

Local Government Association Briefing

Veteran's Strategy

House of Commons and House of Lords debates
15 November 2018



Key Messages

- The Government's Veterans Strategy is a positive step forward, Armed Forces veterans and their families are valued members of our communities. All councils have signed the voluntary Armed Forces Covenant and are committed to honouring their obligations to those who have served their country.
- Councils work with partners to provide a range of services that help veterans and their families adjust from the Armed Forces to civilian life, including housing, money advice, employment support and health and wellbeing services.
- Councils also work with partners to help veterans and their families, who for a variety of reasons may have additional needs arising from their service and, who may also experience a period of crisis that requires intensive support from a number of public agencies as well as the voluntary and community sector.
- We welcome the additional funding for the mental health of veterans announced in the Chancellor's Budget last month which will help to ensure that veterans in need of mental health support can access timely, effective and integrated services. The funding should be available to veterans through councils who want to work with armed forces charities, health and other local partners to further strengthen mental health support for veterans and ensure it links to wider mental health activity.
- The scale of the funding challenge facing local government in England means it is challenging to maintain the current level of support for veterans and other people in vulnerable circumstances.
- At a time when council budgets are under pressure¹, it is a concern that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) Covenant funding for councils starts to end from March 2019, which will impact upon future capacity to deliver specific projects that further the Covenant locally. We want to support councils to share the learning from Covenant funded projects and embed Covenant activity across councils and partners. We are therefore calling on the Government to continue with its MoD Covenant funding for councils.

Briefing

Background

The Armed Forces Covenant

All councils in England have signed the voluntary Armed Forces Covenant and are committed to honouring their obligations to those who have served their country. Councils are helping serving and ex-service personnel and their families to have the same equality of access to public services as their civilian neighbours in areas such as housing, health, employment, education, welfare and transport.

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

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

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

Armed Forces Veterans and their families will often face a range of challenges around housing, health and wellbeing, school provision and employment and skills support. Local authorities have a key role to play in the provision or commissioning of a range of these services.

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

In England, Scotland and Wales, 10 councils were recently awarded 'gold' for the support they provide as employers to the Armed Forces Community, bringing the total to 20 councils.² In 2016, Surrey County Council was awarded 'gold' for their commitment to the Armed Forces in not only recruiting ex-military personnel and reservists but also for the support they offer for their current employees. We are keen to work with the MoD to encourage even more councils to join the scheme.

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

Commemorations and community and cultural assets

Community, leisure and cultural services provided or commissioned by councils help to offer meaningful opportunities to engage veterans in their local community, which contribute towards quality of life and wellbeing, recognise their service to the country and strengthen understanding amongst the wider community about what it's like to serve in the Armed Forces. Research shows that regular cultural and physical activity participation can help to prevent or delay the onset of conditions that require more costly health and support.³ However, the funding crisis facing local government means a focus on high need services

and less money for the wider council services that play such an important role supporting veterans and preventing issues reaching a point of crisis. The recent speech by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP⁴ is a positive step towards recognising the need for investment in this area.

Many councils support local regimental museums, either directly or through in-kind support. These museums offer a connection to military past for veterans, but are increasingly acting as points for connecting with wider social groups and communities. Local government, either through direct provision or a contracted provider, also offer veterans discounts to use leisure facilities. For example, Calderdale Council offers free 12 month membership for all Armed Forces Personnel within 12 months of discharge. After 12 months veterans can apply for membership at the corporate discount rate. Such incentives help to increase veterans' rates of participation in sport and physical activity with all the wellbeing benefits that brings, as well as providing opportunities to socialise and meet new people.

Councils also organise commemorative events and activities to mark national and local military anniversaries that recognise and celebrate veterans' service. A particular focus over the last four years has been commemorating the First World War, often in partnership with the Royal British Legion. Such activity can also act as a focal point for recent veterans, help to strengthen a shared sense of belonging and raise awareness amongst the wider community about the sacrifices present day Armed Forces personnel make for their country. While councils will always do what they can with partners to support commemorations, the cost of policing commemorative events can be significant.

LGA work in improving local delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant

In 2016, LGA worked with Forces in Mind Trust to publish the second edition of the 'Our Community – Our Covenant' [report](#).⁵ This included commissioning Shared Intelligence to carry out research into ways of improving the local delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One theme from the work was the impact of the nature and scale of the Armed Forces Community presence in an area on a council's understanding of the Armed Forces, and the opportunities and challenges that arise from that presence. The relationships between local councils, their partners and the Armed Forces Community work best in places where there is a significant Armed Forces Community / presence of veterans. There is often a proactive approach to meeting the needs of veterans in challenging circumstances. Action is aided by the fact that there is often a significant presence of veterans on the council and among its staff. In places with a very limited Armed Forces Community the report found that there is sometimes further work to be done to move away from a reactive approach to supporting veterans, and that is something we are supporting councils to do.

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

¹ <https://local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Budget%202018%20-%20LGA%20briefing.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/50-employers-awarded-gold-for-supporting-the-armed-forces>

³ <http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-power-of-the-arts-and-social-activities-to-improve-the-nations-health>

⁵ <http://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Our-Community-Our-Covenant-Report-30.08.16.pdf>