

**The Nation's Commitment:
Cross Government Support to Our
Armed Forces, Their Families and Veterans**

**External Reference Group
Annual Report 2010
Published 12 November 2010**

1. A year ago, we published our first annual report on the implementation of the Service Personnel Command Paper (SPCP), issued by the then Government in July 2008. Since then, there has been a change of administration, and the Coalition Government has come to power with a clear commitment to “rebuild the Military Covenant”.

The Coalition Government and the Role of the ERG

2. Ministers have given a number of important undertakings to us since the General Election. First, they have confirmed that they support the thrust of the SPCP initiative, and are looking to carry forward the commitments made by their predecessors in office. Second, they have stated that they continue to value our input and advice, and would like the External Reference Group to remain in being. We have agreed to do so. We see many parallels between the commitment to the Covenant and the SPCP, not least that rebuilding the Covenant will continue to require the active involvement of Ministers and officials across Government, including the Devolved Administrations. The role of Armed Forces Advocates in Government Departments will be ever more important as the Government implements the outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review.
3. We have also noted the specific commitments which the Coalition Government made in support of the Covenant in its “Programme for Government”.
 - a. Ensuring that Service personnel's Rest and Recuperation leave can be maximised
 - b. Changing the rules so that Service Personnel only have to register once on the Service register in order to vote
 - c. Exploring the potential for including Service children as part of the Government's proposal for a pupil premium
 - d. Providing university and further education scholarships for the children of Servicemen and women who have been killed on active duty since 1990
 - e. Providing support for ex-Service personnel to study at university

- f. Creating a new programme, "Troops to Teachers" to get experienced, high quality ex-Service personnel into the teaching profession
 - g. Providing extra support for veteran mental health needs
 - h. Reviewing the rules governing the awarding of medals
 - i. Doubling the operational allowance for Armed Forces personnel serving in Afghanistan
 - j. Including Armed Forces pay in Government plans for a fair pay review
 - k. Ensuring injured personnel are treated in dedicated military wards
 - l. Looking at whether there is scope to refurbish Armed Forces Accommodation from efficiencies
4. We welcome these commitments and we will monitor progress in meeting them over the coming year. We are pleased to note that two of them have already been delivered (doubling Operational Allowance, and maximising Rest and Recuperation leave). In July 2010 we discussed the formation and remit of the Armed Forces Covenant Taskforce, made up of 10 Downing St and MOD staff under the leadership of one of our members, Professor Hew Strachan of Oxford University. We look forward with great interest to the final report of the Taskforce.
5. Our role has expanded in other ways too. Before the Election, we were invited to assume responsibility for monitoring implementation of the report of the Service Families Employment Task Force, published by the Minister for Women and Equalities, the Defence Secretary and the Work and Pensions Secretary in March 2010. We shall be amending our Terms of Reference to reflect our new responsibilities. A list of the members of the ERG can be found at Annex A.

Update on Progress

6. Given the election and the resulting change of focus, we consider that it would not be appropriate to produce an in-depth report this year. A report to the Prime Minister assessing the Government's progress after only a few months in office would add little. We have therefore focused our report on progress made in the last year against existing commitments. In 2011, when the Coalition Government will have been in office for more than a year, we will be able to make a more meaningful contribution to public scrutiny and debate. In the meantime we will remain fully engaged in work relating to the development of the new, tri-Service Armed Forces Covenant through our meetings and other channels.

7. The position on each of the commitments made by the previous Government, including both those made in the SPCP and in the Service Families Employment and Skills Taskforce in March, is summarised in Annex B which accompanies this report. This charts the progress made in the period 1 August 2009 to 31 July 2010, although where appropriate it makes reference to subsequent developments before the end of September 2010. In this period, the number of commitments fully completed across the UK has risen from 15 to 23, the principal developments being:
- a. The opening of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, including the Military Ward, continuing the record of excellent care established by Selly Oak Hospital;
 - b. The launch of the £20M four year pilot Armed Forces Home Ownership Scheme, together with the first completions of purchases;
 - c. Changes to Social Security legislation which enables eligible spouses and civil partners to get National Insurance credits when accompanying a Service Person on an overseas tour
 - d. The launch of an Independent Inquest Advice Service run by the Royal British Legion; and
 - e. The appointment of Armed Forces Champions in Job Centre Plus districts.
8. In the year ahead, on current plans, 14 more commitments are due to be delivered, 5 of which are already delivered in part of the UK. Those that are being rolled out further across the UK include changes to housing regulations and guidance, extending commitments on "High Priority for adapted social housing" to Wales, and "forming a Local Connection" to Scotland. The Department for Transport, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Scottish Government are considering exactly how to take forward the spirit of the commitment with regards to concessionary bus travel; we understand that further details on this will be announced in due course but the plan remains for this to be taken forward in England, Wales and Scotland by April 2011. It is likely that the broad aims of the previous Government's commitment in this respect will be met by including automatic eligibility for seriously injured veterans and service personnel who have been awarded a guaranteed income payment under the 2005 Armed Forces Compensation Scheme and who fall within the categories of disability set out in the Transport Act 2000 (and equivalent legislation in Scotland). Access will be eased for the Blue Badge scheme to seriously injured veterans in England, Wales and Scotland.

9. We recognise that Government Departments will be required to make very tough spending decisions in the months ahead. Resources devoted to improving the circumstances of the Armed Forces community cannot be ring-fenced from scrutiny. Nevertheless, we add our voice to those who call for a continued focus on support to that community.
10. The results of the Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS) 2009 were published on the MOD website on 16 March 2010 (headline results) and 16 June 2010 (full results). They show an improvement in Service personnel's view of Service life, with the majority of personnel (61%) stating that they were satisfied with Service life, up from 51% in 2008 and 47% in 2007. Overall, however, less than half were satisfied with the impact of Service on their personal life. The highest areas of dissatisfaction were the impact of Service life on their spouse/partner's career, with nearly half dissatisfied, and around a third were dissatisfied with its impact on their children's education. Whilst we were pleased at the overall trend on satisfaction with Service life, there is still much to do in minimising the negative impact of Service on family life. The Service Families Continuous Attitude Survey (FAMCAS), was conducted on a tri-Service basis for the first time this year, and included questions designed to measure the effectiveness of SPCP measures. We look forward to reviewing the result of that survey this autumn. We welcome the further development of the MOD survey programme, and stress the importance of basing judgements about how well the Armed Forces community are faring on firm evidence.
11. Last year, the previous Government conducted a public consultation exercise on how to make the principles underpinning the SPCP, such as "no disadvantage", consistent and enduring in their application to the conception and delivery of public services. A number of members of the ERG contributed to that consultation, and the Ministry of Defence published a summary of contributions in February 2010. The findings were that there was widespread support for action to be taken, but no single option amongst those outlined in the consultation paper attracted consensus. Unfortunately the election intervened before the Government was able to announce its own plans for taking forward this important aspect of the SPCP initiative. However we understand that the findings of the consultation, which remain valid, will be taken into account in the Coalition Government's work to develop the Armed Forces Covenant.
12. The role of the ERG extends to all parts of the United Kingdom, and we note that the Scottish and Welsh Assembly Governments – unchanged as a result of the General Election – have also continued to support the SPCP initiative. In addition to the SPCP commitments the Welsh Assembly Government is working to deliver, they have set up a Ministerial-level Welsh Expert Group to support the needs of the Armed Forces Community in Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government is establishing an all-Wales Mental Health and Wellbeing Service for Veterans,

and funding research into veterans' health needs in Wales. Health Boards have appointed Armed Forces and Veterans Champions, and set Annual Operating Framework targets in 2010-11 for Local Health Boards to consider veterans' needs specifically when planning services.

13. In Scotland, as well as the SPCP commitments that Scotland specifically signed up to, there have been further initiatives including the creation of Armed Forces and Veterans Champions in Health Boards and Local Authorities, the establishment of the Scottish Veterans Fund, and working with Scottish Parliament Cross Party Groups on mental health and veterans issues. As we stated last year, we want to see the benefits of the SPCP initiatives extended to Northern Ireland as rapidly as possible, especially now that the uncertainties regarding devolution have been reduced.
14. The ERG expects to have a busy agenda for the coming year. As well as monitoring continued implementation of the SPCP commitments we will be engaged in the launch and implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant against the backdrop of the SDSR. Finally, we believe that the new emphasis on the Covenant represents an excellent opportunity to refresh and renew the efforts made to communicate effectively with members of the Armed Forces community, on their entitlements and their responsibilities. The Armed Forces Covenant is a strong "brand" which will resonate with military and civilian personnel alike, and must be used effectively to promote real change on the ground.

Annex A

Membership of the External Reference Group August 2009 – July 2010

ARMED FORCES ADVOCATES

Department:	Role:
Cabinet Office	ERG Chair Director General Domestic Policy Group, Cabinet Office
Department for Work and Pensions	Director of Benefit Strategy, Welfare and Wellbeing Group
Department of Health	Chief Executive Sheffield Teaching Hospitals and DH co-chair of the MOD/UK Depts of Health Partnership Board
Department for Transport	Director of Communication
Department for Education	Director, School Formation and Investment
Business, Innovation and Skills	Director, Student Finance Strategy
Department for Communities and Local Government	Director of Housing Growth, Markets and Strategy
Her Majesty's Treasury	Policy Advisor, Defence, Intelligence and Diplomacy Team
Home Office	Deputy Chief Executive, UK Borders Agency
Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs	Director, Benefits and Credits
Welsh Assembly Government	Director General for Public Services and Local Government Delivery
Scottish Executive	Director-General for Health and Chief Executive NHS Scotland

EXTERNALS

Confederation Of British Service and Ex-Service Organisations (COBSEO)

Royal British Legion (RBL)

Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA)

War Widows Association (WWA)

Naval Families Federation

Army Families Federation

RAF Families Federation

Prof Hew Strachan, Oxford University

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE REPRESENTATION

Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for Personnel & Training

Director, Service Personnel Policy

Annex B

Progress Against Commitments

Key to Colours:

Fully Complete by 31 July 2009		Ongoing monitoring / longer term commitment	
Fully Complete by 31 July 2010		Not applicable	
To be Completed by 31 July 2011			

Armed Forces Compensation Scheme

No.	Serial ¹	Commitment Title	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
1	2.5	Armed Forces Compensation Scheme Uplift	Delivered doubling of compensation payments in December 2008 All backdated uplifts processed by April 2009			

Health

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
2	2.6	Continuation of the Military Ward in Birmingham	Delivered June 2010			
3	2.7	Prosthetic Limb Provision	Delivered February 2009	Delivered July 2009	Work ongoing	
4	2.8	Access to NHS Dentistry	Long term monitoring			
5	2.9	NHS Waiting List Retention of Place	Delivered December 2008	On track for delivery by end 2010	Delivered January 2009	Already in place
6	2.10	IVF Stability	Delivered May 2009			
7	2.11	Improving Information on Veterans Health Needs	Long term monitoring 'Meeting the Healthcare Needs of Veterans – a guide for General Practitioners' issued Nov 09			
8	2.12	Roll-out of Community Mental Health following Pilots	All six pilots in place by March 2009 Assessment and evaluation will report in October 2010 Veterans service being maintained in areas where pilot has completed			

Housing

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
9	2.13a	Priority in Affordable Homes – Wales and Scotland		Delivered May 2009	Delivered July 2008	
10	2.18	Affordable Homes – Extending Access	Delivered July 2008	Delivered May 2009	Delivered July 2008	
11	2.13b	Affordable homes - £20M pilot scheme	Launched January 2010			
12	2.14	Defence Accommodation Management Strategy	Published August 2009			
13	2.15	'High Priority' for Adapted Social Housing	Delivered April 2009	Revised Code of Guidance due Nov 2010	Delivered June 2009 Revised code of guidance due Jan 2011	

¹ Serial numbers refer to paragraph numbers in the Service Personnel Command Paper.

14	2.16	Adapted Affordable Homes Means Test – Disregard of AFCS/WPS Payments	Delivered July 2008	Delivered May 2009	Delivered July 2009		
15	2.17	Disabled Facilities Grant Means Test – Disregard of AFCS/WPS Payments	Delivered July 2008	Delivered May 2009	Delivered April 2009		
16	2.19	Social Housing – Establishing Local Connection	Delivered December 2008	Delivered March 2009	On track for delivery by end 2010		
17	2.20	Acceptance of Certification of Cessation	Already in place	Revised Code of Guidance due Nov 2010	Delivered February 2009		
					Revised code of guidance due Jan 2011		
Long term monitoring							
18	2.21	Using MOD Void Property	Delivered August 2010				
19	2.22	Homelessness – New Supported Housing	On track for delivery 2011	On track for delivery end 2010	Consultation due to complete end 2010		

Education and Skills

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
20	2.23	Improved School Place Allocation	Delivered Feb 2009	Delivered July 2009		
			Ongoing monitoring			
21	2.24	Assessment of Educational Attainment	Initial census completed in January 2008 Annual thereafter			
			Long term monitoring			
22	2.25	Ensure uninterrupted Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision	Guidance issued in Jan and Feb 2009		Statutory duty already in place	
			Revision of Code of Practice following 2010 Ofsted reviews	Revision of Code of Practice on track for 2012		
23	2.26	State Boarding Schools in England – Priority Access and Increased Provision	Priority access delivered February 2009			
			Additional places during 2009, 2010 and 2011			
			Academies on track for delivery in 2011			

24	2.27	Education and Training for Service Leavers	Delivered April 2009	
25	2.28	New opportunities for Basic Skills training for Families	Delivered 2009	

Transport

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
26	2.29	Concessionary Bus Travel for seriously injured Service personnel and veterans	On track for delivery by April 2011	On track for delivery by April 2011	Review complete May 2009	Delivered
					On track for delivery by April 2011	
27	2.30	Blue Badge – Continuous Automatic Entitlement	On track for delivery April 2011	On track for delivery 2011	On track for delivery 2011	

Support for Families

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
28	2.31	Improving Childcare Provision	Report complete March 2009	Report complete May 2009		
			Ongoing monitoring. Commanders are liaising with Local Authorities to ensure sufficiency audits consider the needs of Service families			
29	2.32	Sure Start Children's Centres and Extended Services	Ongoing monitoring. Commanders are liaising with Local Authorities to ensure sufficiency audits consider the needs of Service families			
30	2.33	Inquests – Independent Support to Families	Coroners & Justice Bill received Royal Assent 12 Nov 09			
			RBL Independent Inquest Advice Service launched July 2010			
			Practical implementation of the Coroners Bill tbc due to a number of proposed changes			
31	2.34	Support to Bereaved Families	Ongoing monitoring			

Benefits

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	UK-Wide Position
32	2.35	State Benefits – Improved access for Service Families	NI Credits delivered April 2010 Impact on eligibility on track for delivery in 2011
33	2.36	New Deal Employment Programmes - Improved Service Family Access	Delivered January 2009
34	2.37	Seamless Transfer onto Benefits on leaving the Armed Forces	Delivered October 2009

Building Careers

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	UK-Wide Position
35	2.38	Flexible Careers in the Armed Forces	Continuous drive for improvement
36	2.39	Support to the Volunteer Reserve Forces	Delivered October 2008
37	2.40	Support to Employment of Service Families	Priority access policy for spouses in MOD civilian jobs published July 2009 Continuous drive for improvement
38	2.41	Improved Employment of Service Leavers in the Public Sector	Public sector employment website launched May 2009 Continuous drive for improvement

Foreign and Commonwealth Service Personnel

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	UK-Wide Position
39	2.43a	Settlement for dependants of F&C Service personnel	Delivered March 2009
40	2.43b	Unmarried/same-sex partners entitlement	Delivered March 2009
41	2.43c	Entitlement for time outside the UK	Scheme under review
42	2.43d	Life in the UK Test – no disadvantage	On track for delivery April 2011
43	2.43e	Entitlement of children born overseas	Delivered January 2010
44	2.44	Eligibility for Home Fee Status	Delivered March 2009
45	2.45	F&C Service Personnel should not be disadvantaged	Continuous commitment
46	2.46	Earned Citizenship Project	Scheme under review

Pay

No.	Serial	Commitment Title	UK-Wide Position
47	2.47	Armed Forces Pay Review Body – Commitment to Process	Delivered March 2009 and March 2010 Ongoing commitment

Service Families Employment and Skills Taskforce

No.	Serial ²	Commitment Title	UK-Wide Position
TF1	21	IT based employment and Training 'One Stop Shop'	Launched April 2010
TF2	26	Jobcentre Plus Armed Forces Champions	Launched March 2010
TF3	36	Changes to Vocational Qualifications System	On track for delivery end 2010

² Serial numbers refer to paragraph numbers in the *Service Families Employment & Skills Taskforce Report* March 2010

TF4	44	Revised Guidance for Local Authorities on Childcare Sufficiency	Revised guidance was published March 2010
			Sufficiency will be assessed again in March 2011
TF5	59	Fair Access to Schools	As per SPCP commitments 20 and 29
TF6	68	Sure Start Children's Centres	
TF7	76	Review of Accessibility	Review ongoing
TF8	78	Flexible career options in the Public Sector	Ongoing monitoring
TF9	89	Private Sector Support	Pilot schemes ongoing