

# Defence Committee Select Committee Announcement

[Monday 23 September 2019]

**Embargoed: not for release until 00.01 on Wednesday 25 September 2019:**

## **MILITARY COVENANT SHORTCOMINGS STILL UNRESOLVED, SAYS DEFENCE COMMITTEE**

The Government has yet to tackle major concerns raised by the Defence Committee in its previous reports on the Armed Forces Covenant, according to its latest update, published today. Problems with repair and maintenance of Service accommodation, reinstatement of War Widows' Pensions, priority treatment for Veterans, and Service children's school admissions, remain unresolved.

Defence Committee chairman, Dr Julian Lewis MP, says:

Every year we take evidence on the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant, and every year we report similar complaints. From inadequate Service accommodation to the grotesque injustice of some war widows' pensions, the Government is failing in its moral obligation towards those who serve or have served in our Armed Forces.

Ruth Smeeth MP, a member of the Defence Committee and Chair of the APPG on the Armed Forces Covenant, says:

We are particularly concerned by the difficulties faced by Commonwealth personnel who wish to bring their families to the UK. If they are prepared to fight for this country, we should not make it impossible for them to have their loved ones nearby. We agree with the Army Families Federation that the current situation is immoral.

### **Service accommodation**

The report once again highlights the Committee's dissatisfaction with the Department's poor performance on accommodation which remains the key problem most frequently reported to the Service Families Federations. The MoD must learn lessons from the poor record of satisfaction with repair and maintenance for Service accommodation to ensure that future contracts have a customer-focused approach and that there is more active management of the contract.

The Committee calls for the MoD to put urgent plans in place to improve the condition of Single Living Accommodation (SLA), and is requesting the Comptroller and Auditor General to examine the provision of SLA.

## **War widows**

The Committee considers it disgraceful that no progress has been made in the reinstatement of War Widows' Pension to a small cohort – between 200 and 300 people – who lost the award upon remarriage or cohabitation between 1973 and 2005. Under welcome new rules brought in by the Cameron Government, if such widows divorced their partners now, the Pension would be reinstated; and, if they then remarried them, it would not be taken away again. From this, it follows that these pensions should be reinstated without further ado, and the MoD should exert maximum pressure on the Treasury finally to put right this insulting anomaly.

## **Education**

The link between the mobility of Service life and adverse effects on the educational attainment of Service children needs to be explored further. Data in the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018 suggested that a career in the Armed Forces may damage Service children's attainment levels if they repeatedly have to change schools, as many do.

Families are still reporting difficulties regarding school admissions, and research suggests that Service children are less likely to go to university than those in the public at large. These disadvantages must be understood and addressed as a Covenant priority.

## **Commonwealth personnel**

The report also highlights new areas of concern. On 5 November 2018, the MoD announced its intention to increase the number of non-resident Commonwealth recruits from 200 to 1,350 per year. However, a number of challenges exist for Commonwealth personnel who would like to bring their families with them to the UK including: high costs of visas, the Minimum Income Threshold and the effective communication of immigration rules.

The Committee agrees with the Army Families Federation that the treatment of Commonwealth personnel and their families is "immoral". There has been a failure adequately to acknowledge the contribution these individuals and their families make to the defence and security of the UK. We recognise that the issue of Minimum Income Threshold (MIT), visa fees and Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) are Home Office policies; but the MoD must do more to record relevant family data, in order that the extent of the problem across the Armed Forces can be fully understood.

The Committee calls on the MoD to ensure that the financial requirements laid upon personnel and their families when moving to the UK are effectively communicated at the point of recruitment, and that high-quality advice and guidance is available to those currently serving. It also calls on the new Defence Secretary to continue discussions with the Home Office in order to resolve this issue quickly.

## **Office for Veterans' Affairs**

The Committee warmly welcomes the establishment of the Office for Veterans' Affairs and expects it to tackle the concerns expressed in this report including: priority access to NHS medical treatment; mental health provision; the implementation of the Veterans Strategy; the future financial sustainability of the Veterans Gateway; and the improved implementation of pledges across business and the community, in addition to those set out above.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION:

**Inquiry:** [Armed Forces Covenant Annual report 2018](#)

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#### **Membership of the Committee, at the time of this Inquiry, was as follows:**

*Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP (Conservative, New Forest East) (Chairman), Leo Docherty MP (Conservative, Aldershot), Martin Docherty-Hughes MP (SNP, West Dunbartonshire), Rt Hon Mark Francois MP (Conservative, Rayleigh and Wickford), Graham P Jones MP (Labour, Hyndburn), Johnny Mercer MP (Conservative, Plymouth, Moor View), Madeleine Moon MP (Labour, Bridgend), Gavin Robinson MP (DUP, Belfast East), Ruth Smeeth MP (Labour, Stoke-on-Trent North), Rt Hon John Spellar MP (Labour, Warley), Phil Wilson MP (Labour, Sedgefield)*