

Progress Made in delivering Nation's commitment to Forces, Families and Veterans

An Independent report published today, **19 November**, shows significant progress by government departments and devolved administrations in delivering against the Nation's Commitment to the Armed Forces. Simultaneously, further measures are being announced by the Defence Secretary and the Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, focussing on helping Service family members who are seeking employment.

The paper – “The Nation's Commitment: Cross Government Support to our Armed Forces, their Families and Veterans, also known as the Service Personnel Command Paper was published in July last year. It was the first time that such a cross-Government strategy had been produced, and it set the standard for the support our Service personnel could expect. It seeks to ensure that our Armed Forces community are not disadvantaged as citizens by the unique demands imposed by Service life, with 47 commitments in key areas like compensation, healthcare, and accommodation.

The first annual report into progress has been prepared by an External Reference Group (ERG), which includes representatives from across Government, Devolved Administrations, Service charities and Service Families Federations.

Secretary of State for Defence Bob Ainsworth said:

“Service life imposes unique demands upon our people. We ask them to serve whenever and wherever they are needed, and this impacts upon them and their families. As a Government we have a moral obligation to ensure that Service life does not disadvantage their rights as citizens. I am pleased to publish the first annual report that the External Reference Group, with its unique perspective, has submitted. The report shows what has already been delivered, how far we have progressed in other areas, and the impact so far. Much has been achieved. Much remains to be done. Our commitment continues undiminished”.

What the Report Says

The report highlights achievements over the past year, including the doubling of compensation payments for the most serious injuries, improved access to affordable housing schemes, free access to further education for those leaving the Services, and help for families of Foreign and Commonwealth personnel to gain citizenship. It also shows what remains to be done, to maintain progress and complete the task.

The Command Paper was conceived as a programme of work over a period of several years. The ERG, looking at the position at the end of July 2009, noted that 15 of the 47 commitments had been fully completed and a further 6 completed in some parts of the UK. A further 2 have been completed since July, bringing the total of completed commitments to 17, as follows:

- Armed Forces Compensation Scheme Uplift (includes a doubling of Compensation for the most serious injuries)

- IVF Stability (ensuring that those undergoing IVF do not move until the cycle of treatment is complete)
- Priority in Affordable Homes – Wales and Scotland (equivalent to the provisions for Armed Forces personnel in the Key Worker Living scheme in England)
- Affordable Homes – Extending Access (retention of priority status up to 12 months after discharge)
- Adapted Affordable Homes (Access to substantial grants to adapt houses for disabled veterans)
- Disabled Facilities Grant Means Test – Disregard of Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS) / War Pension Scheme (WPS) Payments
- Defence Accommodation Management Strategy (which sets out how Defence Estates will manage and sustain their housing and land assets over the next 10 years)
- Improved School Place Allocation (Revised School Admissions Codes for England and Wales), and priority access to State Boarding School places for Forces children
- Education and Training for Service Leavers (access to free further education for eligible service leavers)
- New opportunities for Basic Skills training for Families
- New Deal Employment Programmes - Improved Service Family Access (helping Forces partners to find work when they move)
- Seamless Transfer onto Benefits on leaving the Armed Forces
- Support to the Volunteer Reserve Forces - (More Government Departments signing up to the Supporting Britain's Reservists and Employers (SaBRE) statement)
- Settlement for dependants of Foreign and Commonwealth Service personnel
- Unmarried/same-sex partners of Foreign and Commonwealth Service personnel entitlement to apply for Leave to Enter/Leave to Remain
- Eligibility for Home Fees Status for Foreign and Commonwealth families
- Armed Forces Pay Review Body – Acceptance of pay recommendations

In addition, each relevant Government Department and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales have appointed an Armed Forces Advocate, as promised in the Command Paper, whose role is to identify and resolve policy or legislative issues that may affect Service personnel, their families and veterans.

What next?

Over the next year implementation will continue, and the ERG note that the number of fully completed measures is expected to rise to 28 by the end of July 2010. But, as well as maintaining this momentum, they have identified the need to sustain and increase communications efforts, so that all in the Armed Forces community know what they are entitled to; to develop further mechanisms to measure what is happening on the ground; to roll out more of the Command Paper commitments to those based in Northern Ireland; and to consider the scope for further specific measures. The Government will be following up the points made by the ERG.

An example of how momentum is being maintained is a new package of measures to support the families of Service personnel, which is being announced today by the Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, Minister for Women and Equality, and the Defence Secretary. The measures include the creation of a Service Families Employment and Skills Taskforce, establishing Armed Forces Champions for Jobcentre Plus offices, and reviewing where matters stand on childcare and school places allocation for service families.

In addition, on 16 July 2009, the MOD published a Consultation Document, "The Nation's Commitment to the Armed Forces Community: Consistent and Enduring Support", looking at how to embed for the longer term the principle that the Armed Forces should not suffer any disadvantage as a result of what they do. The consultation closed on 31 October. Work is now in hand to analyse the returns received and a formal response to the consultation will be published in the new year.