House of Commons
Welsh Affairs Committee

Support for Armed Forces Veterans in Wales: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2012–13

Second Special Report of Session 2013–14

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The Welsh Affairs Committee

The Welsh Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales (including relations with the National Assembly for Wales).

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The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the internet at www.parliament.uk/welshcom

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Marek Kubala (Clerk), Anwen Rees (Committee Specialist), Alison Mara (Senior Committee Assistant), Dabinder Rai (Committee Assistant), and Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer).

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Second Special Report

The Committee published its Second Report of Session 2012–13 *Support for Armed Forces Veterans in Wales* on 12 February 2013. The government response was received by the Committee on 22 May 2013 and is published as an Appendix to this Special Report.

Appendix: Government Response

The Government welcomes the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee’s inquiry into ‘Support for Armed Forces Veterans in Wales’ and the findings set out in the Committee’s report published on 12 February 2013. The Government recognises the importance of the provision of support to all our Service veterans and their families. We also recognise that there is still work to be done and we welcome the Committee’s key recommendation that the Welsh Government take forward proposals to establish a network of ‘one stop shops’ for veterans across Wales.

We are pleased that some two thirds of local authorities in Wales have signed up to the Community Covenant Scheme and we look forward to more doing so, endorsing the Committee’s urging of the Welsh government to encourage all their local authorities to review their provision for veterans and to sign up and support the scheme.

We are grateful for the opportunity to further brief the Committee on progress against their recommendations.

The Government recognises the detailed work the Committee has undertaken. Our formal response to its recommendations and conclusions is set out below. Where appropriate, we have grouped together related conclusions and recommendations to respond with a single coherent narrative that addresses both the specific recommendation and the wider underpinning arguments. The Committee’s findings are highlighted in bold, with the Government's response in plain text. For ease of reference, paragraph numbering follows that in the ‘Conclusions and Recommendations’ section of the Committee's Report, including the paragraph reference to the report itself.

Conclusions

1. The MoD’s resettlement programme has improved in recent years but requires further refinement. Some personnel may decide not to take up the MoD’s support and this is a choice for them. But we are concerned that some personnel still do not take up elements of resettlement support due to a lack of awareness of the services available. (Paragraph 21)
Currently, all serving personnel are entitled to access both resettlement information staff (RIS) and Service Resettlement Advisers (SRA) at any stage of their career. Initial resettlement information is provided by RIS and an interview or briefing by the SRA is mandatory for all personnel within three months of entering the final two years of full career service or within one month of giving notice or on notification of discharge or as soon as possible thereafter. All Service Leavers receive an information pack detailing what is available to them and what their entitlement is, and there are other resettlement magazines which include MoD focused articles readily available in units.

2. Armed Forces personnel require a good grounding in financial management for their transition to civilian life. We are pleased that the MoD is placing additional importance on providing such skills to serving personnel. This should continue. (Paragraph 22)

Managing money, saving for the future and being financially secure is important to everyone, but military life brings some specific challenges that can make financial management more difficult for some Service Personnel. They are posted around the country, and indeed the world, which can have an impact on their credit rating. In addition, they deploy to locations where, despite our very good welfare communications facilities, managing finances back in the UK is less straightforward. The MoD has worked with the Royal British Legion and industry to develop a new website (www.moneyforce.org.uk) to address this. MoneyForce forms part of a programme of work to improve the financial capabilities of members of the Armed Forces which includes financial awareness training to new trainees in all three Services. The MoneyForce website and training provides a range of valuable information, in a relevant and meaningful way, to our Armed Forces personnel and their families. It highlights the sorts of financial issues that our personnel should be addressing at different stages of their career, such as prior to a deployment, and provides the information to help them make sound decisions.

This programme builds on work that the MoD has already done to address financial disadvantage: MoD obtained a commitment from the major representative bodies of the financial industry, including the Council of Mortgage Lenders, the Building Societies Association, The British Bankers’ Association, the Finance & Leasing Association and The UK Cards Association to seek to avoid disadvantaging our personnel in the provision of their products and services. More information can be found on the gov.uk website: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/financial-top-tips-for-service-personnel

3. We are concerned that some veterans struggle to obtain information about the services available to them upon returning to civilian life. We believe that the most effective way to provide them with information and assistance would be through a network of ‘one stop shops’ across Wales, broadly similar to the Scottish model. (Paragraph 31)
The Welsh Government has commissioned a defined piece of work to consider how ‘one stop shops’ can be taken forward in Wales. The MoD welcomes this positive response and looks forward to the findings and recommendations of the report, which we understand are due to be reported at the next meeting in June 2013.

4. The mobility requirements of a career in the Armed Forces can be a real disadvantage for personnel trying to access social housing, because of local authorities’ requirements for a ‘local connection.’ This is a serious concern and more priority should be given to those who have put their lives on the line for this country. (Paragraph 41)

MoD recognises that accommodation is a key issue for Service personnel and their families, and under the Covenant, local authorities have been encouraged to offer Service leavers, the injured and the bereaved additional priority for Affordable Housing. In England, the Department for Communities and Local Government has amended its guidelines on the allocation of social housing to ensure that where an application for social housing is made within five years of discharge, local authorities in England must not disqualify Service leavers on the grounds that they do not have a local connection. We welcome the steps taken by the Welsh Government to establish similar provisions.

5. There are arguments both for and against a mental health residential facility specifically for veterans in Wales. We welcome the establishment of a group by the Welsh Government to examine this issue and look forward with interest to its recommendations. (Paragraph 75)

The Government also welcomes this positive initiative and looks forward to the findings and recommendations of the review looking into the issue of a residential facility.

6. We are concerned that the MoD has sometimes failed to communicate to the Welsh Government important decisions that have a direct bearing on the ability of the Welsh Government to provide services to veterans. We trust that the appointment of a new Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans in the MoD gives the opportunity for new relationships to be forged and for communication to improve. (Paragraph 80)

The MoD has a strong working relationship with the Welsh Government, and a representative from the Welsh Government sits on the Covenant Reference Group, which monitors progress on existing Armed Forces Covenant commitments and considers where other commitments need to be established. The Minister of Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans has proposed to meet with his counterpart in the Welsh Government and we look forward to a productive relationship. In addition, the Minister visited 160 Brigade in Wales on 21 May 2013.
7. We welcome the appointment of a Special Representative for Veterans Transition, and look forward to receiving information on his role and his objectives. Clarification will be required on the Special Representative’s relationship with the Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans. (Paragraph 81)

The role of the Special Representative for Veterans Transition will provide the MoD with valuable advice on how we can further support those leaving the Armed Forces. The Special Representative has now met with both the Defence Secretary and the Minister for Defence Personnel Welfare and Veterans to discuss these issues. He is in an excellent position to provide advice on what more we can do to get Service Leavers into employment, and we look forward to receiving his recommendations following his research work in this area.

8. We welcome the Welsh Government’s formation of an Expert Group to advise on how best to meet the needs of the Armed Forces Community. The Group may benefit from permanent local authority or NHS representation. (Paragraph 85)

We also welcome the formation of this advisory body as a positive step forward.

9. We urge the Welsh Government to encourage all those local authorities in Wales that have not yet done so, to review their provision for veterans and plan to sign up and support Community Covenants, in partnership with other relevant local organisations such as health boards and housing associations. We are aware that a number of local authorities have already launched or plan to launch Community Covenant Schemes. Some of these schemes may involve the setting up of the equivalent of a one-stop shop. (Paragraph 89)

More than half of local authorities in Wales have now signed Community Covenants, and the remainder are believed to aspire to the completion of signing by the end of the year. We welcome the support of Welsh local authorities in setting up Community Covenants, and support the recommendation of the Committee that these partnerships should consider the local provision of services for veterans.

Detailed Recommendations

1. The MoD should ensure that all personnel leaving the services are fully aware of all the resettlement support that they are entitled to. (Paragraph 21)

Aside from the briefings already mentioned at Conclusion 1 (above) all Service leavers should receive a copy of the Service Leavers Pack publication in which resettlement is featured. In addition resettlement is widely publicised throughout units and in commercial resettlement specialist magazines such as Quest and Courses for Forces which the MoD contributes to. These magazines are widely distributed for free and easy access by personnel.
2. Although not specifically an element of the support offered to veterans, we note that the effectiveness of the MoD’s Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) programme is disputed by some medical practitioners. We recommend that the MoD makes clear to medical practitioners the scope and purpose of TRiM in the overall treatment of veterans suffering from the effects of combat or other traumatic experiences. (Paragraph 23)

TRiM is well received by individuals, and continues to identify those in need of support, often at an early stage. Additionally, anecdotal evidence appears to indicate that TRiM has increased awareness of mental health issues and helped de-stigmatise discussion of mental health problems and self referral. However, TRiM is only one part of overall Post Operational Stress Management provided to serving personnel, and does not seek to replace the medical services provided by fully trained and accredited mental health personnel in the Defence Medical Services. These services meet the same national standards as those provided by the NHS for veterans.

3. Early service leavers include personnel who are leaving because they have problems, and are therefore likely to need support in the transition to civilian life. Currently they receive the least support. The MoD should consider the provision of more appropriate support. (Paragraph 24)

MoD is addressing this through commissioning two industry-led trials of enhanced resettlement support for Early Service Leavers. These trials have recently ended. The results are being evaluated and will help decide what specific/additional resettlement provision for Early Service Leavers will be made.

4. We are concerned that the MoD currently does not provide formal resettlement support for personnel in the Reserve Forces. The number and role of reservists is set to increase in future years, as is the budget available for training. Given the increased dependence on reservists in coming years, the MoD must ensure that reservists are provided with adequate support to return to civilian life. (Paragraph 25)

Resettlement support is fundamentally designed to enable personnel to successfully transition from their military career to a civilian one. As Reservists are likely to already be in civilian employment the need for career transition would not apply. However, employment transition support does exist for any Reservists who are mobilised and are subsequently medically discharged and for any member of the Armed Forces who is serving on Full Time Reserve Service terms.

5. We recommend that the Welsh Government take forward proposals to establish a network of ‘one-stop shops’ for veterans across Wales. (Paragraph 32)

The Government welcomes this recommendation and the action currently in hand by the Welsh Government to review the establishment of such ‘one-stop shops’.
6. We recommend that local authorities in Wales follow the guidance set out in UK legislation and the Welsh Government’s Code of Practice to ensure that veterans are prioritised in the allocation of social housing. (Paragraph 41)

MoD recognises the impact of mobility on the provision of social housing and welcomes the Welsh Government’s Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales, which includes provisions to ensure that Veterans are prioritised in the allocation of social housing.

7. We encourage the Welsh Government to use the opportunity of its Housing White Paper to consult on the option of legislating to ensure veterans receive priority access to social housing in Wales. (Paragraph 42)

The Government would welcome this course of action.

8. It is unacceptable that disabled veterans face long delays for house adaptations with the consequent damage on their standard of living and their wellbeing as they learn to live with long-term injury. The Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association must examine the reasons for delays in the administration of the Disabled Facilities Grant and take appropriate measures to speed up the process. Examples of best practice across Wales should be identified and disseminated to all local authorities in Wales. (Paragraph 47)

At the UK level, the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2012 recognised that there is more to be done to encourage disabled veterans to apply for the ring-fenced Disabled Facilities Grant and we will continue to work with the Welsh Government, and all other relevant stakeholders, to ensure that awareness is raised of the support available.

9. Developing a historic database of all veterans residing in the UK would be expensive and the benefits would not justify the cost. But there would be advantages if local authorities and the Welsh Government had better data on the number and location of veterans in Wales to assist in policy development. We recommend that the MoD investigate which data could potentially be collected and made available to devolved administration and local authorities within the current legislation. In particular the MoD should improve its system for registering all future leavers. (Paragraph 51)

We acknowledge the concern of the Committee with regards the collection of data on Service leavers and Veterans, but note that the MoD has never had - and could not hope realistically to maintain - a comprehensive and up-to-date database of the estimated 4.6 million UK veterans and their locations. A veteran is defined as anyone who has served in the Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) for more than one day. Most veterans are of an older generation, having served in the Second World War or completed National Service. There has been no requirement to maintain a centralised database of the names and addresses of all who once
served in the Armed Forces, the majority of whom are not in receipt of pensions or compensation.

We agree on the value of making data more widely available where we can.

The MoD provides resettlement support, pensions, compensation and veterans-aware advice to former Service personnel and as such has been able to provide:

- the number of recipients of payments under War Pension Scheme and ex-serving recipients of compensation under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme in Wales, by local authority as at 31 March 2012.
- the number of recipients of payments under the Armed Forces Pension Scheme in Wales, by local authority as at 12 July 2011.

This information is available on the Defence Analytical Services and Advice (DASA) website at DASA Defence Statistics 2012.

In December 2012 the Department of Health, with the support of MoD, started an initial launch regionally of the Veterans Information Service (VIS); the final recommendation of Dr Andrew Murrison MP’s mental health report to be put in place. It was envisaged that VIS would consist of a follow-up message to Service Leavers, 12 months after their discharge, asking recipients if they have concerns about their health and outlining the range of support services available. The full launch of VIS will take place later this year. The intention is that Service Leavers (including Reservists) discharged since 1 September 2010 will be contacted and directed to a questionnaire and knowledge database hosted by the Royal British Legion, which will provide information down to postcode level for the individual.

10. We encourage Armed Forces veterans based in Wales to identify themselves as they use public services. This information will enable the Welsh Government and local authorities to develop policies and target resources to benefit veterans and their families in future. (Paragraph 52)

MoD welcomes the Committee’s recommendation that Armed Forces veterans identify themselves when using public services. Government support to veterans is provided by a number of service providers, for example through the NHS and by local authorities. We encourage Service Leavers to identify themselves as such when they use public services to ensure they access the options and full services available to them. Wales Office Minister has visited and paid tribute to the successful ‘One Vale’ contact service being adopted to promote this in the Vale of Glamorgan.

11. We are disappointed that the level of care given to veterans can sometimes be compromised by the failure to transfer medical records between the MoD and NHS. We welcome the introduction of an improved system by the MoD later in 2013 and
recommend that the Ministry updates Parliament about the establishment and effectiveness of the system by the end of the year. (Paragraph 58)

The new system is on track to be in place in the autumn and an update on its establishment and where we are able (given the relatively short period of time it will have been in place) its effectiveness will be provided to the committee at the end of the year.

12. The extension of priority NHS treatment to all UK veterans is welcome but lack of awareness of the policy is hampering its effectiveness. It is alarming that only one in five GPs have any familiarity with the policy. The Welsh Government should work with NHS Wales to raise awareness amongst the medical community to ensure that Armed Forces veterans receive the priority treatment to which they are entitled. (Paragraph 62)

It remains important to ensure that all service providers are aware of the provisions made for the Armed Forces Community under the Armed Forces Covenant. MoD welcomes the steps taken by the Welsh Government to raise awareness amongst the medical community of Veterans’ eligibility for priority treatment, subject to clinical need.

13. Some Armed Forces veterans—particularly those who left the service prior to the introduction of priority access to treatment in 2008—are not aware of this policy themselves. The MoD must ensure the policy is widely publicised to the current veteran population as well as to all leaving personnel as part of the resettlement programme. (Paragraph 63)

The MoD notes the Committee’s concerns about the low level of awareness of the services available to Veterans, especially regarding resettlement and priority NHS treatment. The MoD works through the Service Personnel and Veterans Agency to ensure that these services are communicated most effectively to Veterans and relevant stakeholders. The Veterans Information Service will signpost Service leavers towards the services appropriate for their needs.

14. The establishment of the All Wales Veterans’ Health and WellBeing Service (AWVHWS) across Wales is a welcome improvement to mental health treatment in Wales. The Welsh Government should ensure that the AWVHWS continues to receive sufficient funding. We encourage the AWVHWS to explore ways to work with the charity sector to improve the capacity of the service. (Paragraph 71)

The Government welcomes this initiative.

15. To avoid duplication, we recommend that the Welsh Government take into account the support launched or planned by local authorities as part of their Community Covenants, should the Welsh Government decide to proceed with a
network of ‘one-stop Shops’ across Wales for veterans. The Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association should actively educate local authorities about their obligations under the Covenant. (Paragraph 90)

The MoD agrees that it is important to recognise the provisions already put in place by local authorities under the Community Covenants. Community Covenants established by Welsh local authorities are having real benefits for the Armed Forces Community, and we welcome the support that both the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association have offered to the scheme.

16. Recent court cases have illustrated the need for vigilance to prevent fraudsters taking advantage of the public’s willingness to give to veterans’ charities. There should be much more stringent inspection of charities’ finances. We recommend that the Cabinet Office look into this as a matter of urgency. (Paragraph 93)

All charities must prepare annual accounts, and registered charities with an annual income over £25,000 must have their accounts independently audited or examined, and published on the Charity Commission’s website. Fraud or abuse of charities is rare, but is totally unacceptable. Charity trustees are ultimately responsible for their charity and are at the front line in the fight against fraud, so we welcome the Charity Commission’s recent preventive work to highlight to charity trustees how they can minimise the risks of fraud. In a time of reduced resources it is important that the Charity Commission focuses on its core regulatory functions, including proactively identifying and tackling fraud and abuse.

17. We are concerned that many charities in the Armed Forces sector are operating in very similar fields, without proper co-ordination. This can lead to duplication of effort, inefficient administrative costs, and can sometimes be confusing for veterans as to where to seek assistance. The MoD, Charity Commission and The Confederation of Service Charities (COBSEO) should work together to review the current focus of charities operating in this sector, and encourage opportunities for better co-ordination between charities where appropriate. (Paragraph 96)

To avoid such duplication of effort the MoD recommends that advice to veterans is to approach the main Service charities in the first instance. It is acknowledged that in recent times many small bona fide charities have been established to support specific needs, and their work is not all co-ordinated. This is an area requiring further action by the interested parties.

18. We respect the right of people to set up charities but we cannot support their role in providing treatments for complex psychological issues which do not meet NICE guidelines. We are concerned that the regulation of charities may be insufficiently robust in this area. We recommend that the Charity Commission should insist that veterans’ charities which offer medical, psychological or counselling services provide documentation from the relevant professional bodies to confirm that they have the
appropriate professional endorsement for the services they offer. We recommend that the Cabinet Office look into this as a matter of urgency. (Paragraph 99)

The Charity Commission does not regulate health-care services it regulates charitable status. Unless there is strong evidence that the services being provided are either harmful or illegal, it may not be viable to insist on professional endorsement as recommended above.