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# THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT AND VETERANS ANNUAL REPORT 2023

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## Summary





# Ministerial foreword to the Annual Report

## The Secretary of State for Defence and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs

The events of the last 12 months have continued to highlight the vital work our Armed Forces carry out. Around the world they support our allies to defend the global community and support vital humanitarian work. At home they protect our borders, provide military aid to our national communities, and support epoch-defining state ceremonial events including Their Majesties' Coronations. More than ever, our Armed Forces community is central to our national life and represents who we are as a country, and we are delighted that public support for our Soldiers, Sailors, Aviators and their families remains consistently high.

We are honoured to introduce the 2023 Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Report. The report includes contributions from across MOD, the Office for Veterans' Affairs, wider Government Departments, and the Devolved Administrations. It is how the Government showcases the extraordinary work that is done throughout the UK to support our Armed Forces Community and is the primary tool by which the Government is held to account in delivering the Covenant.

The Government continues to work to support the Armed Forces, with this year seeing a number of important reports and reviews including the Review of Armed Forces Incentivisation led by Rick Haythornthwaite, which will empower our people, improving their lived experience and make Defence a more attractive, modern

employer. The MOD has widened entitlement to Services Family Accommodation under the New Accommodation Offer to help modernise how Defence supports its people. Lord Etherton's hard-hitting and compelling report into the treatment of LGBT veterans finally allowed LGBT veterans to be heard and enabled a recognition of how the pre-2000 ban on gay Service personnel impacted them both personally and as a cohort.

The Ministry of Defence, Office for Veterans Affairs and Government Digital Service continue to make significant progress to deliver the government's commitment to provide Veterans Cards to all eligible UK Armed Forces veterans who want one, testing the required technology and beginning the rollout of the first Veterans Cards to those who left the Armed Forces prior to December 2018.

The Office for National Statistics has published their first findings from the inclusion of the veteran question in the 2021 census of England and Wales, which provides Government and the wider veterans sector with new, deeper insight into the whole veteran population, and their relative levels of disadvantage, than ever before. In recognition of how Government support to veterans has evolved, Defence and the Office for Veterans Affairs jointly commissioned an independent review of UK Government Welfare Services for Veterans; to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. This, and the second Armed Forces Compensation Scheme Quinquennial Review, make recommendations on how we can continue to ensure those who have served have the right support at the right time.

The Government continues to work to ensure that veterans are able to access the support they may need through clear pathways, including Op COURAGE, NHS England's Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service, Op RESTORE, NHS England's physical healthcare pathway, and Op FORTITUDE, a pathway for veterans at

risk of or experiencing homelessness, delivered in partnership with stakeholders across government, public services and the charity sector.

87% of personnel leaving the Armed Forces find employment within 6 months. Awareness of the value that veterans, reservists and Service spouses and partners offer to the civilian sector was further evidenced by the recent 10,000th signing of the Armed Forces Covenant by the John Lewis Partnership. Nearly 900 Covenant signatories are members of the Gold Award Employer Recognition Scheme, further demonstrating the importance placed on attracting and employing members of the Armed Forces community across UK plc.

In fulfilment of the Government's Manifesto commitment to further incorporate the Covenant into law, the new legal Duty of due regard to the Covenant principles came into force in November 2022. And, in accordance with our commitment made in Parliament during the passage of that legislation, over the past year we have conducted a careful review as to whether the UK Government and Devolved Administrations should also be brought into scope of this new legal duty. But there is still more to do to ensure that members of the Armed Forces Community do not face disadvantage due to service life. This Government will remain focused, with wider UK society, on ensuring that the UK becomes the best place in the world to be a veteran, and that the profound Covenant between our country and our Armed Forces is honoured forever.



The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP  
– Secretary of State for  
Defence



The Rt Hon Johnny Mercer MP -  
Minister for Veterans' Affairs



A mobile testing centre in Bardufoss, Norway set up to test the Marines of 45 Commando arriving in Norway to begin their Cold Weather Training in 2021.

# Health and healthcare

Work to improve healthcare services provided to the Armed Forces Community includes:

- The Op COMMUNITY pilot is underway across England. Op COMMUNITY is a point of contact for the Armed Forces community to offer support and guidance as they navigate NHS services.
- Construction of the National Rehabilitation Centre started this year.
- Op NOVA was launched to deliver pre- and post-custody support to veterans in the criminal justice system.
- The OVA awarded £5 million to 22 projects as part of the Health Innovation Fund.
- Op RESTORE, the veterans' physical health and wellbeing service, was launched in June 2023, replacing the Veterans Trauma Network.
- The OVA, in partnership with the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, invested £3 million into the Veterans Mobility Fund.
- In June 2023, new guidance was issued to all Local Health Boards in Wales to support delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant and uphold the new duty of due regard.
- In England 71% of Primary Care Networks now include a veteran friendly practice.

Of particular interest is NHS England's work to establish the **Serving and Ex-Serving Women's Health Improvement Group**.

This comprises members from the Department of Health and Social Care, Defence, Office for Veterans Affairs, the NHS and Armed Forces charities, to drive improvements for female Service

personnel and veterans, building on the 'We Also Served' report. The Group has been working with Defence Medical Services and the NHS to develop a maternity pathway for servicewomen, building on the Military Maternity Voices pilot in Lincolnshire; and creating a specific pathway for service personnel (regardless of gender) who have experienced sexual assault, including referral to any of the 49 sexual assault referral centres across England.



A demonstration by an RAF Critical Care Air Support Team, moving a patient.

# Education

Work to improve the education and wellbeing of Service children includes:

- The Welsh Government provided £350,000 in 2023/24 to the Supporting Service Children in Education Cymru project, working with the Welsh Local Government Association. The project delivers a range of support for service children living in Wales, delivered via schools and local authorities.
- The Scottish Government has changed guidance regarding further education funding for the children of Armed Forces personnel. This means that students in further education from the Armed Forces community who were unable to access support can now apply for funding for eligible courses.

Work has continued with the Department for Education on strengthening policies such as the [Schools Admissions Code](#) and [the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice](#) to support the needs of Service children. The Department for Education continues to focus on improving the support from local authorities and schools for Service children as they move into and out of the English educational system. The Service Pupil Support Programme was launched early April 2023, supporting projects which focus on pupils from serving families. It aims to prevent gap in attainment between Service and non-Service pupils and address the needs of Service pupils with additional needs.



A group of students drawing on a white board

# Housing and accommodation

- The Defence Command Paper Refresh in July 2023 announced a major investment in Service Family accommodation. An additional £400 million funding over two years will address damp and mould issues, improve thermal efficiency and carry out refurbishment works to unoccupied homes.
- The MOD invested in new properties in several areas, from Lossiemouth to Plymouth. These areas were previously heavily dependent on expensive accommodation rented from private landlords.
- Service Families Accommodation policy has been modernised, so that over 5,200 families in committed relationships (who are not married or civil partnered), can now live in Service Families Accommodation.
- 97% of Service Families Accommodation now has access to Wi-Fi with speeds of 24Mbps, meaning a vast improvement in previous areas of digital isolation.
- After completing a successful pilot, Forces Help to Buy has become an enduring policy from January 2023.
- A minimum standard for Single Living Accommodation has been agreed.
- The OVA was awarded £8.55 million by HMT for the Reducing Veteran Homelessness Programme. This included £500,000 for a new, dedicated referral scheme. By the end of its thirteenth week Op FORTITUDE had supported 162 veterans into housing.
- The OVA launched A Home in Civilian Society, which provides guidance on the housing options and services available to service personnel, veterans and their families residing in England.



Service Family Accommodation in Wiltshire.

# Inquests and judicial engagement

The Defence Inquests Unit has recorded 89 inquests (34 of which concern the death of a veteran) being concluded between 1 October 2022 and 30 September 2023

During the reporting period, the Scottish Fatalities Investigation Unit confirmed to the Defence Inquests Unit that they had concluded investigations into six Service-personnel deaths; this included two veteran deaths in Scotland. In all six deaths, the investigations were sufficient to understand the causes of death, thus precluding a need to take them forward to a fatal accident inquiry (Scotland's equivalent of an inquest). There were no veteran deaths recorded in Northern Ireland.

Inquests are yet to be held into 52 military and veteran deaths that occurred since 1 October 2022.

# UK Armed Forces Families Strategy update

- Funding to support the Armed Forces Families Strategy continues under the Armed Forces Families Fund, over £900,000 for Early Years projects, about £500,000 to support Service spouses and partners, and over £2 million for educational support.



Royal Navy Officer returning home

- Following the successful launch of the Wraparound Childcare scheme in September 2022, there are over 5,500 Service families taking advantage of the funding toward their childcare costs.
- The MOD reached agreement with the Home Office that families of Armed Forces personnel can take the 'Life In The UK' test while they are in the UK and use this for any future Indefinite Leave to Enter applications, even if they are overseas when making their applications.



Couple, one in uniform, holding hands walk across a square in front of buildings

# Business, employment, and the community

- The number of Armed Forces Covenant signatories has seen substantial growth as of 30 September 2023 with some 10,975 total signatories.
- The 2023 Partnering with Defence Conference held at London's Queen Elizabeth II Centre was a vibrant gathering of over 300 organisations, including Armed Forces Covenant signatories and Employer Recognition Scheme award holders.
- In Scotland, NHS Scotland's Supporting Armed Forces Employment Programme was established in October 2022.
- In October 2022, the Office for Veterans' Affairs established the Veteran Employers Group, bringing together leading employers from across the UK to identify, promote and share best practice in veteran employability while identifying opportunities and overcoming barriers to maximise veterans' employment.



British flag flies on a dock

# The Covenant in law

- On 22 November 2022 the statutory Armed Forces Covenant Duty came into force. This places a legal obligation on specific public bodies to have due regard to the principles of the Covenant when exercising certain functions (in healthcare, education and housing) that could impact the Armed Forces community.
- Through 2023, MOD has been conducting a review into whether central departments of the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations should be brought into scope of this Duty.



A Veterans lapel pin on a suit

# Veterans' Strategy Action Plan Update

The Veterans' Strategy Action Plan (VSAP), published by the Office for Veterans' Affairs in 2022, describes how the government empowers and supports veterans in line with the principles and aims set out in the 2018 Strategy for Our Veterans.

The VSAP outlines an ambitious portfolio of over sixty commitments agreed across government to improve our understanding of and services for veterans. Regular updates on progress made to deliver the VSAP by the end of 2024 are provided by the OVA in the summer, and through this report in the winter.

As of September 2023, just over halfway through the action plan period, 64% of planned activities have been completed (up from 25% in August 2022).



A close-up of a poppy



