



REPAYING OUR DEBT-

Providing for Veterans in Northern Ireland

Background

The Democratic Unionist Party commends the contribution made by men and women from Northern Ireland who have served UK forces in many theatres of conflict across the globe, and in the province itself. We take pride in those who served at the Somme, Messines and across Flanders during the Great War and leaders in WW2 such as Field Marshal Montgomery and Lord Alanbrooke.

Approximately one third of people in Northern Ireland have either served or had a close family member serve in the armed forces, even despite our divided society. Evidence today of increasing interest from all sections of our community is encouraging.

More than twice as many Northern Ireland citizens volunteer for the reserves compared with the national average, and the Royal British Legion raises more money in Northern Ireland through its poppy appeal than any other region of the United Kingdom.

Operation Banner remains the longest continuous deployment in British military history, spanning 38 years with almost 300,000 serving. The Ulster Defence Regiment was formed from local volunteers and over the course of the operation, many paid the ultimate sacrifice.

More recently an increasing proportion of armed forces personnel from Northern Ireland have been deployed on operations in other parts of the world, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali and Sierra Leone.

We have some of the best-recruited reserve units in the United Kingdom, with the number of reserve places in the province increased recently by 9%.

Armed Forces Covenant

The DUP identified full implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland as a priority in our Confidence and Supply Agreement with the Conservative Party.

The Armed Forces Covenant states:

“To those who proudly protect our nation, who do so with honour, courage, and commitment, the Armed Forces Covenant is the nation’s commitment to you. It is a pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or who have served in

the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives.”

The Covenant is intended to be a universal commitment, and the experience, care and compassion veterans receive should be the same, but their experience is far from universal.

The Covenant adopted in other parts of the United Kingdom was blocked by Sinn Fein in the Northern Ireland Executive. Michelle O’Neill reinforced this as Health Minister in December 2016 writing: “The Armed Forces Covenant has been adopted by England, Scotland and Wales, to provide equal access to health care.... The Covenant has not been adopted here”.

As a result of Sinn Fein’s approach, the Northern Ireland Executive could not make a submission to the MoD for the annual Defence Secretary’s AFC report to Parliament, or appoint a representative to the Covenant Reference Group.

The allocation of Ministerial posts in Northern Ireland has the potential to block implementation in all the key operational Departments. Nationalist-dominated Councils have refused to adopt the Community Covenant in local government too.

We have called on Government to amend Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to make specific provision for veterans of our armed forces to bring clarity to the situation and ensure Government Departments and agencies in Northern Ireland have regard to the needs of veterans in bringing forward and implementing policies.

The issue of equality legislation and the armed forces was brought into sharp focus recently in relation to Border Force recruitment, which was suspended because one of the eligibility criteria was service in the armed forces. Rather than justifying the reasons why service in the armed forces was an obvious factor, demonstrating key skills that would enhance an application, Border Force decided that it was better to remove veterans’ opportunity to serve their country once again.

There is a misguided belief that equality laws in Northern Ireland act as a barrier to providing for our veterans community, and it would be extremely helpful to have Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act amended to include veterans as a protected class, in line with the aims and aspirations of the Covenant.

Gavin Robinson MP is pursuing a parallel approach with his Armed Forces Covenant (Duty of Public Authorities) Bill scheduled to have its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 22nd March. It seeks to ensure public services are delivered in line with the Covenant, regardless of the views of the respective Minister.

Northern Ireland veterans express a sense of injustice that they are disadvantaged compared with the rest of the UK, and Government should be ensuring our forces in every part of the UK receive the same support.

We would similarly have concerns over how a veterans’ strategy could be taken forward by a Northern Ireland Government where Sinn Fein continued to hold a veto.

The “Report of the Task Force on the Military Covenant”, stated that service personnel based in Northern Ireland “are disadvantaged more than their contemporaries elsewhere... For example, Service families in the province are prevented from identifying themselves as such due to the security situation. This can cause difficulties for partners in explaining their career history to prospective employers and for Service children in obtaining the necessary support in schools”.

Children of forces personnel can also have to contend with frequent moves between different schools and coming into school as a late starter or restarter.

The Covenant also helps transition to civilian life and difficulties with employment, housing or debt. Partnering with business helps pave a path for personnel transferring their skills.

Health needs

We are seeing a pattern in Northern Ireland now of those who served in our armed forces developing mental health problems in later life, as well as physical injury-related medical problems, and the then DUP Health Minister Simon Hamilton announced the establishment of a dedicated mental trauma service.

The DUP has also campaigned for the retention of the Royal Irish Regiment aftercare service which many who have served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment Home Service have benefitted from. We must not overlook either the needs of veterans in the province who did not serve in the UDR and Royal Irish but are equally deserving of support.

Demographic change means we now have an increased number of older veterans who can have more complex needs.

In Northern Ireland, our local veterans live, work and in many cases, recover in what was their theatre of conflict. That can clearly have an impact on mental health, where fear arises and flash backs appear because you reside in the area you served.

If you seek help however, there is no veteran specific treatment centre in Northern Ireland. Whilst a wonderful facility, travelling to Combat Stress at Holybush House, Ayr removes you from family, friends and vital support.

A range of charities are carrying out fantastic work, but veterans continue to campaign for a specialist local facility to bring together support and therapies at a dedicated secure location.

We have visited the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust on the expansive Maryfield site which offers effective similar provision for the police family. Other suggestions have included making use of former military bases such as St Patrick’s barracks in Ballymena, now in the possession of Mid and East Antrim Council, or some of the buildings at the Craigavon House site in East Belfast.

Workshop

As part of our policy development process, the Democratic Unionist Party has engaged with a range of veterans and held a well-attended workshop on veterans' issues at our Spring Conference in Omagh on 16th February, at which Dr Debbie Roy of Ulster University presented.

Key issues which have been raised include financial advice, mental health provision, trust in individuals providing services, transition to civilian life which can impact on the whole family, and loss of a support network. Continuity of support can be required for individuals for a period of time. Security concerns and issues over trust result in many veterans living with unmet needs.

We advocate a dedicated individual as a contact point in each Government Department and agency for veterans' issues. Those providing services to veterans need to be mindful of the culture and seek to use appropriate language.

The Reserves Forces and Cadets Association in Northern Ireland have established a networks of Armed Forces Champions within local government, support officials at the Covenant reference group and liaise with public sector bodies on our veterans' behalf.

The role of Veterans Champions is important in signposting and acting as a communication conduit. A point was identified however that some Councils rotate their Veterans Champion annually between different political parties resulting in a loss of continuity.

Greater clarity was sought on the decision-making process around applications for small grants under the Armed Forces Covenant Fund.

There was a concern around awareness raising amongst those who aren't the regular attendees at veterans' events. Many are reluctant to seek help. Some who come out of the army don't want to know any more about it, but may develop problems later in life. Should information be provided for instance in settings such as health centres, dental surgery waiting rooms or local pharmacies.

It is important that ex-service personnel integrate within local communities, which helps reduce the risk of loneliness and isolation.

Contributors felt that better utilisation might be made of the many Royal British Legion premises across the province, even through potentially buying in services. Bennet House at Portrush was described as a valuable facility, but further awareness was needed for more people to know about it.

Many ex-service personnel have been ill-prepared for later life, and the importance of good education throughout individuals' time in the forces was highlighted.

There had been a lack of detailed information about veterans in Northern Ireland and we greatly appreciate the work of the Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Study at Ulster University funded through the Forces in Mind Trust.

Greater collaboration between voluntary organisations is essential, to have the maximum impact. It is important that national organisations focus sufficiently on, and properly resource their Northern Ireland operations.

Locally-tailored services can be particularly valuable, and we are supportive of building the capacity of local organisations. The responsibilities differ, across both the devolved administrations and in local government. Veterans should be engaged in the development of services.

Some veterans are living in fear of historic inquiries and effective independent legal support and pastoral care should be provided.

The DUP has pressed for the restoration of the War Widows Pensions for 300 widows who have remarried.

February 2019 House of Commons Defence Committee report

The House of Commons Defence Committee report *Mental Health and the Armed Forces, Part Two: The Provision of Care* called for regular engagement and support for veterans up to five years after discharge including a formal medical check for each leaver one year on.

It also stated *“It is difficult to obtain authoritative statistics on veteran suicides. However a study conducted for ITV last year produced a figure that at least 71 serving personnel/veterans unfortunately took their own lives in 2018. Even as a rough estimate this gives a good idea of the scale of the problem”*.

The report continued *“The lack of civilian medical practitioners’ understanding of military culture and military mental health issues remains a significant barrier to veterans accessing and receiving effective treatment for their mental health conditions. We welcome the work being done to improve the understanding of civilian medical practitioners, such as the creation of veteran-friendly GP surgeries”*.

It highlighted variations across the UK in the care a veteran might receive: *“The worst affected are veterans living in Northern Ireland as there is no statutory provision for many of them”*.

The report highlights the need for dedicated residential care for the severest cases: *“There needs to be a highly professional place of safety to which veterans can be sent as soon as they are diagnosed in order to be stabilised and to begin to receive assistance for their recovery”*.

The Defence Committee also called for *“a greater focus on service and veterans’ families as part of their mental health care provision”* and to *“review what assistance can be provided to family members of serving personnel and veterans with mental health issues”*.

Ambassador/ Advocate

One of the reports commissioned by the former Prime Minister on transitioning for veterans recommended Government appoint an armed forces champion in Northern Ireland. This is something we have always supported.

We are also supportive of the idea of a Veterans Commissioner. Representatives of veterans' groups have suggested such an office could sit under the Northern Ireland Office as sponsoring department. A more strategic focus on veterans' issues and better co-ordination province-wide should offer the prospect of better outcomes.

Recommendations

- Enhance and better integrate a network of Veterans Champions across Councils
- Individual Councils to prepare an Action Plan for addressing veterans' needs
- Agencies and Government Departments to have a contact point for veterans issues
- Adequately fund central support for liaison and to co-ordination of organisations and individuals
- Pursue suitable potential locations for a veterans centre
- Fully embed the mental trauma service with a view to developing expertise and knowledge that can be shared internationally
- Government should deliver on a previous No. 10 report that called for an Armed Forces champion in Northern Ireland
- Press Government on establishing a Veterans Commissioner role
- Legislate to ensure equality protection for veterans in Northern Ireland through amending Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, or placing a duty on public authorities to act in line with the Armed Forces Covenant
- Clarity from HM Government over mechanisms for taking forward and implementing a veterans' strategy if Sinn Fein continue to retain a veto over the Northern Ireland Executive
- Introduce a formal medical check for personnel who have recently ceased service
- Seek to establish our network of DUP advice centres as veteran-friendly facilities

We are always keen to hear people's views on our policies and positions. If you would like to offer your opinions on the recommendations above and broader content of this paper, please forward to consultation@dup.org.uk

Thank you