage in access to commercial services, and since the Covenant was first introduced in 2011 around 7,000 businesses and organisations have signed up to that and all the principles entail.⁸⁶ Yet an understanding of the Covenant's principles may not be universally shared by all those in corporate positions who can aid the Armed Forces community where they need it.

Recent research by Natcen, Shared Intelligence and funded by Forces in Mind Trust, found that within a survey of 548 organisations, “just under a quarter (24 per cent) had heard of the Armed Forces Covenant. Eight per cent of organisations had signed the Covenant, and 28 per cent said they were quite likely or very likely to sign the Covenant over the next year.” The research went on to show that whilst larger organisations were more likely to have heard of the Covenant, it was not a knowledge shared within their staff.⁸⁷

During this research, RBL and Poppyscotland also interviewed a range of stakeholders from the corporate world to further provide qualitative evidence on their awareness of the Armed Forces community and the Covenant. Whilst awareness amongst the relatively small sample was high, as with the Natcen findings, in some cases there was a disconnect between staff within these companies. In our research it was the employees on the ground, who were trying to promote the Covenant internally, and senior management who were perceived not to understand its role. For the majority interviewed, their flagship initiatives under the Covenant focussed on employment practices such as internal staff networks, recruitment support and ensuring reservists had adequate or extra time off to carry out their Service.



Practical support for those entering the workplace from the Armed Forces community or employees struggling to balance Service life with their civilian employment has been the focus of many recommendations and initiatives over the years, driven forward within the Employer Recognition Scheme operated through Defence Relationship Management (DRM).⁸⁸ The DRM scheme is almost exclusively focussed on the practices of signatories as employers yet represents the main point of contact for business seeking to uphold their Covenant commitments. Within the criteria for an award within the DRM employer recognition scheme, it is only at the stage of obtaining a Gold award that there is significant reference beyond employment practices. Even there it is tangential, stating that, “the employer must be an exemplar within their market sector, advocating support to defence people issues to partner organisations, suppliers and customers with tangible positive results.”⁸⁹ Yet it is estimated that almost two thirds of veterans are aged over 65, and therefore in the main outside the scope of employment provisions.⁹⁰ This evidences an evolving understanding, or even a misunderstanding, of the original intent of the Covenant. The Covenant document itself places the emphasis not on employment practices, but on the delivery of commercial services and the Armed Forces Community as customers rather than employees:

“Providers of products and services should be encouraged to understand and mitigate the circumstances faced by this community, such as mobility and deployment, and welcome and cater for its members as good and valuable customers.”⁹¹



Some insight is provided by Natcen and Shared Intelligence’s finding that only around 10% “perceive a benefit in terms of helping to market services or goods or meeting organisational objectives” by signing the Covenant. Yet “almost a quarter of organisations... see potential benefits in terms of the recruitment and retention of staff.”⁹² That is not to say that commercial services have been neglected entirely over the decade. The development of Armed Forces specific services under the Covenant has relieved serving personnel from some financial burden in specific areas, for example freezing mobile phone contracts while veterans are posted overseas and banks providing residential mortgages that allow personnel to rent their properties. For veterans, the Defence Discount Scheme provides discounted access to goods and services at businesses and retailers who sign up.

“So the Covenant in business has over the last 10 years done quite a lot. You know, it’s recognized that service personnel are a unique sort of group of customers. If you like, and so lot of businesses in the financial sector in telecom sector have tweaked their policies to really to help out service personnel. Simple as that.”
(Statutory sector stakeholder)

It would be wrong therefore to claim there have been no improvements, but it is evident that there is less understanding of, and appetite for, the wider role the ethos of the Covenant can play in businesses supporting veterans, the injured and bereaved and their families beyond employment practices. An increase in understanding of the Covenant, and subsequent increase in support, both within the general public and within business may aid to reframe an understanding that the promise of the Covenant stretched beyond employment practices and into valuing the Armed Forces community as customers not just as employees.

RECOMMENDATION:
Defence Relationship Management should place more of an emphasis on rewarding special consideration and what commercial signatories can do for the community as customers alongside employees within relaunching the Defence Employer Recognition award scheme, as the Covenant Recognition scheme.



The public sector and government

The Armed Forces Covenant Annual report has, for some Government departments, provided annual evidence of awareness of the Covenant via examples of initiatives, funding and services mentioned elsewhere in this research. Yet within our survey of Westminster MPs, 63% of respondents felt that the understanding of the Covenant among the Armed Forces Community, policy makers and service providers was not aligned.⁹³ As has been explored in the previous chapter, statutory stakeholders were not always aware of the principle of special consideration or how it could be applied.

For those in the Armed Forces charitable sector working directly with beneficiaries, it was similarly noted via our qualitative research that awareness of the Covenant and specialist services varied, especially amongst those delivered through regional and devolved structures such as Jobcentre Plus or the NHS. The Covenant has supported awareness initiatives in the National Health Service such as the Military Veteran Aware Accreditation which seeks to accredit GP practices in England as veteran friendly, and the Veterans Covenant

Healthcare Alliance which seeks to improve veterans care through Veterans Aware NHS Trusts. However, awareness is varied, and our evidence suggests that select healthcare professionals should not be the only statutory professionals encouraged to improve their understanding of the Armed Forces community, particularly in the context of incoming further reforms in England to the health system through the embedding of more holistic Integrated Care Systems.



Recent findings from the Defence Select Committee expressed “deep concern”⁹⁴ about the lack of knowledge of the Covenant in civilian service providers, and previous research carried out by the RBL corroborates these concerns. In 2016 the Legion commissioned the political monitoring and research agency Dods to conduct quantitative research on priority treatment as part of a Healthcare Omnibus Survey of 1,351 NHS healthcare professionals across the UK, with respondents from a range of roles and geographical areas. Although only 14% of NHS staff surveyed disagreed with the key pillar of the Armed Forces Covenant in healthcare, Priority Treatment, as a policy, while 44% agreed, 74% of healthcare professionals knew ‘Nothing at all’ or ‘Not very much’ about priority treatment. 70% of survey respondents did not know how to apply the policy in their work practices or believed it did not apply to them.⁹⁵

Equally, previous research by RBL and Poppyscotland has found a consistent perception of a lack of awareness amongst frontline Department for Work and Pension staff of both the Covenant and its implementation despite the national presence of Armed Forces champions in the Jobcentre Plus network.⁹⁶ In some cases, our research found instances where charity staff reported having to tell advisers in the Jobcentre of the Covenant and explain why veterans were in receipt of specific benefits, such as Armed Forces Independence Payment (AFIP).

“There seems to be little continuity from one area to another, so I don’t feel that the average veteran benefits from the Covenant at all especially.”
(RBL welfare staff survey respondent)

So that all veterans can consistently benefit from the services provided by central government, many of the charitable stakeholders interviewed for this research who worked most closely with veterans and their families, believed that all those in the public sector who design or deliver services the Armed Forces community may access should have a strong awareness of the Covenant and any tailored services available. Whilst there are mechanisms, such as the Covenant Report, where certain government departments report on their work around the Covenant throughout the year, it was not apparent that this knowledge is widely known throughout the departments and their subsidiary service delivery elements.



RECOMMENDATION:
The Armed Forces Covenant should be included in the induction training process for all elected parliamentary and assembly politicians, their caseworkers, and policy roles within the UK and devolved civil service to ensure a base level of awareness across all departments and policymakers.

RECOMMENDATION:
All statutory bodies and those delivering statutory services should ask all individuals whether they or a member of their family have served in the UK Armed Forces, with internal guidance provided on how the body meets its commitment to the principles of the Covenant.



Local Government

With local government responsible for vital services such as social care, schools, and housing, a good understanding and knowledge of the Covenant within this sector is vital. Variations in levels of knowledge and understanding can produce serious and negative effects on the welfare of the Armed Forces community who rely on the principles of the Covenant. As one Scottish charity stakeholder, reflected:

“You might find it’s absolutely excellent and you know you’ve got fantastic Armed Forces Champions at a local level in some areas who will have joined up the dots and they will have been speaking to all the right representatives from the public and private sector and our third sector and you just get this amazing kind of joined up understanding and support for the Armed Forces community and then you could put that pin somewhere else in the map and it could be nearly non-existent.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

Previous research carried out by Shared Intelligence, and funded by the Forces in Mind Trust, has highlighted that just less than half (48%) of councils report having a “good understanding” and another 39% had a “moderate understanding.” Combined this should mean that nearly 9 out of 10 (87%) councils have at least a moderate understanding of the Covenant, and yet the research also highlighted variation in that understanding, not just between councils, but between tiers of Government. 22% surveyed felt that their council and central government had only a small, shared understanding of the expectations of delivering the Covenant.⁹⁷

This mismatch in understanding between local authorities and other stakeholders is a finding echoed in our own research for this report.

“There is no disagreement whatsoever with the Covenant. The difficulties from, a local government perspective, the difficulties arise, mainly I think where there are still some challenges around people truly understanding what it means.”
(Local government stakeholder)

“I think once you get below that government level, I do think the whole idea of signing the Armed Forces Covenant and what the Armed Forces Covenant means becomes a little less clear”
(Academic sector stakeholder)

Equally, it was noted within local authority stakeholders that we spoke to, creating greater awareness is not a one-off exercise as competing priorities and staff turnover erodes inherited knowledge a decade after the Covenant was introduced in a different social and political context:

“There is something about the need to keep refreshing engagement with the Covenant. Yes, it’s been around for 10 years. Yes, there will always be some people within local government and other partners who have been in this space for that long. But there’s also a lot of churn we have elections, people change jobs. So therefore, there’s a constant; as well as the need to focus on that continuous learning; a constant need to refresh your understanding and commitment as people’s roles change and people move on and come and go. And that shouldn’t be underestimated.”
(Local government stakeholder)

“I guess that’s quite a roundabout way of saying that I think the main challenge is around maintaining momentum, and it is around sustainability, and I think what we need to think about the Covenant is everybody wants to do right by it.”
(Local government stakeholder)

“2011 we were in the middle of Afghanistan and Iraq, an obvious connection between the public and the AF as always in the news. There is a disengagement now from the needs of the AF community. Why prioritise them now?”
(Local government stakeholder)

The Armed Forces Bill 2021 is set to introduce further reforms to the delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant within certain functions of locally delivered services. It is a stated intent of the bill that it will “help ensure all personnel across the UK have equal access to vital services like healthcare, education and housing.”⁹⁸ Therefore it may address some of the need outlined above, but there should also be a robust framework, not just in these three areas, but across local government provision in relation to the Armed Forces Covenant.

RECOMMENDATION:
 Alongside the guidance for the Armed Forces Bill 2021 on any new Covenant duties for local authorities, there should be a clear framework for Covenant delivery, drawing on the Our Community Our Covenant toolkit, and including policy areas beyond just health, housing and education.

Looking beyond 2021
 Whilst the principles and ethos of the Covenant continue to remain secure in 2021, a decade on from its introduction it is clear that knowledge and understanding has not significantly increased and become inconsistent within all sectors of society. As the Covenant enters its second decade, complacency in promotion of the Covenant and what it can practically deliver risks nullifying its admirable aims. The support exists, especially in the general public, but it goes untapped unless a more consistent mechanism for creating awareness of the Covenant and improving and keeping knowledge updated is introduced.



Chapter 6: Reporting and Governance

In a statement to Parliament in 2011, just after the Armed Forces Act became law, the then Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond stated that, “the Armed Forces Covenant is a matter for the whole of Government, and sustained progress requires both close collaboration across Whitehall and clear ministerial leadership.”⁹⁹ Governance and reporting on the Armed Forces Covenant, particularly at the centre, is therefore critical, including in the eyes of the government itself. Establishing a stable framework that would sustain the Covenant underlaid the government’s original policy intent, but these arrangements have also evolved over time.

Reporting and Metrics

As with all areas of government, good clear data and metrics are vital to identifying where support for the Armed Forces community is working and where it is not. The annex to the Annual Reports on the Covenant contains a table of commitments, showing progress against Covenant issues that have been identified either by government or external partners. This is an abridged form of a Covenant Commitments Tracker which is maintained by the Ministry of Defence, updated by government departments, and shared with the Covenant Reference Group external partners. The commitments table has been

revised in format over the last ten years and forms a key mechanism for achieving a shared understanding of the issues that require attention under the Covenant.

On a minority of issues, where there is a difference of opinion between government and external partners on whether an issue has been satisfactorily resolved or even exists, the tracker is unable to resolve the situation as it is a record of government commitments. But in general, there appears to be some consensus amongst those familiar with it, that it acts as a useful way of maintaining issues on the record, prompting departments to report progress, and identifying improvements over time.

However, there is a lack of consistent metrics and data available at local, national and devolved government levels. As one charity we interviewed for this report stated, “we do not believe that reporting against the principles of the [Covenant] has been consistent. There are no specific reporting metrics or measurements for the [Covenant] as a whole, that we are aware of.” As an example of inconsistency in metrics, in England data is collected on service pupils in England in order for schools to apply for the Service Pupil Premium, however in Wales, the previous Education Minister, Kirsty Williams, made a commitment to collect this data through the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC)¹⁰⁰, however, that has not yet happened.

One policy official in the research interviews indicated that there was an alignment with the charity sector on the desire for improved data.

“I just wish we did more data collection at a local level to really be able to understand the impact...Headline statistics are not enough. I think we need more detailed performance metrics around veterans.”

(Statutory sector stakeholder)

However, an emphasis was placed on the quality rather than the quantity of any new data collection and publication, with it noted by another official that a desire for metrics alone risks a “danger of ascribing a set of very transactional rather than transformational approaches to the Covenant.”¹⁰¹



Whilst we do not repeat the exact recommendation in this report, it is noted that in order to bridge this gap, and ensure that greater data collection takes place the Defence Select Committee's report on the 2017 Annual Report made a recommendation on developing better metrics:

“We repeat our predecessor Committee’s recommendation that an independent assessment should be made of progress towards Covenant commitments. This work should also include the development of ways of measuring impact, outputs and outcomes as well as inputs. The measures used by the devolved administrations in their different systems and the establishment of an independent Armed Forces Covenant Programme Office should also be taken into consideration.”¹⁰¹

The discussion around greater metrics was also noted by our research participants in Scotland. A charity stakeholder in Scotland queried the measures used for accountability directly, asking, “are people accountable in a measurable way? No, because people’s interpretation of the Covenant and responsibilities are varied. It is still dependent on good will but without the Covenant, there would be no annual updates or annual reports or cross party groups and other agencies.”¹⁰³

Our Scottish focus group meanwhile felt that reporting on the Covenant is fairly good in terms of the Scottish Government reporting on the relevant strategies like the Veterans Strategy. However, it was felt that much of the feedback and accountability in measuring the impact of the Covenant were removed from the experience of those on the ground. They suggested that the Covenant needs to be more clearly and widely disseminated as whilst it started with a ‘bang’ and the general public were fairly aware of it, it has since ‘meandered’¹⁰⁴, a subject explored in more detail earlier in this report.

It is worth recognising that the definition of commitments and metrics in the Covenant Annual Report and other materials has evolved and improved over the last ten years, and that it has continued to be an area of focus for the government and one to which they have devoted particular effort. We are under no illusions about the challenges in developing meaningful metrics across government, and the risks of focusing on that which can be measured rather than that which matters.



However, an opportunity for better metrics has arisen, as a result of a veteran question in the censuses being implemented in England and Wales in 2021 and Scotland in 2022. This question, and its interaction with other data both in the census and elsewhere, will provide an important baseline on which further metric development can occur to ascertain progress across a range of demographic indicators.

RECOMMENDATION:
UK Government should work with local and devolved governments to develop and publish a consistent and comparable suite of metrics to improve our understanding of the Armed Forces community and improve targeting of support.

RECOMMENDATION:
The Scottish Government should undertake research with stakeholders to establish practical steps to improve reporting on the Covenant in Scotland so that understanding of the commitment to the Armed Forces community improves.



Governance Structures

Over its lifetime, the UK Government has set up various committees and bodies to aid in the governance of the Covenant. As part of its response in 2018 to the House of Commons Defence Select Committee’s inquiry into the 2017 Covenant Annual Report, the MOD provided an organogram of Covenant governance¹⁰⁵ which showed on the record the complex nature of governance across the UK at that point.

The Covenant Reference Group (CRG) was established in 2011 as the successor to the External Reference Group (ERG). The CRG came into being in the context of the publication of the Covenant and the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2011.

The current overall purpose of the CRG is

“to contribute to facilitating, monitoring and reporting on the work undertaken by Government to fulfil the obligations set out in the Armed Forces Covenant, in order to improve outcomes for members of the Armed Forces community.”¹⁰⁶

The chairmanship of the CRG has changed over time. Whilst there were occasions when it met jointly with the Cabinet Sub-Committee (see below) and was therefore chaired by the Prime Minister, it has mostly been jointly chaired by the

Director-General of the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat at the Cabinet Office and the Chief of Defence People. More recently that joint role has been passed to the Director of Armed Forces People Policy at the MoD and the Director of the Office for Veterans’ Affairs.

The CRG’s membership at the time of this review’s research comprised representatives from government departments (including at times non-ministerial departments such as HMRC), the Devolved Administrations, the Local Government Association for England and eight ‘external partners’:

- Royal British Legion
- Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo)
- Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA)
- War Widows’ Association
- Army Families Federation
- Naval Families Federation
- Royal Air Force Families Federation
- Professor Sir Hew Strachan

At times there has also been representation from the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland in its capacity supporting the Northern Ireland Veterans Support Office, but representation from that part of the UK has generally lacked consistency or even presence during the last decade.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Covenant Reference Group secretariat should work with the Northern Ireland Veterans Support office and Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to ensure that there is consistent Northern Ireland representation on the Covenant Reference Group.

Professor Sir Hew Strachan, who served on the CRG throughout the first ten years of its existence has suggested that over time it may have lost focus. In an interview for this report, he described it as originally a reference group of expertise to inform the government's work that for example visited bases and held focus groups. It had meetings with Ministers and was on occasion chaired by the Prime Minister. It appears that the collaborative nature of the group as a reference point for government with experts may have dissipated over time and there could be value in restoring this focus.

Agendas, minutes or records of decisions, and other papers from the CRG are not in the public domain. Whilst the external partners are therefore aware of the issues that have been covered and how this has changed over time, they are not able to articulate this publicly in any detail and we are not therefore able to do so in this review. For transparency, and to aid accountability, it would be desirable if these documents could be published in some format. Following the establishment of the Veterans Advisory Board in 2020, summary minutes of its proceedings have been published, as are those of the Wales Expert Group, creating precedents that can be drawn on.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Covenant Reference Group should reacquire a collaborative focus as a source of external expert reference for government as measures to deliver the Covenant are developed.

RECOMMENDATION:

Minutes or records of decisions from the Covenant Reference Group should be published, subject to appropriate security and privacy considerations.

Cabinet Sub-Committee and the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board

From 2011 until July 2016 there was a Cabinet Sub-Committee – the Home Affairs (Armed Forces Covenant) Sub-Committee - chaired by the Minister for Government Policy at the Cabinet Office, Oliver Letwin. This committee led intra-government coordination on the Covenant and oversaw progress. The Prime Minister himself also occasionally chaired this committee, including twice in 2012.



Following the departure of David Cameron from office, this Cabinet Committee was not re-established. The Defence Select Committee report on the 2016 Annual Report noted the discontinuance of the Cabinet Sub-Committee and recommended this be reversed:

“The Inter-Ministerial Group on the Armed Forces Covenant will be central to the co-ordination and implementation of Covenant commitments. We are concerned that twice-yearly meetings will be insufficient to provide the necessary levels of Ministerial focus across Whitehall on the implementation of Covenant commitments. Furthermore, the removal of its status as a Sub-Committee of Cabinet runs the risk that its influence will be diminished. We recommend that the Inter-Ministerial Group should meet at least four times a year, in line with its predecessor body, and that consideration be given to elevating its status to that of a formal Cabinet Sub-Committee.”¹⁰⁷

In 2017, an inter-ministerial group, the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board (MCVB) was created, co-chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Secretary of State for Defence. Bringing together ministerial leads on the Covenant from across departments, it first met in October 2017.

The published terms of reference of the MCVB – which also state that it meets twice a year - are:

“To provide a forum to discuss and agree the strategic direction of the Armed Forces Covenant; to drive forward the implementation of the Covenant and monitor its progress and; to ensure the provision of high quality, well-coordinated services to Service personnel, Veterans and their families. To work closely with the devolved administrations to mutually support the delivery of the Covenant across the whole of the United Kingdom. The Board should report regularly to the Prime Minister.”¹⁰⁸

Far from the Defence Select Committee's recommendation that it meets at least four times a year, the MCVB met again in April 2018 and November 2018, and at the time of writing it appears that it has not met since.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board should meet at the earliest opportunity, and continue to do so a minimum of twice a year in order to provide ministerial oversight and direction.

External Partners Meeting

In 2017 a new External Partners Meeting was introduced, chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Secretary of State for Defence. This meeting arose following representations from Covenant Reference Group external members that they had not got an opportunity (as was previously the case) to formally meet with senior ministers on Covenant issues.

It was intended that this meeting take place annually. The first meeting took place in November 2017, and it met again in May 2018 and then in March 2021.



Office for Veterans' Affairs

Office for Veterans Affairs

The Office for Veterans Affairs (OVA) was established in July 2019, bringing an additional element to the governance of the Covenant. The government has argued that the creation of the OVA enables “better coordination of the full machinery of government and other partners to deliver joined-up support for veterans.”¹⁰⁹ It should be borne in mind that the Covenant has a wider scope than that of the OVA. However, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, who has lead responsibility for the Covenant, operates out of both the MoD and the OVA, providing the focus of coordination. The creation of the OVA has generated further new governance elements including the creation of the Veterans Advisory Board, comprised of external experts to act as a “critical friend”¹¹⁰ and support the delivery of the government's Veterans' Strategy, and the appointment of an Independent Veterans Adviser to the Government.

This is an addition to the enduring regionally-based Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committees, which have now existed for more than a century and have a role to “act as advocates for implementing the Armed Forces Covenant” and “assist Veterans and dependants in accessing local services as envisaged under the Armed Forces Covenant”.¹¹¹

RECOMMENDATION:

Each year's Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report should set out the current governance structure for the Covenant and veterans' issues, including an organogram, so that lines of decision-making and accountability are clear externally.

Devolved Administrations

Scotland

The Scottish Government participates in the UK wide Covenant Reference Group and is usually represented by an official. In research for this report, it was identified that greater collaboration between the UK and Scottish Government is required on Covenant issues even where devolution may provide differences in approach. One former minister for veterans reflected on it in our research.

“We need to ensure that the Covenant delivers the same things in different parts of the UK, but at the same time that approach must respect and reflect the fact that individual governments will come at this from a different direction. Because tailored approaches are appropriate if you are in Wales, if you’re in Scotland, or if you’re in the north of England, wherever it is... When I took over there was a lot of talk about a UK wide board that we would be involved in. It’s rarely met. So I welcome the fact that the Ministerial Covenant Reference Board is now to hopefully function effectively. I am going to represent the Scottish Government on that. I think that’s an opportunity to ensure that standards are raised wherever, best practice is taken onboard and I’m sure that if it does turn out to work as effectively as I hope then it’ll be to the benefit of everybody.”

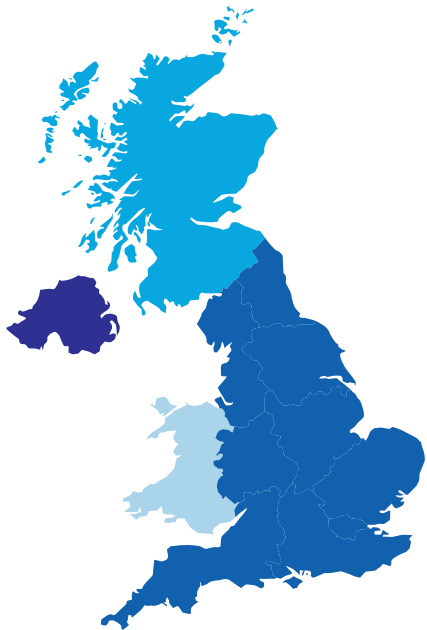
(Political stakeholder)

The perceived lack of understanding of the devolved context was echoed by others in office within Scotland.

“What have been the key areas that have interested me or created a concern for me? I think the primary one has been the relationship between the Scottish Government and the UK Government in support of veterans writ large, and that is about the ability of the UK Government to prepare serving people for life as a veteran in all corners of the United Kingdom and it is about the Scottish Government receiving those veterans who choose to live in Scotland once they finish their service. And it’s about getting that relationship working well in a mature apolitical fashion.”

(Statutory sector stakeholder)

It is a view acknowledged, if not unanimously agreed with, amongst Westminster MPs. When asked whether there was adequate cooperation between the UK Government and the devolved administrations regarding the Armed Forces Covenant, a third of respondents in our survey of sitting MPs agreed (33%), compared to 31% who disagreed and 34% who didn’t know.¹¹²



In addition to its involvement in UK Government governance structures, the Scottish Government’s involvement in this area is overseen by its Veterans and Armed Forces Personnel Unit. Since 2017, the Scottish Government has also published an annual update on its achievements and work undertaken to support the Armed Forces community.

As far as external scrutiny is concerned, Scotland has had a Veterans Commissioner since 2014. The Commissioner has reported on a number of issues affecting the ex-Service community in Scotland, including housing, employment and transition.

The commissioner also has a remit to “work to align effort on the delivery of priority outcomes for veterans, through collaboration and focussed effort of delivery partners both statutory and voluntary”¹¹³. Two individuals have so far held the role and it has principally focused its recommendations on statutory services. The creation of an independent veterans commissioner means that the Scottish Government is not left to solely self-assess the implementation of its strategy for veterans. This is something that was welcomed by a former Scottish Minister for Veterans interviewed for this research.

“We are fortunate in Scotland that thanks to my predecessor, Keith Brown, we have a veterans commissioner. He’s there to hold our feet to the fire where it’s necessary... We have a benchmark that is set by the commissioner’s reports that we are following up on and then he is reporting on our performance. So I think we have that advantage in Scotland around monitoring and delivering governance that perhaps other parts of the UK don’t have at the moment.”

(Political stakeholder)



Crown copyright, 2013



Wales

In Wales governance arrangements have similarly developed over the ten years of the Covenant. The Expert Group on the Needs of the Armed Forces Community in Wales brings together key stakeholders from Government, healthcare and the third sector to advise how public services can meet the needs of current and former members of the Armed Forces. Its minutes are published on the Welsh Government website.¹¹⁴ Since 2019, the Welsh Government has also published an annual report on the Covenant outlining progress.

Hannah Blythyn MS, the Deputy Minister responsible for the Armed Forces in Wales argued that, “in Wales, we understand that constant dialogue and opportunities to share information is the best way of coordinating that delivery. That is why we try and bring together all partners – physically or increasingly virtually now – to maintain that coordination.”¹¹⁵

Since 2018, Armed Forces Liaison Officers (AFLOs) have worked with Local Authorities, Health Boards and the wider Armed Forces community to ensure the Covenant commitments are upheld. AFLOs have generally proven to be effective and popular in Wales. AFLO funding was renewed by the Welsh Government for a further 2 years

in 2020, which is welcomed, however longer term funding would be helpful to provide increased certainty and the ability to plan.

RECOMMENDATION:
The Welsh Government should provide longer term funding for Armed Forces Liaison Officers in Wales.

The UK Government announced in 2021 its intent to introduce a Veterans Commissioner in Wales, but this had not yet progressed at the time of writing.

Northern Ireland

Governance of the Covenant has been challenging in Northern Ireland. There are no formal structures within the government for Northern Ireland for the Covenant and it is left therefore to voluntary bodies to undertake this role. The Northern Ireland Executive has an open invitation to participate in the Covenant Reference Group (CRG), and while that position is still open, in the interim, the Northern Ireland Office have appointed a representative to the CRG and the decision panel for the Covenant Fund.

In 2015 the Northern Ireland Veterans Support Office (VSO) was formally established and resourced to expand capacity in supporting Veterans in Northern Ireland. It is facilitated by Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland (RFCA NI) but resourced through and overseen by the Confederation of Service Charities, Cobseo. It provides a focal point for advice on support available to Veterans and on how applications to draw down the Covenant Fund might be made. It will also seek to provide solutions to those Veterans whose needs are not being met by statutory bodies, such as health trusts, or the charitable sector.

In 2020 the UK Government appointed the first Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner. The first postholder, Danny Kinahan, describes his aim as being “to use my position to press and influence our political representatives, statutory agencies and others to ensure they fulfil their responsibilities and I will do my utmost to be a strong voice and tireless advocate on behalf of those who have themselves given so much to their country.”¹¹⁶

Ownership and responsibility

The question of who owns the Covenant is important yet difficult to answer. Clarity of ownership increases responsibility, accountability and improves focus. Whilst the Covenant itself says it is a promise between the government, the nation, and the people, it also states that when it comes to policy, service delivery and standards much of the responsibility lies with central government and the Devolved Administrations. This remains the view expressed in research interviews both with policy officials and charity stakeholders, in particular noting that it is not the responsibility of one department.



Within surveys for this research carried out amongst the public, RBL membership and welfare staff, the majority of respondents felt that Central Government was responsible “for ensuring that the Armed Forces Covenant works as it is designed to.” 53% of the general public felt that it was “The Government, specifically departments such as the Ministry of Defence” followed by 34% believing that it was the responsibility of “Government Services (e.g National Health Service, Jobcentre Plus, etc)”¹¹⁷ When staff members were asked this 70% felt that it was the responsibility of Government Departments and 76% services such as the NHS.¹¹⁸

Figure 6: Which, if any, of the following organisations do you think are currently responsible for ensuring that the Armed Forces Covenant works as it is designed to?¹¹⁹

	UK General Population (%)
The Government, specifically departments such as the Ministry of Defence	53%
Local Authorities (i.e. councils and other local services)	25%
The Armed Forces	46%
Government Services (e.g. National Health Service, Jobcentre Plus, etc.)	34%
Charities and voluntary groups	25%
Devolved Governments (i.e. the governments of Scotland and Wales)	21%
Businesses	7%
The general public	7%
None of these	1%
Don't know	29%

In previous years a lead minister for the Covenant has been named in each UK Government department, and they were featured in the Strategy for our Veterans. This clarity has not continued in the List of Ministerial Responsibilities, which currently references the Covenant only rarely. The annual publication schedule of the Armed Forces Covenant Report provides a regularly updated vehicle for ensuring that accountability falls where it is needed and Ministers with a Covenant lead are listed, and gaps highlighted.

RECOMMENDATION:
As ownership is a matter for all of government, each UK and devolved government department should have a named minister responsible for its department’s Covenant commitments, and a list published in the Covenant Annual Report.

Finally, there is the question of public accountability for the Covenant. The Covenant Reference Group plays a role in monitoring Covenant delivery but does so behind closed doors. The Covenant Annual Report provides an account to Parliament on delivery, but it is a government document, albeit incorporating an opportunity for external members of the CRG to express observations on the content. The House of Commons Defence Select Committee has occasionally, although not consistently, held oral evidence sessions on the report, although a review of literature and policy announcements infers that its recommendations have had limited impact so far. Veterans Commissioners add a further dimension, and in the case of Scotland have been able to provide a published independent assessment of delivery. The Commissioner roles are subject to the priorities set and approach taken by their incumbents, and as the roles develop may benefit from a consistent approach across the UK to ensure members of the Armed Forces community benefit where they are.

RECOMMENDATION:
There should be a consistent approach for members of the Armed Forces community to seek external accountability on the Covenant, with an annual inquiry into the Covenant Annual Report by the Defence Select Committee, an annual debate in each UK Parliament and agreed priorities shared between the UK Veterans Commissioners.

Looking beyond 2021

Governance structures have had a mixed record during the Covenant’s lifetime. It is unarguable that some have been downgraded over time, such as the Cabinet Sub-Committee being followed by the MCVB. The Covenant Reference Group has endured, although its focus, and the attention it has received from the higher echelons of government appear to have waned in recent years. Other structures appear to have suffered from appearing to meet a few times and then not being sustained. Lack of clarity could cause confusion of ownership and could mean momentum lost. Referenced in

interviews for this report, it has been argued that it is inevitable and necessary that structures will evolve over time along with the Covenant, and that the change in focus represents success by demonstrating that there are not crisis issues that require immediate attention from the top of government. However, this needs to be balanced by the message that is sent about the salience of the Covenant in policy-making, and that the structures continue to perform their original intent of facilitating mobilisation across government in response to arising Covenant issues.



Chapter 7: Finance and Funding

When the Covenant was introduced in 2011 in its present form, the emphasis was on its moral framework of principles. Whilst there was consideration of the practical implications, precise financial effects were not outlined. Nevertheless, it was stated that “In many areas, doing more to honour the Covenant depends on attitudes and actions rather than resources, and the Government will take action where it can. But in others there is little alternative to sustained investment.”¹²⁰

Over the decade funding for Covenant commitments from all sectors of society should not be underestimated, but whether that funding has always been sustainable and efficiently targeted has sometimes been questioned.

Support from governments

With the inception of the Armed Forces Covenant in its current form, financial support was available in the shape of the Community Covenant Grant Scheme, established in 2011 to support the then Community Covenant and “to give financial support to projects, at the local level, which strengthen the ties or the mutual understanding between members of the Armed Forces Community and the wider community in which they live.”¹²¹ This was announced as £30 million over the four years 2011 to 2014¹²² and would eventually be superseded by the Covenant Fund in April 2015.

In 2013 the then Chancellor announced enduring funding for the Covenant in the form of what would become the Armed Forces Covenant Fund, launching in 2015. This was announced in 2013 as £10 million per year, drawn from the LIBOR banking scandal fines. The Covenant Fund was launched in June 2015, described as: “A new standalone MOD grant team, with expertise from the Big Lottery Fund, has been set up to deliver a professional scheme that maximises best practice across the sector. Priorities for the fund will be agreed annually by the Covenant Reference Group. Priorities should fit within four overarching themes: removing barriers to family life; extra support after Service for those that need help; measures to integrate military and civilian communities and allow the Armed Forces community to participate as citizens; and non-core healthcare services for Veterans.”¹²³ The Covenant Fund would be run in this form until 2018 when it was spun out of the MoD and established as a charitable trust, chaired by a senior MoD civil servant, and rebranded as the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT).

The story of the early funding of Covenant initiatives is closely linked with the proceeds of the LIBOR banking scandal fines first issued in 2012, and by 2015 totalling £973 million in collected fines overall.¹²⁴ The first of these funds were allocated by end of 2013 - £35 million had been spent on 96 Armed Forces projects and this money was later referred to as the Covenant (LIBOR) Fund. In 2014 LIBOR funds were allocated to the Veterans Accommodation Fund, which was £40 million for 16 projects. 2015 saw a number of high-profile causes funded by LIBOR. The Veterans Hearing Fund and the Veterans Mobility Fund (both administered by RBL) provided £10 million and £3 million respectively across five years; and the Aged Veterans Fund £25 million over five years.¹²⁵

In addition to the targeted resources from LIBOR fines and the various iterations of a Covenant Fund over the past decade, there have been numerous other initiatives that are said to support the delivery of the Covenant, but which were funded from other sources. For example, the Service Pupil Premium in England which started in 2011 as £200 per pupil at a total cost of £9 million per annum; by 2021 this had increased to £310 per pupil and a total cost of £25 million per annum to the Government,¹²⁶ which is paid for from the Department for Education's wider pupil premium budget. Other initiatives to support the Armed Forces community often cited as examples of the Covenant in action are funded through departmental budgets rather than from specific allocated Covenant money, such as the Armed Forces Bereavement Scholarship Scheme (AFBSS) launched in 2011, or Forces Help to Buy, which the 2017 Covenant Annual Report claimed had been worth £193 million to Service personnel and their families.¹²⁷ Money made available for health care initiatives has included £6 million for veterans' prosthetics provision in 2015 and £10 million into the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service (TILS) and the Complex Treatment Service (CTS) in 2019.¹²⁹ Along with the contribution of devolved governments like the £500,000 that has been provided through the Supporting Service Children in Wales Fund, or the Scottish Veterans Fund which has allocated £1.7 million in funding since 2008, these handful of examples indicate ongoing significant funding commitments from devolved governments and UK Government departmental budgets, on top of direct 'Covenant Fund' or LIBOR grants made to numerous projects over the past 10 years. The cost of these ongoing commitments easily outstrips the £10 million annual *Covenant Fund Trust* grants.



The combination of various funding streams specifically ring-fenced for the Covenant and other funding initiatives from government departments and devolved administrations is not recorded in one place and so it is impossible to quantify the funds that have been provided in this way over the last decade. We cannot look only at the Covenant Fund Trust or the Covenant (LIBOR) Fund and say that they represent the total of all funds made available during 10 years of the Covenant. The true total, and the overarching impact of this expenditure, is wrapped in a web of past and ongoing commitments to numerous policies and projects paid for out of day-to-day public services budgets.

Interviews with statutory sector stakeholders highlighted the moral framework of the Covenant in justifying new spending commitments. The Covenant acts in some circumstances as an enabler that can be enough of a reason in of itself to justify new expenditure and make the process of arguing for extra funding much easier:

“If we do something and said ‘here we are breaching the Covenant, and this is what is required, this is the change of the rules and this is the change of policy that’s required to stop breaching the Covenant, and it costs this much money, I think that would be persuasive enough for ministers to do if that’s what we were advising.’”

(Statutory sector stakeholder)

It is unquestionably the case that very significant amounts of public expenditure have been directed to support the Armed Forces community under the banner of the Covenant over the last decade, and that the Covenant Fund alone represents an open-ended commitment by the UK government to a sustained funding channel for Covenant-specific projects. It is impossible to ascertain whether this money may have been spent in this way in the Covenant's absence, but a strong case can be made for clear financial impact as a result of the Covenant's existence, including in the delivery of initially unplanned expenditure in response to accepted breaches of the Covenant principles.

However, what also cannot always be determined is whether all of the expenditure has had the desired impact or has been well-directed.

This concern was manifested in a 2017 investigation by the National Audit Office into the management of the Libor Fund.¹²⁹ This review highlighted issues around grant terms and conditions, assurance that grants had been spent as intended, and ability to demonstrate impact. These aspects were subsequently addressed through a review conducted by the AFCFT, and then a further independent review which the Directory of Social Change was commissioned to undertake to evaluate the impact of LIBOR funding, and which was published in June 2021. This highlighted the work of grant recipients, provided quantitative and qualitative data and further heard about the impact via a survey of grantees. Based on data provided by the grant recipients, the grants covered in this report affected an estimated 4.7 million actual and potential beneficiaries” and of those, “91.7% of the respondents to DSC’s evaluation survey either agreed or strongly agreed that LIBOR funding for their organisation, project or service had enabled them to better serve their beneficiaries.”¹³⁰

Local Government

The first decade of the Covenant has coincided with significant pressure on local government finances. By 2019 it has been estimated that overall spending was 17% lower than in 2009/10.¹³¹ This financial context was a regular and consistent theme with local government representatives during our research and is a constraint that most operating in the Armed Forces sector are aware of. Air Vice Marshal Tony Stables in his foreword to *Our Community, Our Covenant* wrote:

“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.”

Within our research, the money made available by the Covenant was cited by many local government actors as being one of the Covenant’s main achievements. These funds were among the first to be provided by the Covenant, originally under the Community Covenant Grant Scheme starting in 2011.¹³²

As well as paying outright for numerous projects, this funding was noted as a catalyst for cooperation between local government, local communities, and the Armed Forces. The Armed Forces themselves, charity and

local government interviewees highlighted the role that Covenant funding played in focusing the minds of groups of stakeholders on local projects and on improving collaboration. The incentive of money coming soon, or the knowledge that funding is secured and money is on the way, was attributed as a powerful driver of action at the local level. Commenting on a successful Covenant Fund application, an Armed Forces focus group participant said: “It gave us a strategic focus for the delivery of stuff that’s been done sometimes on the back of a fag packet.”¹³³

An illustration of this is in the Strengthening Delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant grant programme from the Covenant Fund Trust in 2016 and 2017 which altogether distributed £6.5 million to local authorities and was widely welcomed. The AFCFT commissioned an evaluation of this programme which has highlighted the benefits and potential areas for improvement.¹³⁴ However, this grant funding was time-limited, has now all expired, and despite the best intentions of the Covenant Fund Trust for sustainability, many of these particular funded posts have stopped. An interviewee from the charitable sector observed:

“The fact that they’re only a two-year funded post there was always that sort of overhang of ‘this isn’t going to go on for much longer.’ And ‘What can we actually get done within that two-year time frame?’ And then when it was made clear that there was no extension of those posts, there was no funding enable those to continue. I think that sent out quite a negative message because it was almost this impression that we’ve done it for two years, it’s job done, and we can all move on. When actually the intention was that the local authorities would then take those posts within their own funding structures and continue with it. But the majority haven’t got the funding to enable that to happen. So it just stopped. Which was a real shame actually because there was some great work that was going on.”

(Charity sector stakeholder)

It is important not to generalise from the experiences of some Covenant funded work stopping. There are examples of projects that were Covenant funded and have been sustained beyond the funded period. However, in the prevailing financial environment for local government, there is a common fear that lack of funding directly impacts the ability of local government to support the Covenant:

“There comes a point where if you don’t have enough money, you can’t do what you want to do. So the issue is, how close is local government as a whole to that point where the funding challenges are having to stop doing things on the Covenant and are prevented from doing what they would like to be doing? ... I get a very strong message from my networks that funding is a barrier for them and a lot of concern that as the dedicated local government funding from the Trust starts to end, and you have got officers moving on, the Covenant becomes an add-on to somebody’s already busy agenda. By definition, you’re not going to achieve as much as if you did have that dedicated resource...There’s no doubt that things have got a lot better over the last 10 years, there has been a lot of progress over the last 10 years. No question of that. But I think we probably are at a point where you’ve got the coming together of the impact of austerity; and now the impact of COVID; less Covenant Fund Trust money around and I think that we will see that having an impact.”

(Local government stakeholder)

“Local government find it very hard to articulate the cost benefit analysis and the return on social investment for having a Covenant officer. It was a nice thing when somebody else was paying for it, but in the in the wider perspective of the pressures on their funding. They’re not going to see a cost benefit of having that individual there, even though I suspect there is a cost benefit by, you know, if you have a highly effective Covenant officer, really good social prescribing you’ll be moving those burdens of social need that would generally be referred to council social services.”

(Academic sector stakeholder)

If this is the case, this would appear to represent a failure of the aspiration to mainstream the Covenant principles in business-as-usual activity, if it continues to be seen as an ‘added extra’ rather than a priority to support a community that Parliament, and all others who have signed the Covenant, have deemed worthy of particular attention and support. There must also be a fear of an unintended consequence, that the creation of dedicated streams of funding for these specific purposes may have inadvertently encouraged this perception and approach.

It is, however, worrying if a perception has developed in some quarters that unlike as highlighted in central government above, local authorities – and potentially other public bodies – can only deliver on their Covenant commitments if they are provided with additional funding for that purpose despite the benefits that Covenant initiatives can bring. As one academic stakeholder reflected to us:

RECOMMENDATION:
In order to promote innovation within Covenant delivery, it should be ensured that Covenant funds are not used for business-as-usual activity or meeting statutory guidance.



Northern Ireland

As noted above, the Covenant is implemented in Northern Ireland somewhat differently to the rest of the United Kingdom. To ensure that veterans receive the same level of support as elsewhere, a bespoke delivery system has been established so that if an individual veteran cannot access the services they require through statutory channels, they can access support via Armed Forces charities and other parts of the third sector, who can act both as a provider or a facilitator with the main statutory bodies in Northern Ireland including the Health Service, the Housing Executive, and education ministries. This bespoke structure centres around the Veterans' Support Office (VSO), which links individuals to devolved government departments, local government Veterans' Champions, and the voluntary and charitable sector. The VSO is facilitated by the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association Northern Ireland (RFCA NI), which holds the appointed Cobseo function for Northern Ireland, with Cobseo itself being granted a £300,000 award via the Covenant Fund in 2017 to deliver the VSO, and additional funding to expand activities provided by government since. The VSO has a coordinating role in the alternative support structure and complements rather than replaces both statutory bodies and the charitable sector. The VSO in turn sponsors 11 local authority Veterans Champions.

We have heard praise for the Covenant Fund in Northern Ireland,¹³⁵ and its positive impact, noting that the money has helped to start projects or place existing ones on a more sustainable footing, in different communities across Northern Ireland. It has focused on the delivery of tangible outcomes, rather than allowing the branding aspect of the Covenant to come to the fore much as happens in other parts of the UK.

Northern Ireland and the VSO serve as an illustration of the positive effect that direct Covenant funding can have in implementing the delivery of services to the Armed Forces community. Northern Ireland's Armed Forces community inhabit a sometimes challenging environment, and its potential blockages have been surpassed by the money flowing from Covenant Fund grants which has directly facilitated initiatives like the VSO and side-stepped local challenges to implementing the Covenant. As seen similarly but not quite to the same extent in other places where local Covenant grants that acted as a catalyst for local collaboration, the provision of money from an external source overcomes the local question of 'who will pay for it?', and in Northern Ireland, the money motivates stakeholders to work around the challenges of the political environment.



The corporate sector

During our research interviews, comments from businesses who have signed the Covenant and are active and keen participants in implementing the pledges to which they agreed, highlighted that they do not receive any funding for their Covenant work from the Government or Covenant Fund or any other source, with the exception of one alluding to an unspecified Covenant grant for an internship programme. With that exception, they painted a picture of pursuing this work eagerly, but without financial support. It is important to note though, that none seemed to view that negatively, and it was not a criticism. They receive no monetary support, but do not expect any. All appeared genuine that the Covenant commitment they made was done so with the understanding that they would strive at making it a success, spurred on by their own enthusiasm, rather than in the expectation of financial support. One even commented that it was "No huge demand on resources."¹³⁶ What is difficult to assess is whether this represents a difference of philosophy and approach with the public sector when it comes to financing activities, or reflects the more minimal Covenant commitments that may be applied to business signatories.

Challenges, criticisms, and areas for improvement

A consistent complaint, whether that be through the various Covenant Funds over the years or through the LIBOR funds in the early years, has been that of the sustainability of the projects that are paid for with the grant monies. A senior Welsh political stakeholder interviewed, observed that solely providing funding for establishing projects is not enough:

"As with all funding, sometimes sustainability can be an issue... It is important that sustainability of projects remain a key focus as veterans and organisations have spoken of their frustration if a project is established with funding and is successful but then can't continue."

(Political stakeholder)

This view has been repeatedly highlighted as a key point for improvement. By its very nature grant funding is temporary, and the applicants know that when they apply and enter into that agreement, and sustainability is always going to be a challenge for a model built in this fashion. However, clarity and stability of funding for the future is important for projects to have lasting effect. Longer term grants can of course go some way to address this and some of the examples featured in this chapter have been for five-year funded projects, so precedent exists. The fact that the Covenant Fund is guaranteed in perpetuity makes it well-placed to consider longer-term grant arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION:
The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust should consider more multi-year grants to projects in order to increase the impact and sustainability of funded work.

Grant funding from the Covenant Fund Trust can be restrictive if the available categories do not match with what a service delivery body sees as a need on the ground. For example, we have heard of a health board in Wales which was not eligible for a grant who asked the local authority to apply for it and then partnered with them.¹³⁷ The annual priorities of the Covenant Fund are considered by its board and by the Covenant Reference Group, but it remains a relatively opaque process, with some programmes over the years appearing from external observation to have less groundwork than others. In past years, a clear link between evidenced demand and programmes has not always been apparent, and this is closely related to wider issues concerning data on the Armed Forces community. Forthcoming census data, improved research and intra-sector coordination will hopefully go some way to addressing these challenges in the future.

There are concerns also over the longevity of funds directed towards the Covenant. That of the Covenant Fund Trust is not in question, as a commitment has been made by Government to fund the £10 million per annum in perpetuity – the concern arises around other departmental funding streams. Service personnel in our focus group, displaying some cynicism, alluded to the question of

whether financial support would continue at prior levels now that the Armed Forces are less in the public eye and there are more pressing issues on the agenda. Healthcare in the aftermath of Covid was specifically cited as an example of wider events and priorities driving the Government's spending decisions.¹³⁸ As with so many aspects of the Covenant, the extent to which the flow of money is dependent on the wider political context and the will to drive the Covenant forward reinforces an important broader point about the successful implementation of the Covenant.

The different levels at which the Covenant is enacted; national governments, local government and wider society; and what former Director General of the RBL Chris Simpkins called the "pan-societal approach to Covenant delivery"¹³⁹ has the consequence of creating different levels of capability to implement the Covenant. There is an implied shift of responsibility away from the UK Government onto other actors, like local government, who have more limited financial means or manoeuvrability to be able to fund new Covenant initiatives on their own in the same fashion as UK Government departments. As one local government interviewee expressed:

"There is this inherent disconnect between central and local government and that's something worth recognising at the outset of this...Councils, they view it [the Covenant] as almost a moral crusade from the central government who say 'this is what we want' and yet they haven't given the local authority the policies or the finances to see that pledge through...Local Authorities feel the pain of cuts, and at the same time an expectation of delivery that they feel is unfair."

(Local government stakeholder)

There are differences of perception at national and local levels about the nature of responsibility and resourcing for the Covenant. Whilst these differences are found in many other policy areas, the distinction is largely irrelevant to the member of the Armed Forces community who is trying to access public services without disadvantage. The overriding priority therefore is funding that is well coordinated and well targeted across all those who have made public commitments to the principles of the Covenant.

Chapter 8: A Covenant for the Next Decade

Our findings from this research leave little doubt that the Armed Forces Covenant has been a progressive force for change since its inception, justifying the considerable political and financial capital that both brought it into existence in the UK, but also embedded it within the structures and thinking of those who hold the levers of change for the Armed Forces community.

There was equally unanimous agreement between the surveys, the interviews, literature and focus groups that the core underlying ethos and principles of the Covenant were as relevant today as they were when the Government in 2011 originally enshrined its wording in legislation. However, whilst those principles remain fit for purpose, the delivery of them has not always been. This is especially true whilst knowledge of the Covenant struggles to break through amongst both the UK public and those it seeks to support.

As identified throughout this report, the Covenant’s journey to fulfilling its promise is far from over. The political and societal context within which the Covenant exists has evolved and the Covenant’s framework must evolve with it. For each barrier identified within this report, recommendations for solutions have been proposed.

Contextual changes and the challenges they present

If the involvement of the UK Armed Forces in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq saw an increase in the salience of issues affecting the Armed Forces community, then the conclusion of high-tempo and high-profile overseas operations has, perhaps unsurprisingly, seen media and public interest in Armed Forces issues cool, which in turn has impacted on the political will to resolve them.

“When I think back to when the guys were all deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan... you know everybody was watching the news every day you were keeping a note of the casualty numbers. We were all watching them being repatriated in the news at night and it was heart-breaking and it was very much at the forefront of people’s minds. Whereas now we’re into kind of, there is no active zones out there if you like and we’re not hearing about our guys and girls being deployed on active tours of duty at the moment, we’re not hearing about it on the news every day so it slips away from the public consciousness”

(Charity sector stakeholder)

In the decade since the Armed Forces Covenant was written into legislation, the wider context has changed markedly. Whilst HM Armed Forces continue to be engaged in operations around the world, and indeed closer to home as part of the nation’s pandemic response, the intensity of deployments has been on a downward trajectory: since 2014, for instance, there have been only three lives lost as a result of hostile action (one in 2015, one in 2018 and one in 2020).¹⁴⁰ With the exception of recent high-profile coverage of the withdrawal of UK troops from Afghanistan in 2021, the media profile afforded to contemporary operations is much diminished compared to the coverage seen in the preceding decade. With reduced sight of the work of the Armed Forces, and in the absence of significant casualties, public demand for action from political representatives has lessened as other policy issues take precedence. As a former Veterans Minister remarked to us in an interview for this project, “I just don’t think that the related issues surrounding our Armed Forces are at the front of the public’s mind anymore.”¹⁴¹ As a consequence, there is simply not the same imperative for political action, something officials themselves in interviews were conscious of.

“Certainly if you were back seeing a conflict like Iraq or Afghanistan would our current rules meet the spirit of the Covenant, possibly not?”

(Statutory sector stakeholder)

The Armed Forces themselves have also changed significantly over the past ten years. The size and footprint of the serving community has altered, with fewer Regulars, more Reservists, greater use of non-UK personnel, more people living off base in local communities, and shorter enlistments than a decade ago. The ex-Service community has similarly undergone changes. The veteran population has shrunk from an estimated 4.6m people in 2010¹⁴² to around 2m in 2021¹⁴³ as more of the Second World War generation leave us. As they do so, and as the numbers of those who undertook National Service also reduce, so we are increasingly left with a majority professional, volunteer veteran base, as opposed to one overwhelmingly comprised of conscripts.



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The changing demographics and context of the community is likely to have an impact both on the needs to be addressed and public perceptions when it comes to the application of the Covenant. For instance, with shorter enlistments and greater replication of civilian working practices, such as flexible working and privately owned accommodation through the ongoing implementation of the Future Accommodation Model, the ability to identify issues that arise because of, or which are exacerbated by, Service is likely to become ever more challenging. This could have implications for the relevance of the Covenant in future, with some suggesting that “it will always need to be there, but we should have to rely on it less and less as the numbers plummet”.¹⁴⁴ In the same vein, as public familiarity with, and personal connection to, the Armed Forces wanes with a shrinking Armed Forces community, and as various groups and issues compete for limited resources, it may become less uncommon for policy makers and the public to question why the Covenant is even still needed.

“It is really important that Defence continues to connect with the public, to explain what our Armed Forces are doing in their name and the sacrifices made by them, and their families, in doing so. With competing priorities for resource, recognition that our Armed Forces were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice is something that needs to be honoured for life and the Armed Forces Covenant is a mechanism to ensure that they, and their families, are not disadvantaged from accessing public services and goods, and that special consideration is appropriate for those that have given the most.”

(Statutory sector stakeholder)

The Armed Forces Covenant was introduced in recognition of the unique sacrifices and commitments of those who serve and their families in times of conflict, but also of peace. The contextual shift in the public, media and political gaze to others in society has in recent years driven calls for covenants for other public sector occupations.¹⁴⁵ It is for others to argue the merits of such initiatives, however it emphasises the importance of ensuring that the Armed Forces Covenant remains distinct in what it can achieve for the community it serves, so that the exceptional nature of Armed Forces life is recognised and reflected.

Meanwhile, the territorial constraints of the Covenant, which is currently applied only within the geographical confines of the United Kingdom, increasingly presents a conundrum for which there has yet been little appetite to solve. Non-UK personnel make up 4.4% of the Regular UK Armed Forces and 1.1% of the Reserves¹⁴⁶, a proportion that is set to increase following the recent lifting of restrictions on overseas recruitment. Whilst the needs of non-UK personnel resident in the UK are recognised under the Covenant, progress to date in terms of improving outcomes – especially in matters concerning immigration – has been notably slow, with the RBL, Poppyscotland, and others having campaigned on the matter of Indefinite Leave to Remain fees for years without satisfactory resolution. But whilst the Covenant does apply to non-UK personnel resident in the UK, it does not for those who are either British born but choose to emigrate or for those who are non-UK nationals and return to their home country, regardless of whether that individual was injured or their family left bereaved as a result of Service in HM Armed Forces.



Clearly the UK Government cannot legislate on matters for which other independent states are responsible. However, it can, and has previously, put in place multi-lateral and bilateral agreements and funding arrangements, such as with Germany on matters concerning serving British Forces stationed in the country, or the local solutions devised between actors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to ensure that nationals of the latter can access services and support in the former. With the ongoing contribution of non-UK personnel to the effectiveness of HM Armed Forces presently under the spotlight, and with the effects of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union still being worked through in terms of reciprocal rights and agreements, overseas veterans remain an overlooked group when it comes to benefitting from the Covenant, but there is both scope and opportunity to do more in this area.

Discussion of the changing operating context over the past decade also needs to consider the evolving policy environment. In the first few years after the Covenant was written into legislation, there was a plethora of new initiatives announced but this frenzy of activity has not been sustained.

“I think in the early days, there was quite a lot of low hanging fruit that was gathered relatively quickly. It was things everybody kind of knew that they should be doing, and actually were quite easy to do; they just cracked on and did it. And unfortunately, I think we're now at the stage where actually we're into fairly complex, and in some cases, intractable problems... Therefore, the entire system has really, I have a sense, ground to a bit of a halt”

(Charity sector stakeholder)

As covered in this report, it is felt that some of the most obvious examples of disadvantage, particularly in health, were relatively quickly resolved out of political necessity, whilst those less obvious – perhaps because they affect smaller groups of individuals or are more technical in nature – continue to be recorded on the Government's Covenant Commitments Tracker yet do not always see as much action taken to address them. Some of this inactivity can be considered the result of a governance structure that has lost its focus and influence within Government and across devolved government over the years, in part because of the apparent waning political priority attached to Covenant matters. On the one hand there have

been significant initiatives in recent times such as the creation of the Office for Veterans' Affairs and the proposed strengthening of the Covenant in law. On the other hand, such was the priority in the early days that the Covenant Reference Group used to even be occasionally chaired by the Prime Minister, but this is no longer the case, despite it being noted that, “if the Prime Minister is suddenly interested in something, things happen... It gives me a lever to then get people around the table. So, I do think having a stronger sort of champion at the cabinet level would push this”.¹⁴⁷ But it could also partly be the result of policy increasingly moving away from establishing separate, parallel structures for the Armed Forces community, towards specialist pathways integrated within mainstream services. Under this delivery model, the needs of the Armed Forces community are broadly considered within wider considerations, risking sometimes getting lost as a minority group, or positive action taken on their behalf being hard to identify.

And finally, there has also been a gradual but apparently intentional shift in responsibility for delivering the Covenant away from national government to local government and third sector partners. When the Covenant in its current form was first conceived, its focus “was only ever on national government (and to a lesser degree devolved governments), but this has increasingly shifted to local government and businesses”.¹⁴⁸ The vast majority of initial attention, action and funding commitments were therefore focused at Westminster, with interest groups like the RBL and Poppyscotland focusing their campaigns on issues for which national and devolved government were responsible, such as compensation, coroner's inquests and healthcare. The UK Government subsequently introduced Community Covenants, as they were initially known, and made them a central pillar of Covenant delivery. Community Covenants and their successor, the Armed Forces Covenant in the Community, have been supported by millions of pounds of funding for local Covenant initiatives. This has resulted in some success but our research also found that funding was sometimes regarded as being too short term to establish sustainable best practice, or at times a way of plugging council finances.

This push towards local delivery, the voluntary nature of Covenant commitments, and the ongoing devolution of powers within the UK and across England has resulted in considerable variation in the nature and quality of services offered by councils and governments across the UK. This has led some to describe the effectiveness of the Armed Forces Covenant as something of a “postcode lottery”¹⁴⁹, with the Covenant lacking in legal clout and limited by a lack of understanding, particularly at the local level. To combat this, the Government included new Covenant provisions in the 2021 Armed Forces Bill, which seeks to strengthen the Covenant in law and place a new duty on selected public bodies, most notably local authorities, to consider the Covenant in policy decisions and development. The exclusion of national governments from the scope of the new provisions, however, risks reinforcing a perception by Government that is not wholly shared by the general public; that Covenant delivery is increasingly the responsibility of councils, and that any failings are predominately theirs to fix.

Armed Forces Bill reshaping the Covenant

The Armed Forces Bill 2021 arguably represents the biggest change in Covenant delivery since it was introduced a decade ago. Where the 2011 Armed Forces Act amended the 2006 Act to enshrine the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant in legislation for the first time and mandated the publication of an annual Armed Forces Covenant report to Parliament, the 2021 Bill makes provisions that fulfil the UK Government’s 2019 manifesto to “further incorporate the Armed Forces Covenant into law”.¹⁵⁰ In short, the Bill would introduce a legal requirement on select public bodies – principally local authorities and some health and education bodies – to have due regard to the principles of the Covenant in the fields of health, housing and education.



Participants in our research were aware of the Bill and the new duties being introduced, and brought it up through their own volition in interviews. Where it was discussed, interviewees and survey respondents were broadly aligned in support of the principle of a strengthened legal duty, albeit at times less enamoured with the proposed framework as set out. There were some, particularly amongst those out of scope of the new provisions, such as business and national government statutory stakeholders, who welcomed the measures being brought forward. However, pervading much discussion of the topic amongst most stakeholders who touched on it were concerns about the limited range of policy areas within scope, the lack of national government accountability and the resourcing behind it:

“We believe that the legislation should cover the full scope of the Covenant.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

“However, because the Covenant has never come with any mandate, frankly, nor indeed any resources attached. And of course, that’s why it’s never been statutory. The issue here in Parliament, is there is nothing statutory about it. And frankly, the Armed Forces bill is not going to make a huge difference to that. Therefore, if you don’t fundamentally change that, you cannot possibly expect people to take a different approach, other than let’s share what works.”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

“There’s a view that the best way to overcome that is to give it that teeth, by introducing a new statutory requirement and then you’ve got a new legal duty on the relevant public authorities in the way that’s set out in the in the bill...[my] main concern is around resources...There’s probably a bit more that we’ve got to do now... that’s going to need some extra resource, and that isn’t going to be forthcoming.”
(Local government stakeholder)

“Does this mean now that in relation to the Armed Forces Bill, when you talk about low hanging fruit. Does that mean that health care, education, housing, are fixed and actually, when it comes to benefits, tax, deployment, family life, do we need to find a different way of highlighting that?”
(Charity sector stakeholder)

The views of those interviewed for this research align with those heard by the Bill Committee during its passage through Parliament. The evidence revealed near unanimous support for the Covenant being strengthened, but concern about the scope of the proposals and their potential to alter the nature of the Covenant and limit progress. Evidence submitted to the Committee repeatedly highlighted the desirability of applying the same new legal standard to national government as will be applied to local government, and of addressing the omission of critical policy areas affecting the Armed Forces community, thus maintaining the broad responsibility and reach of the Armed Forces Covenant explored in this report.

“Given that the role of the UK and Welsh governments is setting national and strategic policy that directly impacts on how local services operate, there will perhaps be merit in extending the duty in this manner”.¹⁵¹

This narrow nature of the Bill’s scope could have significant implications for real world outputs and outcomes, and perceptions of the Covenant and the Armed Forces community. Over the last decade, whilst Covenant activity and performance have at times been variable, there has been innovative action undertaken and significant resource invested in new ways to support the Armed Forces Covenant. As the implementation of the Covenant changes to reflect the provisions set out in the Armed Forces

Bill, it is important to be alert to any unintended consequence of within public bodies, who may have many other financial and legislative priorities. As the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has suggested, “there is the potential for confusion within local authorities as some aspects of the Armed Forces Covenant will be enshrined in law and others not”.¹⁵²

The Bill, as set out at time of writing, does provide for the Secretary of State to, by regulation, add functions and bodies to the scope of the Bill in the future, but there are no details, or guarantees, as to when or if this may be used.

And finally, while the UK Government has confirmed that “no new enforcement mechanism is planned”¹⁵³ and that existing complaints procedures and Ombudsmen could be used to enforce the new Covenant duty, it has indicated that enforcement will be possible via judicial review. Having this option available could fundamentally alter the character of the Covenant, which to date has been advanced on the basis of voluntary arrangements, collaboration and good will, rather than adversarial legal challenge.

RECOMMENDATION:
The Secretary of State for Defence should use the powers in the Armed Forces Bill 2021 to extend the scope of the new Covenant duty to all public sector bodies.

RECOMMENDATION:
There should be appropriate and clear procedures and mechanisms for the Armed Forces community to pursue any breaches of the Covenant duty without incurring prohibitive legal costs.

Covenant's next phase and recommendations for the future

The last decade has shown important progress in support for the Armed Forces community, and addressing some of the challenges and disadvantages they face. Whilst a firm link cannot always be drawn, it is clear that the Armed Forces Covenant and its principles have played a major role in those achievements. Our research shows that those principles have support of the public and the Armed Forces community and retain a strong degree of consensus. Significant amounts of public funding have been directed to Covenant-related activity in the last decade that might not otherwise have been spent. The essential framework of the Covenant has remained in place and is institutionally recognised, with further changes in its legal underpinning to come. So it is our conclusion that the decision of the RBL, almost fifteen years ago, to call on those with the responsibility to 'Honour the Covenant', was the right one. However, our research findings also show concerns including over governance and the lack of resolution on some issues of concern meaning a step change is required to learn from and build on the successes of the Covenant's first decade. The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report alone is unable to provide the accountability and metrics needed to fulfil an ever-evolving requirement. A legally binding Covenant for the next decade would benefit from fulfilling that original campaign call, but only if it is applicable to all areas where a serving member of the Armed Forces, a veteran or their family needs to access support, from all tiers of government.

However, as this report has set out, there are a number of ways beyond just a legal duty that delivery, policy intention and formal mechanisms can be altered to ensure that the duties and principles of the Covenant remain as relevant in 2021 as they were in 2011.

As we look towards a second decade of the Covenant providing a framework of support to those in the Armed Forces community who need it the most, we recommend that:

- To further their commitment to improving awareness of the positive contribution of the Armed Forces and to ensure veterans feel recognised for their Service, the UK and devolved governments' should place promotion of the Armed Forces Covenant at the heart of its messaging. This should include a dedicated programme of Covenant promotion activity within the next iteration of the Strategy for our Veterans Action plan..
- The Government should set out to identify and address the needs of reservists and their families as a priority activity, with reinstatement of dedicated narrative within the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report.
- Geographical restrictions placed on the delivery of Armed Forces Covenant should be overcome with a desire to support members of the Armed Forces community wherever they reside and face disadvantage or are eligible for special consideration.
- The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office should be routinely included within the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report to update on initiatives they provide to support the Armed Forces Community overseas.
- Further research and analysis of the views of the Armed Forces community in Northern Ireland should be carried out to establish their views on the Covenant being more openly discussed and the principles of the Covenant.
- Following research the Northern Ireland Assembly and the UK Government should produce a roadmap for the implementation of the Covenant in Northern Ireland, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for delivery bodies supported by an information campaign that sets out what the Covenant is and is not.
- The UK Government should explore how the outcomes focussed approach to Armed Forces community support across the island of Ireland can provide best practice for wider implementation of the Covenant's principles overseas.
- The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust should create a multi-year funding stream for initiatives and activities in Northern Ireland to help embed Covenant activity via apolitical funding and resourcing.
- The UK Government should clarify the applicability of the Armed Forces Covenant in Crown Dependencies, with a desire for resident members of the UK Armed Forces Community to have parity in the protections of the Covenant as their UK based contemporaries.
- Authors of any publication or statement that references the Covenant should ensure that they use the specific wording of the principles as outlined in the Covenant itself to avoid confusion and dilution of them.
- The UK Government and the wider Armed Forces Charity Sector should conduct research into the attitudes towards the UK military community amongst younger age groups, especially those aged 18-24, with the aim of creating bespoke marketing and information materials about the importance of the Armed Forces Covenant.
- Further research should be carried out into the impact on attitudes towards the Armed Forces of the implementation of instances of special consideration as set out in the principles of the Covenant.

- The MoD should develop a best practice guide on the application of special consideration within national and devolved government policy making ensuring that it goes beyond just addressing disadvantages.
- Armed Forces Covenant annual reports should outline which principle of the Armed Forces Covenant a policy relates to, with an emphasis on ensuring that the principle of special consideration is honoured.
- All government departments should conduct proactive and positive social media campaigns with content outlining measures being taken under the Armed Forces Covenant to support the Armed Forces community or services already available to them, incorporating the rationale for the measure alongside accurate and engaging stories and facts about the Armed Forces community.
- The Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo) should work with Defence Relationship management to ensure the Employer Recognition Scheme is aligned to the work of the Armed Forces charity sector and enables member organisations to sign pursue scheme awards.
- Armed Forces charities with award status from the Employer Recognition Scheme should promote the Covenant by highlighting the ERS award status branding on external communications and providing internal training and communications on embedding the Covenant into workplace practices and values.
- The Armed Forces charity sector should support the UK and devolved governments in any Covenant publicity drive by promoting real life examples of where the Covenant has worked for the Armed Forces community, explaining the benefits.
- The Single Services should provide greater awareness training of the Armed Forces Covenant as part of phase one training, with further training and awareness sessions through career for all ranks and Services, including real life examples of how it can and has supported serving personnel. Materials should also be made more available for, and promoted to, families as well.
- Defence Relationship Management should place more of an emphasis on rewarding special consideration and what commercial signatories can do for the community as customers alongside employees within a relaunch of the Defence Employer Recognition award scheme, as the Covenant Recognition scheme.
- The Armed Forces Covenant should be included in the induction training process for all elected parliamentary and assembly politicians, their caseworkers, and policy roles within the UK and devolved civil service to ensure a base level of awareness across all departments and policymakers.
- All statutory bodies and those delivering statutory services should ask all individuals whether they or a member of their family have served in the HM Armed Forces, with internal guidance provided on how the body meets its commitment to the principles of the Covenant.
- Alongside the guidance for the Armed Forces Bill 2021 on any new Covenant duties for local authorities there should be a clear framework for Covenant delivery, drawing on the Our Community Our Covenant toolkit, and including policy areas beyond just health housing and education.
- UK Government should work with local and devolved governments to develop and publish a consistent and comparable suite of metrics to improve our understanding of the Armed Forces community and improve targeting of support.
- The Scottish Government should undertake research with stakeholders to establish practical steps to improve reporting on the Covenant in Scotland so that understanding of the commitment to the Armed Forces community improves.
- The Covenant Reference Group secretariat should work with the Northern Ireland Veterans Support office and Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to ensure that there is consistent Northern Ireland representation on the CRG.
- The Covenant Reference Group should reacquire a collaborative focus as a source of external expert reference for government as measures to deliver the Covenant are developed.
- Minutes or records of decisions from the Covenant Reference Group should be published, subject to appropriate security and privacy considerations.
- The Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board should meet at the earliest opportunity and continue to do so a minimum of twice a year in order to provide ministerial oversight and direction.
- Each year's Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report should set out the current governance structure for the Covenant and veterans' issues, including an organogram, so that lines of decision-making and accountability are clear externally.

- The Welsh Government should provide longer term funding for Armed Forces Liaison Officers in Wales
- As ownership is a matter for all of government, each UK and devolved government department should have a named minister responsible for its department's Covenant commitments, and a list published in the Covenant Annual Report.
- There should be a consistent approach for members of the Armed Forces community to seek external accountability on the Covenant, with an annual inquiry into the Covenant Annual Report by the Defence Select Committee, an annual debate in each UK parliament and agreed priorities shared between the UK Veterans Commissioners.
- In order to promote innovation within Covenant delivery, it should be ensured that Covenant funds are not used for business-as-usual activity or meeting statutory guidance.
- The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust should consider more multi-year grants to projects in order to increase the impact and sustainability of funded work.
- The Secretary of State for Defence should use the powers in the Armed Forces Bill 2021 to extend the scope of the new Covenant duty.
- There should be appropriate and clear procedures and mechanisms for the Armed Forces community to pursue any breaches of the Covenant duty without incurring prohibitive legal costs.



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Appendix 2 Survey Results

YouGov on behalf of The Royal British Legion, The Armed Forces Covenant.

All figures unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2130 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25th -26th May 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+)

25th - 26th May 2021 - Results by Gender and Age

YouGov®	Total	Gender		Age						
		Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
Moving on...For the following question, by 'UK Armed Forces' we mean the Army, Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, Royal Marines. Which, if any, of the following statements apply to you? (Please select all that apply)										
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540	
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492	
I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	1%	2%	0%	2%	3%	2%	0%	0%	0%	
I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	5%	9%	2%	5%	3%	2%	5%	6%	9%	
A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	4%	3%	5%	3%	4%	3%	3%	3%	4%	
A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	21%	18%	24%	9%	9%	15%	19%	28%	36%	
I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	9%	10%	8%	17%	15%	10%	8%	5%	5%	
I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	23%	26%	20%	6%	18%	27%	29%	28%	25%	

YouGov®	Total	Gender		Age					
		Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	47%	44%	49%	53%	54%	50%	45%	44%	38%
Don't know	4%	5%	3%	13%	4%	3%	2%	2%	2%
HRA_Q2. Before taking this survey, had you ever heard of the Armed Forces Covenant?									
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492
Yes, I had	17%	22%	12%	19%	15%	15%	14%	22%	17%
No, I hadn't	83%	78%	88%	81%	85%	85%	86%	78%	83%
Which, if any, of the following do you think are functions of the Armed Forces Covenant? (Please select all that apply)									
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492
Looks after/supports people who have served in the UK Armed Forces	29%	29%	29%	20%	25%	25%	26%	36%	37%
Looks after/supports people currently serving in the UK Armed Forces	24%	23%	24%	24%	23%	20%	19%	25%	28%
Looks after/supports the family of people currently or previously in the UK Armed forces	27%	28%	27%	28%	19%	21%	23%	35%	34%
Looks after widows/widowers of people who served in the Armed Forces	27%	26%	27%	28%	20%	21%	22%	33%	34%
Looks after the families (e.g. children, parents, etc.) of people who have been killed in service in the Armed Forces	27%	27%	27%	30%	21%	22%	22%	33%	32%
Upholds the nations obligations to the Armed Forces (e.g. recognition of the sacrifices made by those who have performed military duty)	24%	26%	22%	23%	15%	17%	23%	31%	31%
It is a way of showing support for the Armed Forces	48%	20%	16%	19%	14%	13%	16%	19%	23%
Gives advantages to serving personnel over other sectors of society	7%	7%	6%	10%	7%	5%	4%	7%	7%
Legally enforceable rights (e.g. freedom from discrimination, the right to education, etc.) for members of the Armed Forces community	15%	16%	14%	15%	14%	13%	11%	18%	18%
Other	0%	0%	1%	-	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%

YouGov®	Total	Gender		Age					
		Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Don't know	47%	44%	49%	53%	54%	50%	45%	44%	38%
To what extent do you personally agree or disagree with each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant? (Please select an option on each row)									
No member of the Armed Forces community should face disadvantage in the provision of public and commercial services compared to any other citizen.									
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492
Strongly agree	68%	68%	68%	49%	61%	64%	71%	76%	77%
Somewhat agree	21%	20%	22%	28%	25%	23%	20%	17%	17%
Somewhat disagree	3%	3%	2%	9%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%
Strongly disagree	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	2%	1%	0%	1%
Don't know	8%	8%	8%	15%	10%	8%	8%	6%	4%
Net: Agree	89%	88%	90%	76%	86%	87%	90%	93%	94%
Net: Disagree	3%	4%	3%	9%	4%	4%	2%	1%	2%
In some circumstances special treatment may be appropriate, especially for the injured or bereaved									
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492
Strongly agree	57%	56%	59%	34%	42%	53%	61%	66%	73%
Somewhat agree	29%	29%	30%	38%	39%	30%	29%	24%	22%
Somewhat disagree	4%	5%	3%	11%	5%	4%	2%	3%	1%
Strongly disagree	1%	2%	0%	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%
Don't know	8%	8%	8%	16%	12%	10%	7%	5%	3%
Net: Agree	87%	85%	88%	72%	81%	83%	90%	90%	95%
Net: Disagree	5%	7%	3%	12%	7%	6%	3%	4%	2%

YouGov®	Total	Gender		Age						
		Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
To what extent do you think each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant goes far enough in supporting the Armed Forces community? (Please select an option on each row)										
No member of the Armed Forces community should face disadvantage in the provision of public and commercial services compared to any other citizen										
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540	
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492	
The support this principle sets out to provide does not go far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	22%	23%	20%	13%	14%	21%	23%	29%	25%	
The support this principle sets out to provide goes far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	45%	47%	43%	41%	51%	42%	44%	43%	48%	
The support this principle sets out to provide goes too far towards supporting the Armed Forces community	1%	2%	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	
Don't know	32%	28%	36%	45%	34%	35%	32%	28%	26%	
In some circumstances special treatment may be appropriate, especially for the injured or bereaved.										
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540	
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492	
The support this principle sets out to provide does not go far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	26%	25%	26%	16%	16%	20%	25%	34%	35%	
The support this principle sets out to provide goes far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	40%	43%	37%	40%	45%	39%	40%	38%	39%	
The support this principle sets out to provide goes too far towards supporting the Armed Forces community	3%	4%	2%	3%	4%	3%	2%	3%	1%	
Don't know	32%	28%	35%	41%	34%	38%	33%	25%	25%	
Thinking specifically about the principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: "Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured and the bereaved." In which five, if any, of the following areas do you think current or previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should receive special treatment? (Please select up to 5 options. If you don't think current or previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should receive special treatment, please select the 'not applicable' option										

YouGov®	Total	Gender		Age					
		Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492
Physical and mental health services	70%	65%	74%	57%	63%	66%	73%	73%	80%
Social care	32%	33%	31%	22%	27%	29%	33%	36%	39%
Children's education	19%	19%	18%	18%	16%	21%	18%	19%	19%
Housing	51%	48%	55%	29%	40%	48%	53%	61%	65%
Employment	43%	41%	46%	26%	37%	40%	46%	46%	54%
Finance (including pensions and benefits)	43%	39%	47%	27%	35%	38%	47%	49%	55%
Adjusting/ transitioning/ reintegrating to civilian life	69%	65%	72%	59%	61%	65%	71%	72%	77%
Other	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Don't know	11%	12%	9%	19%	13%	13%	10%	8%	6%
Not applicable - I don't think current or previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should receive any special treatment	9%	11%	7%	12%	11%	10%	8%	8%	4%
Thinking specifically about the principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: "The Armed Forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services." In which five, if any, of the following areas do you think current and previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should not be disadvantaged? (Please select up to 5 options)									
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492
Physical and mental health services	69%	65%	72%	53%	59%	69%	71%	75%	76%
Social care	37%	39%	35%	26%	32%	34%	38%	45%	42%
Children's education	31%	33%	28%	28%	28%	33%	30%	32%	31%
Housing	60%	58%	62%	46%	49%	59%	62%	69%	69%
Employment	58%	57%	59%	50%	48%	55%	58%	61%	68%
Finance (including pensions and benefits)	50%	45%	54%	36%	43%	43%	49%	55%	63%
Adjusting/ transitioning/ reintegrating to civilian life	60%	56%	62%	41%	51%	58%	61%	62%	72%
None of these	4%	5%	3%	6%	6%	4%	4%	5%	2%

YouGov®	Total	Gender		Age					
		Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Don't know	14%	15%	13%	27%	20%	15%	14%	8%	7%
Which, if any, of the following organisations do you think are currently responsible for ensuring that the Armed Forces Covenant works as it is designed to? (Please select all that apply)									
Unweighted base	2130	989	1141	143	360	380	347	360	540
Base: All UK adults	2130	1033	1097	236	340	371	335	355	492
The Government, specifically departments such as the Ministry of Defence	53%	54%	51%	39%	50%	45%	52%	59%	62%
Local Authorities (i.e. councils and other local services)	25%	25%	25%	21%	22%	21%	22%	27%	30%
Devolved Governments (i.e. the governments of Scotland and Wales)	21%	24%	19%	18%	17%	17%	24%	24%	26%
Government Services (e.g. National Health Service, Jobcentre Plus, etc.)	34%	35%	33%	31%	31%	30%	32%	35%	41%
Charities and voluntary groups	25%	22%	27%	24%	22%	26%	26%	25%	25%
Businesses	7%	8%	7%	7%	10%	5%	5%	7%	8%
The general public	7%	8%	5%	7%	6%	8%	5%	6%	7%
The Armed Forces	46%	43%	48%	39%	43%	43%	46%	46%	54%
None of these	2%	2%	1%	4%	3%	2%	1%	1%	0%
Don't know	29%	28%	30%	35%	32%	32%	29%	26%	24%
Thinking about your knowledge of the Armed Forces Covenant including what you have read about in this survey. Do you think it provides enough support for the Armed Forces Community?									
Unweighted base	356	222	134	20	52	57	49	82	96
Base: All UK adults who were aware of the Armed Forces Covenant before taking the survey	359	231	127	44	50	54	48	77	85
Yes, it does	24%	27%	19%	26%	35%	23%	21%	30%	14%
No, it doesn't	43%	42%	45%	28%	26%	33%	52%	44%	61%
Don't know	33%	31%	35%	46%	39%	43%	27%	26%	25%

Results by membership of the Armed Forces Community

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces								
		I am current-ly serving in the UK Armed forc-es, regular or reserve	I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, part-ner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, sib-lings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know	
Before taking this survey, had you ever heard of the Armed Forces Covenant?										
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63	
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84	
Yes, I had	17%	83%	56%	36%	25%	29%	20%	10%	12%	
No, I hadn't	83%	17%	44%	64%	75%	71%	80%	90%	88%	
Which, if any, of the following do you think are functions of the Armed Forces Covenant? (Please select all that apply)										
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63	
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84	
Looks after/supports people who have served in the UK Armed Forces	29%	32%	46%	41%	36%	36%	36%	24%	14%	
Looks after/supports people currently serving in the UK Armed Forces	24%	23%	36%	35%	30%	29%	27%	20%	14%	

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces							
		I am current-ly serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	I have previ-ously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know
Looks after/supports the family of people currently or previously in the UK Armed forces	27%	30%	32%	33%	34%	34%	32%	24%	17%
Looks after widows/widowers of people who served in the Armed Forces	27%	33%	28%	32%	34%	34%	33%	23%	14%
Looks after the families (e.g. children, parents, etc.) of people who have been killed in service in the Armed Forces	27%	48%	35%	37%	35%	37%	30%	23%	14%
Upholds the nations obligations to the Armed Forces (e.g. recognition of the sacrifices made by those who have performed military duty)	24%	43%	49%	36%	34%	32%	28%	18%	9%
It is a way of showing support for the Armed Forces	48%	36%	32%	31%	23%	24%	21%	14%	11%
Gives advantages to serving personnel over other sectors of so-ciety	7%	16%	13%	7%	9%	10%	6%	6%	6%
Legally enforceable rights (e.g. freedom from discrimination, the right to education, etc.) for members of the Armed Forces community	15%	25%	24%	24%	21%	23%	15%	14%	6%
Other	0%	-	-	-	0%	1%	1%	0%	3%
Don't know	48%	13%	25%	36%	39%	39%	45%	55%	65%
To what extent do you personally agree or disagree with each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant? (Please select an option on each row)									
No member of the Armed Forces community should face disadvantage in the provision of public and commercial services compared to any other citizen.									
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
The support this principle sets out to provide does not go far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	22%	68%	51%	33%	29%	27%	27%	16%	17%
The support this principle sets out to provide goes far enough to-wards supporting the Armed Forces community	45%	25%	38%	47%	47%	47%	45%	46%	24%
The support this principle sets out to provide goes too far towards supporting the Armed Forces community	1%	3%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	2%	-
Don't know	32%	3%	10%	18%	24%	25%	27%	37%	59%
In some circumstances special treatment may be appropriate, especially for the injured or bereaved.									

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces							
		I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
Strongly agree	68%	48%	82%	80%	78%	77%	78%	62%	41%
Somewhat agree	21%	42%	10%	9%	17%	18%	16%	23%	24%
Somewhat disagree	3%	6%	4%	8%	2%	4%	2%	2%	13%
Strongly disagree	1%	4%	2%	-	1%	-	1%	1%	-
Don't know	8%	-	2%	4%	3%	1%	3%	11%	22%
Net: Agree	89%	90%	93%	88%	95%	96%	94%	85%	65%
Net: Disagree	3%	10%	5%	8%	2%	4%	3%	3%	13%
In some circumstances special treatment may be appropriate, especially for the injured or bereaved.									
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
Strongly agree	57%	70%	78%	73%	72%	63%	69%	48%	36%

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces							
		I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know
Somewhat agree	29%	15%	13%	19%	21%	29%	25%	35%	28%
Somewhat disagree	4%	4%	3%	2%	3%	3%	2%	4%	10%
Strongly disagree	1%	3%	4%	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%
Don't know	8%	8%	2%	6%	3%	4%	3%	12%	23%
Net: Agree	87%	85%	91%	91%	93%	91%	94%	83%	64%
Net: Disagree	5%	7%	7%	3%	5%	5%	3%	6%	13%
To what extent do you think each principle of the Armed Forces Covenant goes far enough in supporting the Armed Forces community? (Please select an option on each row)									
No member of the Armed Forces community should face disadvantage in the provision of public and commercial services compared to any other citizen.									
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
The support this principle sets out to provide does not go far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	22%	68%	51%	33%	29%	27%	27%	16%	17%
The support this principle sets out to provide goes far enough to-wards supporting the Armed Forces community	45%	25%	38%	47%	47%	47%	45%	46%	24%
The support this principle sets out to provide goes too far towards supporting the Armed Forces community	1%	3%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	2%	-
Don't know	32%	3%	10%	18%	24%	25%	27%	37%	59%
In some circumstances special treatment may be appropriate, especially for the injured or bereaved.									

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces							
		I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
The support this principle sets out to provide does not go far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	26%	58%	47%	40%	33%	32%	31%	19%	20%
The support this principle sets out to provide goes far enough towards supporting the Armed Forces community	40%	32%	44%	39%	40%	40%	38%	41%	25%
The support this principle sets out to provide goes too far towards supporting the Armed Forces community	3%	7%	-	4%	2%	4%	2%	3%	2%
Don't know	32%	3%	9%	17%	25%	24%	28%	37%	53%
Thinking specifically about the principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: "Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured and the bereaved." In which five, if any, of the following areas do you think current or previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should receive special treatment? (Please select up to 5 options. If you don't think current or previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should receive special treatment, please select the 'not applicable' option)									
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
Physical and mental health services	70%	61%	73%	77%	80%	78%	82%	64%	44%
Social care	32%	45%	34%	30%	35%	31%	37%	29%	24%

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces							
		I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know
Children's education	19%	30%	24%	33%	20%	26%	19%	18%	16%
Housing	51%	59%	66%	67%	62%	56%	60%	46%	32%
Employment	43%	35%	53%	47%	55%	43%	46%	39%	36%
Finance (including pensions and benefits)	43%	54%	53%	56%	51%	46%	50%	39%	24%
Adjusting/ transitioning/ reintegrating to civilian life	69%	64%	76%	75%	77%	80%	78%	63%	39%
Other	1%	-	4%	2%	2%	3%	1%	1%	-
Don't know	11%	-	5%	3%	7%	4%	6%	14%	25%
Not applicable - I don't think current or previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should receive any special treatment	9%	3%	5%	7%	6%	8%	5%	10%	21%
Thinking specifically about the principle of the Armed Forces Covenant: "The Armed Forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services." In which five, if any, of the following areas do you think current and previous members of The Armed Forces and their families should not be disadvantaged? (Please select up to 5 options)									
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
Physical and mental health services	69%	60%	68%	73%	76%	75%	80%	64%	36%
Social care	37%	24%	46%	32%	41%	42%	43%	33%	26%
Children's education	31%	47%	35%	37%	30%	42%	33%	30%	12%

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces							
		I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know
Housing	60%	50%	69%	73%	71%	68%	71%	56%	31%
Employment	58%	53%	67%	60%	65%	61%	63%	55%	34%
Finance (including pensions and benefits)	50%	53%	52%	58%	59%	51%	55%	46%	18%
Adjusting/ transitioning/ reintegrating to civilian life	60%	26%	64%	65%	65%	65%	68%	57%	28%
None of these	4%	-	5%	1%	4%	3%	3%	4%	14%
Don't know	14%	3%	4%	7%	8%	10%	6%	18%	38%
Which, if any, of the following organisations do you think are currently responsible for ensuring that the Armed Forces Covenant works as it is designed to? (Please select all that apply)									
Unweighted base	2130	19	106	81	466	191	521	986	63
Base: All UK adults	2130	24	111	77	451	194	492	992	84
The Government, specifically departments such as the Ministry of Defence	53%	37%	65%	64%	59%	64%	62%	48%	23%
Local Authorities (i.e. councils and other local services)	25%	30%	46%	45%	32%	35%	32%	20%	8%
Devolved Governments (i.e. the governments of Scotland and Wales)	21%	29%	35%	29%	25%	25%	28%	18%	9%
Government Services (e.g. National Health Service, Jobcentre Plus, etc.)	34%	18%	44%	49%	43%	42%	41%	29%	13%
Charities and voluntary groups	25%	21%	32%	26%	31%	30%	29%	21%	14%
Businesses	7%	25%	14%	15%	10%	15%	9%	5%	3%

YouGov®	Total	Connection to the Armed Forces							
		I am currently serving in the UK Armed forces, regular or reserve	I have previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) is currently serving in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	A member of my family (parent, siblings, partner, child) has previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who currently serve in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I have friend(s) who previously served in the UK Armed Forces, regular or reserve	I do not know anyone who has served in the UK Armed Forces	Don't know
The general public	7%	28%	13%	8%	7%	11%	9%	5%	4%
The Armed Forces	46%	37%	54%	54%	53%	58%	55%	40%	19%
None of these	2%	-	1%	3%	0%	1%	1%	2%	11%
Don't know	29%	3%	10%	17%	23%	23%	21%	34%	57%
Thinking about your knowledge of the Armed Forces Covenant including what you have read about in this survey. Do you think it provides enough support for the Armed Forces Community?									
Unweighted base	356	15	57	29	120	54	106	101	6
Base: All UK adults who were aware of the Armed Forces Covenant before taking the survey	359	20	63	28	115	56	97	100	10
Yes, it does	24%	42%	27%	20%	22%	24%	20%	27%	8%
No, it doesn't	43%	43%	52%	65%	55%	54%	57%	25%	26%
Don't know	33%	15%	21%	15%	24%	21%	24%	47%	66%

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Notes

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