



The Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland Policy Statement

The Veterans' Transition Review by Lord Ashcroft KCMH PC

About The Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland

1. The Royal British Legion was created as a unifying force for the military charity sector at the end of WWI, and still remains one of the UK's largest membership organisations. We are the largest welfare provider in the Armed Forces charity sector, providing financial, social and emotional support, information, advice, advocacy and comradeship to hundreds of thousands of Service personnel, veterans and their dependants every year. In 2013, we provided services and grants to over 200,000 Service personnel, veterans and dependents – more than ever before – and spent £1.4m every week on welfare support. For further information, please visit www.britishlegion.org.uk.
2. The Legion works with politicians across the political spectrum to improve the lives of the Armed Forces community. We have been campaigning to further the cause of serving personnel, ex-Service men and women and their families since 1921. In recent years, our campaigning work has resulted in a number of significant changes to public policy, including the enshrinement of the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant into statute; the introduction of the post of Chief Coroner to oversee the military inquest process; and substantial improvements to military compensation and welfare benefits for veterans.
3. In June 2011, The Royal British Legion merged with Poppyscotland to form the largest charity group supporting the Armed Forces community across the whole of the UK. Poppyscotland continues to operate as a distinct charity within the Legion's group of charities, and is responsible for running the Scottish Poppy Appeal, which raises over £2m each year. Poppyscotland is the leading charity supporting serving and ex-Service men and women and their families in Scotland, providing a wide range of services to meet their needs, both directly and through enabling grants to other service providers.

Introduction

4. The Legion and Poppyscotland welcome the recent publication of Lord Ashcroft's Veterans' Transition Review. Whilst the vast majority of veterans thrive in 'civvy street', there are a number of issues that still act as barriers to successful integration into civilian life. It is encouraging that the Government takes these issues seriously, and we hope that it will take forward many of the recommendations aimed at central Government, local authorities and statutory agencies.
5. We wholeheartedly agree that the media's misconceptions about Service leavers – for example, that most are damaged by their military experiences – need to be challenged robustly. Given the right support and integration package, the vast majority of Service personnel will be assets to any community and career they choose to enter after leaving the Armed Forces.

6. The Review makes a number of recommendations for the Service charity sector, including around provision of information for the Armed Forces community. This policy statement focuses largely on our positions on the Review's *public policy* recommendations, including on education and training, resettlement and employment, housing, local government and health.

Education and training

7. We broadly welcome both of the Review's main recommendations around education and training: for the introduction of a Personal Development Plan to cover all aspects of development and preparation for a post-Service career; and for the reinforcement of the strategy for translating and accrediting skills and qualifications achieved in the Armed Forces for the civilian world.
8. We agree that it is vitally important that through-Service training leads to civilian qualifications wherever possible; for example, by converting practical skills and experience gained during Service into technical or vocational NVQs. The Legion welcomes the work already being done by the Armed Forces to increase the number of areas in which personnel can obtain civilian qualifications, but, like Lord Ashcroft, we would like to see this accreditation work extended further.
9. Qualifications gained in the Services must be readily transferable to civilian life and, for this reason, the Legion believes that the MOD should do more to encourage Service personnel to sit for vocational qualifications and GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations, and their equivalent examinations in Scotland, in a wide range of subjects, which will stand them in good stead for future employment. For those personnel who leave Service without such qualifications, it is essential that more is done to ensure that the value of through-Service courses is better understood within the civilian sector.
10. The introduction of a Personal Development Plan would complement the good work that is already being done to improve the educational attainment of personnel during their Service career. It would also go some way towards helping individuals to make a successful transition into civilian life, by ensuring that they start to think about their future employment earlier in their Service career, and plan for it accordingly. However, we maintain that the PDP will only be of any real value if it is updated and referred to regularly, alongside a CV which can be easily understood by a civilian employer (see below, paragraph 17). It must be introduced to personnel in a way which ensures they take full ownership of it and appreciate its value, rather than seeing it purely as a tiresome bureaucratic process. Personnel and their supervisors must also be afforded the time, amid competing priorities, to progress it.
11. More information should be made available to personnel about what qualifications are required or desirable for their future career, and about the courses and financial support available to them. In addition, more study time should be provided to Service personnel, to enable them to prepare thoroughly for elected courses and examinations.

Resettlement and employment

12. We largely welcome the Review's recommendations around resettlement and employment. Given the large-scale redundancy programme currently underway, it is more important than ever to ensure that those individuals leaving Service are properly supported in their transition to civilian life, and that they are in the best possible position to compete in the civilian jobs market.

13. We welcome Lord Ashcroft's support for three week work placement schemes in a civilian environment. We agree that this would help to focus Service personnel on their next career, whilst providing relevant experience and useful contacts. Some training courses may, however, have significant value, so we suggest that work placements should be used to complement (rather than replace) existing courses. It will also be important for Service leavers to be encouraged to apply for placements at the right time, and for their commanders to release them from their duties in order for them to attend.
14. We recognise that moving resettlement learning packages online would improve accessibility for some Service leavers, but this proposal also carries the risk of resulting in a less comprehensive and flexible offering. Those most at risk of poor transition, such as those with poor IT and literacy skills, will find it harder to engage with an online package, and will benefit more from face-to-face, responsive support from career and employment consultants. The 'real life' career transition workshops should be retained, with any online service used as a complementary addition or alternative for those less in need of intensive support.
15. The vast majority of Service leavers who use the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) find employment within six months of leaving the Forces. However, we remain concerned that only 52% of Early Service Leavers (ESLs) are in work six months after leaving the Armed Forces. We recognise that current MOD policy is to link entitlement to length of Service but, in recognition of the problems experienced by ESLs, we are supportive of Lord Ashcroft's recommendation for the full resettlement support package to be offered to all personnel who have completed basic training. Additional resources for ESLs should not, however, be at the expense of those who may be better qualified but, through commitment to their minimum term in the Armed Forces, have still earned the right to receive comprehensive support. We would also welcome extension of the CTP to spouses, but question why this should be on a self-funding basis. The difficulty that spouses experience in job-seeking are usually a direct consequence of their partner's military Service.
16. We have some concerns about the proposal for the next CTP provider to be incentivised by a 'payment by results' system. Whilst this can encourage innovative and successful practices, there is also a real danger that this could result in the provider selecting the easiest (most employable) individuals to support, and leaving the others to be picked up by Service charities and other statutory agencies. It may also act as an incentive to push Service leavers into the most readily-available job, and not necessarily the one most suited to their skills and experience.
17. Many personnel doubt that their professional skills and experience will be of value to civilian employers, and fear that their qualifications will not be understood in the civilian sector. It is essential that the MOD works hard to instil confidence in Service leavers about their abilities, and helps them to prepare CVs which do their skills justice. Ideally, their CV should be updated throughout their career, including following deployments, with assistance from someone who has experience of the civilian world of work and who can translate the Service person's skills and experience into civilian language. We also endorse the recommendation for the MOD to be more proactive in challenging negative public perceptions of ex-Service personnel, to encourage civilian employers to take them on.
18. Through the Corporate Covenant initiative, the MOD should encourage civilian employers to recognise the value of Service leavers and their professional qualifications, and persuade employers to make special efforts to recruit them. One way this could be facilitated is through Lord Ashcroft's recommendation for an Employers' Council, which would coordinate the relationship between the MOD and industry, and promote Service leaver recruitment. As

identified, this body would also be ideally placed to tackle discrimination against Reservists, and ensure that their civilian careers do not suffer as a result of their Service.

Housing

19. We endorse Lord Ashcroft's recommendation for the MOD to enter into partnership with one or more Service housing charities, in order to provide advice to Service personnel on housing options, making use of their "footprint, commitment and expertise in providing advice and support". We suggest, however, that this should also extend to civilian housing charities, to maximise the expertise available.
20. The Review recommends that the MOD should commission a publicly-available database detailing the ways in which every local authority's housing allocation scheme deals with Service personnel and veterans. This would provide an excellent resource to assist individuals with making informed choices.
21. In 2012, in order to encourage adherence to new Government guidance on social housing for the Armed Forces community, the Legion surveyed every local authority with a remit to provide housing in England. We received responses from approximately half of those contacted, with a significant number advising us of positive local measures that they had introduced. Unfortunately, this information is now a few years out of date, but we would be delighted to support the MOD and other partners to develop a UK-wide resource, potentially linking it with our new 'Knowledge Base' information system.
22. We particularly welcome the recommendation for Service personnel's awareness of the cost of living to be improved through the provision of information on pay statements about the cost of their accommodation (including subsidies). This can only serve to further personnel's preparedness for the financial realities of life after the Armed Forces.
23. The Review's more radical suggestion of ending automatic accommodation deductions from salaries is more contentious, but not entirely without merit. It is also in line with Government thinking in other policy areas (e.g. the payment of housing benefit to social tenants). However, this would presumably result in additional administration costs for the MOD and, more importantly, it is likely that a very small number of personnel would not, at least initially, prioritise rental payments and preserve them from their disposable income. As a result, procedures or measures would be required to address or deter rent arrears. Enforcement measures that might be suitable for civilian life (e.g. eviction) may not be appropriate in a military setting. While it might be possible in theory to revert to automatic deductions for these individuals, this policy would, therefore, require much more detailed consideration before being adopted.
24. We welcome the Review's proposal to allow for the payment of terminal lump sums prior to departure, to improve opportunities for securing a mortgage and house purchase. We hope that MOD can implement this change as part of the New Employment Model.

Local Government and Community Covenants

25. The Review highlights variations in approaches taken by local authorities which have signed a Community Covenant. Whilst some level of variation is a natural side-effect of a locally-administered scheme, the vast disparity between the achievements of different councils is somewhat worrying. We endorse the Review's recommendation for a full survey of local authority provision to be carried out. When trying to decide where in the country to settle

after leaving the Armed Forces, Service personnel and their families need clearer information about what services and support structures are available to them.

26. The sharing of best practice between local authorities is a positive and useful activity, which the Legion and Poppyscotland have encouraged through the publication of two 'Best Practice Guides to Community Covenants'. The most recent Guide was endorsed by the Local Government Association (LGA), the Welsh LGA and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), and sent to all local councils. In general, the MOD should be more proactive about facilitating best practice locally. Beyond highlighting good practice, more may need to be done at a statutory level to ensure that an acceptable level of provision is implemented by all local authorities and not just the best performing ones. For example, the MOD or Department for Communities and Local Government (and devolved administrations) could lay out more centralised policies on issues such as education or housing for the Armed Forces community.
27. The Review highlights the need for a forum or sounding board for local authorities to pursue best practice, and suggests that the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee (VAPC) is the most suitable structure to carry this forward. We welcome the Review's consideration of how the gap between different councils' delivery on the Covenant can be bridged. However, it is unclear to us whether VAPCs have the capacity or expertise to deliver this recommendation. The development of regional forums of local councils and voluntary sector organisations, similar to the NHS Armed Forces Networks, could be a suitable alternative approach.
28. Inadequate information on some local authority websites is a problem of which we are acutely aware. The Review team's audit found that 73 per cent of council websites featured 'minimal' information relating to the ex-Service community (it is not clear whether this covered the devolved regions). This is very disappointing; particularly as this included councils that have signed a Community Covenant. It also mirrors our experiences of council websites, a large proportion of which feature no information at all about the Community Covenant having been signed; no details about the officer or councillor leading on the topic; and no details of any changes that the council has implemented or plans to implement. For a Service leaver or member of the Armed Forces community, such information can make local services far more accessible, often with minimal cost to the council.
29. The Review places a strong emphasis on the role of Veterans Champions. Whilst councillor 'Champions' have been excellent advocates for the Armed Forces community, we believe that the involvement of council staff is equally important, particularly with regards to researching and implementing new policies. In addition, with political power being as fluid as it is, cross-party councillor Champions, or councillor-officer Champion duos, may be more sustainable in the long term. The Review further suggests that an annual conference for these champions is required. The MOD already organises an annual Community Covenant conference, which the Champions are able to attend, and a similar event takes place in Wales, organised by the Welsh Government. Perhaps information about this conference could be better communicated, or a series of regional conferences could give a greater number of interested individuals the opportunity to attend.
30. Local authorities commonly struggle to obtain accurate and timely data about the Armed Forces community, both in relation to those living in and moving to their area. Lack of data can impede a council's ability to plan resources adequately and to justify proposed policy changes. The MOD should work more closely with local authorities to help them to prepare for any increase in Service leavers and their families moving into their area. Local authorities also have a role to play in improving the collection and sharing of data. Councils are well

placed to ask their residents about Service connection when they access local services, and should record and collate this information. Indeed, in Scotland, since April 2006, applicants for public housing have been invited to declare past Service, and some local authorities have also demonstrated successful data collection practices (e.g. the Vale of Glamorgan). Finally, we recommend that a question on military Service should be added to the national census, in order to provide detailed local information on the numbers and profile of serving and former Armed Forces personnel in any given local authority area.

Health

31. We agree that more needs to be done to challenge public perceptions of Service leavers. Contrary to popular opinion, the mental health of the Armed Forces is not, for the most part, worse than the general population. Despite the attention paid to it by the media, overall rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) remain relatively low. Like the rest of the population, members of the Armed Forces are far more likely to suffer from common mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, than from PTSD. However, those who do develop problems need to be able to access timely and effective support and intervention.
32. Furthermore, some issues and groups remain a cause for concern. Across all age groups of Service personnel and amongst some groups of veterans, rates of alcohol misuse, including alcohol dependency, appear to be worryingly high.¹ Some groups, such as those with pre-enlistment vulnerabilities,² Reservists,³ and those exposed to combat,⁴ are at a significantly heightened risk of developing PTSD. Early Service leavers are a vulnerable group, with heightened rates of suicide.⁵ Overall, mental health outcomes for veterans and Armed Forces families remain poorly understood, as both groups have been under-researched.
33. The Review paints a rather too rosy picture of mental health provision for veterans and Reservists. As it highlights, the ten National Veterans Mental Health Networks (NVMHN) in England are a positive step towards achieving cohesion and clarity in this area, ensuring that the NHS, military charities and other agencies are working together to achieve the best outcomes for veterans and Reservists with mental health problems. There has indeed been significant investment by local NHS commissioners in some parts of England, enabling the Networks to employ their own clinical staff and ensure a smooth and efficient patient journey from assessment to treatment. In other areas, however, funding is very limited, and waiting lists for psychotherapy services can be up to two years long. Veterans and Reservists will, therefore, experience a rather extreme postcode lottery when accessing NHS mental health services. Furthermore, funding for the NVMHNs runs out in April 2015, and the Government is yet to announce whether it intends to maintain or improve upon this investment.
34. In Wales, The Legion is part of the unified care pathway established under the Welsh Government-funded All Wales Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Service (AWVHWS). This Service provides dedicated veteran therapists in each Local Health Board area and additional local access to specialist outpatient care for veterans with mental health problems. The Legion supports this service and regularly refers beneficiaries to it, but we have expressed concern that investment has remained static since its inception in 2010, and we believe that improved promotion and funding is required in order to increase awareness and capacity of the service across Wales.
35. The Scottish Government places significant importance on the need to recognise the mental health issues facing veterans in Scotland, as emphasised in its 2012 paper, "Our Commitments: Scottish Government Support for the Armed Forces Community in Scotland". As part of that commitment, it has agreed to £3.6M of funding, over a three year period, to enable Combat Stress to deliver specialist mental health services. The Scottish Government

is also providing £200K per year (until 2014) towards one of Combat Stress's two outreach services in Scotland. It should be noted, however, that these funds only partially cover the costs of Combat Stress's services in Scotland. More recently, as a result of a successful LIBOR bid, £2.5M has been made available to enable 'Veterans First Point' – which provides information, signposting and health and wellbeing services – to be rolled out to three additional areas across Scotland. Continuance of funding should be a priority moving forward.

36. Reservists are able to access the Reserves Mental Health Programme at Chilwell, but the numbers attending are very low; perhaps because individuals in need of help would rather receive it in their local community. We recommend that the Government and devolved administrations review the geographical distribution of the provision of mental health care for Reservists and veterans across the UK, and consider what additional support they could provide for Reservists experiencing Service-related mental health problems, to ensure that this is at least as good as the support provided for their full time equivalents. This may involve better links between Reservists' units, Service charities and NHS services (e.g. the National Veterans Mental Health Networks in England). It may also require additional investment in community mental health services more generally.
37. Research has demonstrated that rates of alcohol misuse, including dependence, are elevated across all age groups of the Armed Forces, with an increase in drinking after personnel return from deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. The difference between civilian and military drinking appears particularly stark amongst women, with female personnel reporting rates of alcohol dependence five times higher than the general population (five per cent vs one per cent).⁶ For men, the rate of alcohol dependence amongst Service personnel is double that of the general population (six per cent vs three per cent).⁷
38. We are encouraged by signs that alcohol misuse is being taken more seriously by the three Services as a health problem (and not just an operational issue). Nevertheless, we are concerned that there has been insufficient activity in this area in the last decade. We suggest that the MOD should take a cross-Governmental approach to the problem, by aligning its policies with the Government's 2012 Alcohol Strategy and the Scottish Government's 2009 strategy, and working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the NHS, Public Health England, the Scottish Government's Health and Social Care Directorate and other relevant devolved bodies, with the aim of bringing rates of alcohol dependency amongst Service personnel down to the levels found amongst civilians of the same age.⁸
39. Within the last decade, a large number of new military not-for-profit organisations have emerged, providing alternative therapeutic services for injured serving personnel and recent Service leavers and their families. A significant few of these have given rise for concern, as highlighted within the Review. We agree that a directory of accredited providers would be a useful resource for veterans and their families, but we would question whether Cobseo has the resources and skills to establish and maintain such a service. This would fundamentally change the role of Cobseo as a membership organisation, and may be more appropriately undertaken by a statutory body. We also urge the Government to work with the relevant professional and regulatory bodies to ensure that military veterans with mental health problems can access effective, timely, evidence-based treatment, provided by qualified individuals. This will require greater investment in NHS mental health services, as well as increased use of existing regulatory bodies to ensure that claims of potentially harmful treatment by rogue providers are properly investigated, and appropriate enforcement action is taken.

40. We welcomed the decision to award funds collected from LIBOR fines to projects supporting Service personnel, veterans and their families. So far, this has enabled a lot of positive activity in the sector, including the rollout of Mental Health First Aid training for the Armed Forces community. However, we have concerns about the application of criteria for the award of grants. It is vital that these funds remain supplementary to statutory services, and are not used to plug gaps resulting from the under-funding of mainstream mental health services and other forms of statutory support for Service-related needs, and that grants do not give rise to unsustainable activity or very limited outcomes.
41. The easy access to health services that personnel experience while serving can create certain expectations in Service leavers when they are discharged, which may be hard to meet within the resources of the NHS. More could be done to educate Service personnel about ways in which they can engage with their local NHS services, and how the civilian system works. This issue could also be addressed by better educating civilian health professionals about the challenges of transition from military to civilian life, and the long term impact of typical military injuries.
42. Veterans suffering from Service-related injuries or illnesses are eligible for priority treatment on the NHS, meaning that they should receive secondary care ahead of others with the same level of clinical need. Unfortunately, Legion research has found that awareness of priority treatment amongst veterans and GPs appears to be very low. In response to a 2009 survey of 500 GPs across England and Wales, 81 per cent of respondents said they knew 'not very much or nothing at all' about priority treatment.⁹ More should be done to educate GPs and other medical professionals about military health needs; especially as the NHS now has greater responsibility for the commissioning of health services for serving members of the Armed Forces and their families.
43. We endorse the Review's recommendation for research on longer-term outcomes for those who have been cared for in Personnel Recovery Centre (PRC) facilities. We understand that the MOD is in the process of setting up a long-term research project – the 'ADVANCE' study – on the wounded, injured and sick (WIS). At present, however, it is unclear to us whether the MOD plans to include families in this research. We are also concerned about the long term sustainability of the project. We urge the Government to commit to funding this research for at least 20 years – the minimum required to establish the long term effects of illness and injury on physical and mental health – and to ensure that it includes the family members of the WIS.
44. As highlighted by the Review, due to the limited capacity of the Personnel Recovery Units (PRUs), they cannot manage the recovery of all WIS personnel. The adoption of an independent, outcomes-focused assurance framework would increase the chances of all of the WIS receiving consistent support, regardless of whether they are assigned to a PRU or assisted by their unit. We therefore recommend that the MOD takes steps to have Defence Recovery Capability (DRC) independently quality assured by a recognised, qualified body.

Further information:

For further information, please email publicaffairsandpublicpolicy@britishlegion.org.uk or call Laura Pett, the Legion's Public Affairs and Campaigns Manager, on 020 3207 2240.

¹ www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/alcoholsmoking/Jones2011-Alcoholuseandmisusewithinthemilitary.pdf

² www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/iraqafghan/lversen2008-riskfactorsptsd.pdf

-
- ³ www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/deployment/Harvey2012reservists.pdf
- ⁴ www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/iraqafghan/Woodhead2012-combatexposuregender.pdf
- ⁵ www.plosmedicine.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000026
- ⁶ Fear et al. 2007. Patterns of drinking in the UK Armed Forces. *Addiction*, 102, pp1749-1759.
- ⁷ *Ibid*
- ⁸ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224075/alcohol-strategy.pdf
- ⁹ Ipsos-MORI online questionnaire completed by 500 GPs across England and Wales. Fieldwork was conducted between 13-23 March 2009. Data weighted according to age, gender, region, practice size and practice list size, to reflect the profile of GPs in England and Wales.