



## DEBATE PACK

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# Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland

Main Chamber

Wednesday 7 March 2018

Opposition Day Debate: Motion in  
the name of the Democratic  
Unionist Party

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### Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Press Articles</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>PQs</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Other Parliamentary material</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1	Debates	10
4.2	Statements	10
4.3	Early Day Motions	11
<b>5.</b>	<b>Further reading</b>	<b>12</b>

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. Background

The Armed Forces Covenant is a statement of the moral obligation which exists between the nation, the Government and the Armed Forces. It was published in May 2011 and its core principles were enshrined in law, for the first time, in the Armed Forces Act 2011. It applies to all three services.

The Covenant articulates the view that the nation has a moral obligation to members of the Armed Forces Community in return for the sacrifices they make. Specifically, the Covenant outlines two core principles:

- No disadvantage: no current or former member of the armed forces, or their families, should be at a disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.
- Special consideration: special consideration is appropriate in some cases, particularly for those who have been injured or bereaved.

The Armed Forces Act 2011 does not create legally enforceable rights for Service personnel but it does require the Secretary of State for Defence to report to Parliament each year on the progress made with respect to the Covenant.

On 18 December 2017 the Government published its latest annual report on the Armed Forces Covenant. It highlights all of those areas where progress has been achieved over the last year, and outlines some key priorities for the future. Most notably a new Ministerial Covenant and veterans Board was established and met for the first time in October 2017. The Board will provide strategic direction for the delivery of Covenant initiatives. In April 2017 the Veterans Gateway was also launched which provides a single point of contact for veterans seeking support.

With respect to Northern Ireland, there has been longstanding criticism over the perceived lack of implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant.

## 2. Press Articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

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### [DUP councillor calls for Irish Army personnel to get priority in social housing allocation](#)

Irish News  
John Monaghan  
14 December 2017

### ['NI must get benefits of Armed Forces Covenant'](#)

Belfast Telegraph  
Victoria Leonard  
27 June 2017

### [The DUP Has Controversially Secured Preferential Treatment for British Soldiers](#)

Buzz Feed News  
Siobhan Fenton  
27 June 2017

### [DUP secures 'Military Covenant' for veterans in Northern Ireland, Paisley claims](#)

Belfast Telegraph  
22 June 2017  
Sue Doherty

### [Military Covenant 'part of DUP-Tory deal'](#)

BBC News  
22 June 2017  
Vincent Kearney

### [DUP defends bid to include military covenant in 'culture act' alongside Irish language](#)

Irish News  
John Manley  
31 March 2017

### 3. PQs

#### [Armed Forces Covenant](#)

05 Mar 2018 | 904159

**Asked by: Tom Pursglove**

What steps he is taking to encourage more organisations to participate in the Armed Forces Covenant.

**Answered by: Tobias Ellwood | Department: Defence**

The armed forces covenant annual report was published in December 2017. I am pleased to say that more than 2,000 organisations and companies are now signed up. The new cross-Whitehall body, the veterans board, chaired by the Defence Secretary, is used to ensure that all Government Departments meet their covenant commitments.

**Asked by: Tom Pursglove**

I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. What conversations has he had with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about ensuring that there is better understanding in local government of their duties and obligations and what they need to be doing under the covenant?

**Answered by: Tobias Ellwood**

My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is important that each Department understands its commitments. That is why I stressed the importance of the veterans board, on which the Secretaries of State of all the Departments are represented. We now have proper assessment techniques to make sure that Departments' commitments—in that case, to do with housing—are met.

**Asked by: Gerald Jones**

Members across the House and people across the country were horrified to read last week that the Ministry of Defence had taken money raised from the LIBOR funds that was supposed to benefit forces charities and support the delivery of the armed forces covenant, and instead spent it on projects—albeit worthy ones—that should be part of routine departmental spending. We know that things are bad in the MOD, but it can hardly consider itself a charity. Can the Minister tell the House how that was allowed to happen? More importantly, will the Ministry be paying the money back?

**Answered by: Tobias Ellwood**

I also saw those comments in the press. It is important to understand that LIBOR grants are there for additional facilities. The MOD has a responsibility to provide core activities. Obviously there is a grey area between a core activity and an additional facility. I am more than happy to look at the details of what the hon. Gentleman raises, and I will write to him.

**[Armed Forces Covenant](#)****15 Jan 2018 | 634 c590****Asked by: Carol Monaghan**

The armed forces covenant is currently more of a statement of intent than a statement of action, and it does not guarantee the support that serving personnel and veterans require. Does the Secretary of State agree that putting an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing would be a bold commitment to ensure proper representation of personnel and veterans?

**Answered by: Gavin Williamson | Department: Defence**

What we have done is to create the veterans board. It was previously co-chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and me, and it will now be co-chaired by me and the Minister for the Cabinet Office. We have found that the feedback about what we have been doing and trying to achieve in creating the board has been very positive. This is about not just the Ministry of Defence, but every Department, every local authority in the country and businesses helping and supporting our veterans and our service personnel.

**[Armed Forces Covenant](#)****15 Jan 2018 | 634 cc589-591****Asked by: Mary Creagh**

Whether he has plans to strengthen the Armed Forces Covenant.

**Answered by: Gavin Williamson | Department: Defence**

The Ministry of Defence published the armed forces covenant annual report in December 2017, which outlined the progress made to strengthen the covenant. Notable achievements include the establishment of a new ministerial covenant and veterans board, which had its first meeting in October 2017. The next ministerial covenant and veterans board meeting is due in the spring.

**[Veterans: Scotland](#)****08 Jan 2018 | 120690****Asked by: Stephen Gethins**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, if he will give the Scottish Government Minister with responsibility for veterans a seat on the Ministerial Armed Forces and Veteran's Board.

**Answering member: Tobias Ellwood | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The new Ministerial Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Board will drive forward and coordinate better Government support to the Armed Forces, their families and veterans across the whole of the UK. The devolved administrations play an important role in providing this support, which is why representatives from the Scottish Government and Welsh Government, and the Northern Ireland Civil Service, were

invited to the inaugural meeting of the Board in October 2017. Following discussions at that meeting, the Government is considering the best arrangements for future meetings.

**Armed Forces Covenant: Northern Ireland**

**08 Nov 2017 | 110569**

**Asked by: Lady Hermon**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what recent progress has been made in Northern Ireland on the implementation of the Military Covenant; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: Tobias Ellwood | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The Department continues to improve the support offered to our Service personnel, their families and veterans through engagement with statutory providers and the charitable sector with a view to ensuring none are disadvantaged through service in or living in Northern Ireland (NI). The recent launch of the Veterans' Gateway is a positive example of developing this collaborative approach. In addition, the bespoke Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish Aftercare Service provides support to those personnel referred through the regional Personnel Recovery Unit within 38 (Irish) Brigade.

Any veteran whose needs are not met by statutory bodies or the charitable sector is looked after by a Veterans' Support Office (VSO), linked to each of the veterans champions established in every local authority. There is an intention to provide additional resources to strengthen the VSOs and improve NI's capacity to identify projects that could draw from the Covenant Fund.

A further update on our initiatives in NI will be published in the next Covenant Annual Report to Parliament in December 2017.

**Power Sharing**

**28 Jun 2017 | 626 c580**

**Asked by: Emma Little Pengelly**

The Secretary of State will be aware that the armed forces covenant has been the subject of talks in Northern Ireland because of the lack of full implementation. Does he agree that the party blocking that implementation talks a lot about rights and respect? It needs to do the right thing and stop being a barrier to the support that the veterans in Northern Ireland need.

**Answered by: James Brokenshire | Department: Northern Ireland**

May I welcome the hon. Lady to her position? I am sure that the experience she has—over legacy, and over so many parts of Northern Ireland—will enrich the debate in the House.

We obviously stand by our commitments in relation to the military covenant—wanting to see that felt in all parts of the UK—and we look forward to working with all parties and all communities across Northern Ireland and the UK to see that that happens.

**Belfast Agreement: Impartiality**

**28 Jun 2017 | 626 c578**

**Asked by: Dr Andrew Murrison**

Notwithstanding the commitment to parity in the Good Friday agreement, does my right hon. Friend agree that the military covenant needs to be applied throughout the country, regardless of where servicemen and women live?

**Answered by: James Brokenshire | Department: Northern Ireland**

I do uphold the military covenant. The Conservative party has made great strides in rolling it out across the UK, and the Government remain committed to that. We will work with the Executive and all the parties so that the benefit of the military covenant is felt in all parts of the UK.

**Armed Forces Covenant Reference Group: Northern Ireland**

**27 Apr 2017 | 71785**

**Asked by: Danny Kinahan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what effect the absence of a functioning Northern Ireland Executive has on the ability of the recent appointment of the Northern Ireland representative to the UK-wide Covenant Reference Group to carry out her role.

**Answering member: Mark Lancaster | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The Northern Ireland Assembly agreed to nominate appropriate representatives to the national governance bodies of the Armed Forces Covenant on 6 December 2016. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has urged all parties to make appropriate nominations to the Covenant's national governance bodies a priority for the devolved Government once reconvened. In the interim, Northern Ireland's interests on the national governance bodies of the Armed Forces Covenant are represented by Ministers and officials from the Northern Ireland Office.

**Armed Forces Covenant**

**13 Mar 2017 | 623 c6**

**Asked by: Gavin Robinson**

During a recent sitting of the Defence Committee, I shared with the Minister correspondence from the then Health Minister for Northern Ireland, now the leader of Sinn Féin, who pointedly said:

“the Armed Forces Covenant is not in place here”.

What advice and guidance can the Minister give in the face of such intransigence?

**Answered by: Mark Lancaster | Department: Defence**

We all understand that the armed forces covenant applies throughout the United Kingdom. I appreciate that there are specific challenges in Northern Ireland, and I have already said that I intend to make that a priority for this year. To that end, I shall be visiting Northern Ireland shortly.

**Armed Forces Covenant**

**13 Mar 2017 | 623 cc5-6**

**Asked by: Holly Lynch**

Some amazing work is undertaken by the British Legion and other charities in my constituency and across the UK, but the head of SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity, has recently warned that the

“Armed Forces Covenant lacks bite”.

Many local authorities seem to feel that complying with the covenant is an option rather than an obligation. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to reinforce the message of just how essential the covenant is?

**Answered by: Mark Lancaster | Department: Defence**

I think that there is an acceptance across the House of just how important the covenant is, and I am delighted that every local authority in the United Kingdom—including four in Northern Ireland—has now signed it. Last year, we sent out a survey to try to establish best practice, and we are now moving on to the next stage, in which we will look carefully at those local authorities and other organisations that are not doing what they said they would do, and encourage them to remedy that. Ultimately we could revoke the agreement with them, but I would like to think that we would never get to that stage.

**Armed Forces Covenant Reference Group: Northern Ireland**  
**24 Jan 2017 | HL4532**

**Asked by: Lord Rogan**

To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the reply by Earl Howe on 9 January (HL Deb, col 1835), when they were first given notice that the Northern Ireland Executive had nominated an individual to the Armed Forces Reference Group, and what is the name of that individual.

**Answering member: Earl Howe | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Jeffrey Donaldson) wrote to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer) on 21 October 2016 to advise that Mrs Brenda Hale MLA had been nominated to sit on the Armed Forces Covenant Reference Group as a Northern Ireland representative.

**Armed Forces Covenant**  
**07 Nov 2016 | 616 c1242**

**Asked by: Jim Shannon**

What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to see the armed forces covenant enforced in Northern Ireland? What steps has his Department taken in the interim to work with veterans' services in Northern Ireland until the scheme is fully implemented?

**Answered by: Mark Lancaster | Department: Defence**

Of course, we have unique challenges in Northern Ireland, but I am pleased to report that we estimate that 93% of covenant issues are being enforced in Northern Ireland. Clearly, we need to do better, and that is going to be my focus for the year.

## 4. Other Parliamentary material

### 4.1 Debates

#### [Fatalities in Northern Ireland and British Military Personnel](#)

HC Deb 25 Jan 2018 | 635 cc203-226WH

#### [Combat Compensation](#)

HC Deb 20 Jul 2017 | 627 cc411-424WH

#### [Armed Forces Covenant](#)

HC Deb 2 Feb 2017 | 620 cc1238-1292

#### [Armed Forces Covenant](#)

HL Deb 9 Jan 2017 | 777 cc1819-1833

### 4.2 Statements

#### [Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report](#)

18 Dec 2017 | HCWS360

**Gavin Williamson (Secretary of State for Defence):** I am today laying before the House the 2017 Armed Forces Covenant annual report. The Armed Forces Act 2011 set out the requirement for the Defence Secretary to report progress annually to Parliament. The Covenant is a promise by the nation to ensure that those who serve, or have served, and their families are treated fairly and suffer no disadvantage. The sacrifices made by serving personnel, veterans and their families should be recognised accordingly. The report describes what the Government, and wider society, has done to uphold the principles of the Covenant across the UK.

The Covenant is not only a debt owed by the nation to the Armed Forces community, it is also a mutually beneficial partnership between the military family and the wider society that they serve. The annual report highlights just some of the excellent initiatives being taken in local communities to deepen relationships and that the publication of the report today coincides with the announcement of O2 as the 2,000th business signing of the Covenant demonstrates the ongoing success in building partnerships with the private sector.

A consistent theme of this year's report is a drive toward coordinating services across the core areas of the Covenant. The launch of the Veterans' Gateway, funded by the Covenant and delivered by a Royal British Legion led-consortium, and the work of the Department of Health-led Transition Intervention and Liaison Services, in close co-ordination with Defence, are just two examples of working across

organisational boundaries to provide a more coherent and focused service to the people that need it the most.

In the public sector new guidance for Local Authorities published this year will help to improve the consistency of delivery at a local level. As well as identifying examples of best practice the guidance explains how local support groups and organisations can share resources to help integrate military and civilian communities.

The mobile nature of Service life can lead to disadvantage in a number of areas, one of which is access to education. The inclusion of Service children as a target group for universities in their fair access agreements, acknowledges this and the ability to identify Service children when moving between schools will help to minimise the impact to their education.

The Government's new Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board will also ensure a more coordinated approach, confirming that providing support to Service personnel, veterans and their families remains a top priority, and the report also sets out the key commitments for 2018.

The report has been compiled in consultation with other Government Departments, the Devolved Administrations, and the external members of the Covenant Reference Group.

I am grateful to them all for their contributions, and their continued support as together we ensure our Armed Forces community receive the support they deserve.

## 4.3 Early Day Motions

### [Distribution of armed forces covenant funding](#)

**EDM 419 (session 2016-17)**

**7 September 2016**

**Jeffrey Donaldson**

That this House is concerned with the distribution of Armed Forces Covenant funding across all of the UK; notes that the regions of Northern Ireland and Wales are the lowest of the 10 UK regions in terms of successful small grant applications and total amount awarded in 2015-16; and further notes that no grants were awarded under two of the three large grant themes with a focus upon those regions.

### [Armed forces covenant](#)

**EDM 616 (session 2013-14)**

**23 October 2013**

**David Simpson**

That this House notes that service personnel are disadvantaged as a direct result of the absence of an armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Government to ensure that any such disadvantages are addressed and identified needs are met.

## 5. Further reading

[Armed Forces Covenant](#) website

### HM Government publications

[The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2017](#)

Ministry of Defence  
18 December 2017

[Armed Forces Covenant: Annex to 'A Guide for Local Authorities: How to deliver the Covenant in your area' – Northern Ireland](#)

Ministry of Defence  
*(The general 'Armed Forces Covenant for Communities' guidance was updated 28 November 2017)*

[Armed Forces Covenants in Northern Ireland](#)

Ministry of Defence  
26 October 2017

[Armed Forces Covenant](#)

Ministry of Defence Policy Paper  
3 June 2016

[The Armed Forces Covenant](#)

Ministry of Defence  
2011

### House of Commons Library briefings

[Support for UK Veterans](#)

Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP7693  
23 June 2017

[The Armed Forces Covenant](#)

Commons Library Briefing Paper SN06519  
4 January 2013

### House of Commons Committee inquiry

[Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2017 inquiry](#) website

Defence Committee

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