



A MODERN ARMED FORCES

A NEW OFFERING FOR PERSONNEL, VETERANS AND SERVICE FAMILIES



SNP Defence Team
June 2021

CONTENTS

Foreword by Stewart McDonald MP.	2
Introduction	3
Section I: Recruitment and Retention.	4
Section II: Working Conditions and Pensions.	7
Section III: Housing and Facilities	9
Section IV: Education and Health	11
Section V: Veterans.	13

FOREWORD BY STEWART MCDONALD MP

From assisting with the rollout of life-saving vaccines across Scotland to undertaking freedom of navigation exercises across the world, members of the Armed Forces have quietly continued their vital work during this past unprecedented year, with many upending their personal lives – as they have done for years – to keep us safe. As we mark Armed Forces Day on the 26th June, it offers more than a chance to give thanks for the work they do: this day provides an opportunity to reflect upon the place of the Armed Forces in society and how we recognise the sacrifice they make.



It is clear that successive UK Governments have let the Armed Forces down. Offered some of the lowest salaries for serving personnel in Europe and expected to tolerate squalid, rodent-infested housing, members of the Armed Forces are expected to make enormous personal sacrifice in exchange for some of the worst pay and conditions offered by any European or NATO ally. When they leave the military, responsibility for their welfare, education and health more often falls on the shoulders of third-sector organisations than on the state they served.

This is unacceptable and must urgently change. This paper sets out a range of policies – such as an end to the culture of outsourcing or the establishment of an Armed Forces Representative Body – which we, the SNP Westminster Defence Team, believe would go some way towards making the Armed Forces an employer of choice for adults seeking a rewarding and fulfilling career in service of their country. Unfortunately, given its past record, we have little faith in the UK Government to deliver them.

The institutional failures of the UK Government when it comes to personnel and veteran welfare should serve as a cautionary tale to the first government of an independent Scotland, which we hope will offer these proposals more careful consideration.

INTRODUCTION

A career in the Armed Forces should not only be something that people can take pride in pursuing, but one which the Government can offer with the confidence that it is doing everything it can to recognise the sacrifices personnel make in service of their country. We believe that, as employees of the Armed Forces, service personnel should be employed on terms that allow them to develop as professionals, remain grounded in their local communities, and ensures that their family life and personal wellbeing are assured. There are five parts to this approach:

- 1. Recruitment and retention:** From the outset, we must ensure that a good employment offering is made to engage people interested in a career in the Armed Forces and retain them for as long as possible. This offering should meet or exceed the standards set by comparable public sector jobs.
- 2. Working conditions and pensions:** Guarantees on existing pension rights are required and future pensions should match or exceed current UK forces levels. A representative body for members of the Armed Forces should also be created to ensure that personnel are able to advocate for their needs in the workplace.
- 3. Housing and Facilities:** Current housing satisfaction among existing personnel is poor and we should aim to provide comfortable and desirable accommodation that allows personnel - particularly those with families - to have the flexibility to maintain a permanent home in a civilian environment near where they work.
- 4. Education and Health:** We are committed to ensuring that all serving personnel and veterans are able to access the best possible care and support. This entails robust support for physical and mental welfare, and support for career and personal development before, during, and after service. Personnel should have the opportunity to access high-quality professional development opportunities catered to all levels and abilities.
- 5. Veterans:** We remain committed to the 2028 Outcomes as outlined in the 2018 *Strategy for our Veterans* and suggest consideration of an independent department or unit covering veteran's services. Within this we should look to encourage greater openness around mental health, while also ensuring that the Armed Forces and veterans are more integrated in civilian life.

SECTION I: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The UK Government's approach to Armed Forces recruitment leaves much to be desired. The 2014 promise of 12,500 full-time personnel based in Scotland still comes nowhere close to being delivered but, instead of addressing the crisis of recruitment that has dogged the Ministry of Defence, the UK Government seems to have embraced it: the Defence Secretary announced in the 2021 Integrated Review that thousands of service personnel would be cut and the Armed Forces shrunk to its smallest size since the early eighteenth century.¹ In addition to raising the age of recruitment to 18, we believe there are three structural changes which the UK Government must make to its approach to recruitment and retention.

1. Raising the age of recruitment

Children can currently apply to join the Armed Forces when just over 15-and-a-half years old. That they can then be recruited into the Armed Forces at 16 years old makes the UK an outlier among European and NATO allies and among the world's major military powers. The UK Government should raise the age of recruitment to 18.

2. An improved recruitment offer

Prospective recruits to the Armed Forces must be made an employment offering that reflects their unique working environment and the conditions that comes with it. This offer should go beyond simply meeting their basic needs in terms of salary and pension – it should make the Armed Forces an employer of choice for those seeking a rewarding and stimulating career. Current UK Armed Forces' pay scales offer recruits significantly lower starting salaries than their peers in other public sector organisations, with entry-level recruits in the UK Armed Forces earning between £4,000 and £6,000 less per annum than their counterparts in the Police or Fire Services.² Despite widespread unhappiness by serving personnel regarding their pay and conditions, the Defence Secretary announced in 2021 that pay rises for the majority of Armed Forces

¹ HM Government, National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom', November 2015; HM Government, 'Scotland Analysis: Defence', October 2013; UK Government, 'Location of UK regular service and civilian personnel annual statistics: 2020', 9th July 2020; HM Government, 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', March 2021

² British Army, 'Pay and Benefits'. Accessed: <https://apply.army.mod.uk/what-we-offer/army-life/benefits>; Fire Brigades Union, 'Pay Settlement 2020'. Accessed: <https://www.fbu.org.uk/pay-rates/pay-settlement-2020>; Police Scotland, 'Pay and Grading Structure'. Accessed: <https://www.scotland.police.uk/about-us/finance/pay-and-grading-structure/>

SECTION I: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

personnel will be 'paused' for 2021/22.³ For as long as the UK Government ignores the disparity between UK military salaries and those of our European allies, recruitment and retention – as well morale – will be adversely affected.

As part of efforts to ensure that a good recruitment offer is made to prospective and current members of the Armed Forces, the UK Government should undertake an annual review which evaluates the Armed Forces as an employer. This review should involve comparisons of pay and conditions with other European militaries and with other comparable public sector roles in the United Kingdom and be reflective of the burden placed on personnel.

3. A more flexible and open working environment

Too often serving personnel – particularly early on in their careers – feel that they are not keeping pace with civilian peers both in terms of their income and in terms of the skills that they are developing.⁴ And too often they leave because they are made to feel like the Armed Forces is not a place for them.⁵ If the Armed Forces is to be attractive employer for all citizens, both of these must be urgently rectified. Greater effort should be made to promote initiatives – such as career breaks – which would help attract and keep potential recruits who might otherwise feel that they had to choose between a military career and having prospects in civilian life.

While the Armed Forces is a unique institution, it should one which fully represents the country it serves, and which offers the chance for any citizen to rise to the top. However, an ongoing Defence Select Committee inquiry has seen around 4000 women – around 40% of whom are currently serving – submit written evidence testifying to a culture of misogyny and sexist bullying.⁶ The Armed Forces' independent ombudsman also reported in 2019 that racist attacks in the Armed Forces were happening with 'increasing and depressing frequency' with serving personnel describing anti-racism efforts as 'lip service and tick-box exercise with little or no consolidated effort to root out the underlying issues causing some of the most blatant

³ Defence Secretary, *Letter to the AFPRB Chair Pay Round 2021 to 2022*, 3rd March 2021

⁴ Will Chalk, 'Armed Forces: "I left because the job is boring and the pay is terrible"', BBC News, 3rd January 2020

⁵ Katie Mark, 'It wasn't just Army banter – it was racism', BBC News, 11th June 2020

⁶ Larissa Brown, 'Military has its MeToo moment', *The Times*, 4th March 2021

SECTION I: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

offenders'.⁷ The Ministry of Defence must go further and faster with efforts to tackle identify-based discrimination and harassment in the Armed Forces.

4. Alternative entry routes

The recruitment pool for military personnel in the UK currently restricted by a linear and hierarchical entry structure, with those possessing essential skills having few means to enter the Forces with an attractive offer due to the obligation to begin at entry level. We welcome Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Nick Carter's call for the Armed Forces to move towards a state where 'we no longer distinguish between regulars and reservists particularly ... that we have a spectrum of commitment from full to part-time service.'⁸ Initiatives such as greater collaboration with the private sector – such as employers releasing scientists, linguists or technology experts for three or six months – should be welcomed and implemented. With skill shortages in over 100 critical trades, the Ministry of Defence should introduce such programmes as a matter of urgency.⁹

⁷ Jonathan Beale, 'Racism 'prevalent' in the armed forces, ombudsman warns', *BBC News*, 19th December 2019; Ben Quinn, "'People like you' still uttered: BAME armed forces personnel on racism in services', *The Guardian*, 7th January 2020

⁸ Helen Warrell, 'Forces chief rallying cry to UK's part-time tech warriors', *Financial Times*, 21st June 2021

⁹ Public Accounts Committee, 'Skill shortages in the Armed Forces', July 2018

SECTION II: WORKING CONDITIONS AND PENSIONS

While the initial offer made must be attractive to ensure retention of personnel, so too must conditions after joining. Below, we have made four recommendations for improved working conditions which would greatly improve life for members of the Armed Forces by providing them with the expectation of options for flexible career paths, a family life that is as close to normal as can reasonably be expected, and clear guidance on pay, conditions and pensions.

1. Written employment contracts

Armed Forces personnel are not currently afforded the same clarity on their employment status and rights as other public sector employees. The complex and varied work that members of the Armed Forces do should not preclude them from developing basic expectations of their employer - a clear contract of employment setting out their duties, responsibilities and rights would go a long way towards establishing this.

2. Expansion of childcare subsidies

The UK Government currently offers service families the option of tax-free childcare, up to the value of £2,000 per child per year.¹⁰ This is a welcome first step but, given the average Scottish family spends almost £6,000 per year on childcare, it does not go far enough.¹¹ For Armed Forces families, this cap should be increased to £6,000 per year.

3. Spousal employment network

In Canada, a spousal employment network connects military families with employers that strive to provide equal employment opportunities to military spouses and partners. While third-sector organisations like Recruit for Spouses offer something close to this service in the UK, it cannot be left up to civil society to fill the gaps left by poor UK Government policymaking. The Ministry of Defence should support the creation of an in-house spousal employment network.

¹⁰ HM Government, 'Childcare for Service Children', 7th April 2021

¹¹ Coram, 'Scottish families face rising tide of childcare costs as prices rise again', 28th February 2019

SECTION II: WORKING CONDITIONS AND PENSIONS

4. Armed Forces Representative Body

An Armed Forces Representative Body would allow service personnel the right to engage in collective bargaining and would be able to advocate for its members on matters such as housing, pay and benefits, medical services, welfare provision, career development, resettlement, and equipment. It would also be able to provide confidential advice and support independent of the chain of command, especially on legal and disciplinary concerns. In 1995, the Government-commissioned Bett Report on Armed Forces career structures and conditions of service found that:

'We have not been able to ignore a growing strength of feeling, apparent on our visits and in the responses to our survey, that the time may be approaching when some form of representation outside the chain of command may be required ... In a survey carried out as part of the Review, 66% of Servicemen had agreed to some extent with a statement that the Services would benefit from an organisation providing representation outside the chain of command'.¹²

25 years later, and despite the precedent set by our NATO allies in Germany, Norway, the USA, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland, the UK Government refuses to allow for the statutory creation of an Armed Forces Representative Body. This short-sighted policy must be reversed – the UK Government must allow and facilitate the creation of an Armed Forces Representative Body, and a legal framework which assures contractual rights in law.

5. Pensions

In the UK there is an occupational pension scheme for members of the Armed Forces - the Armed Forces Pension Scheme - and separate schemes to make payments to current and former service personnel and their families in respect of ill health, injury or death caused by service - the War Pensions Scheme and the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme. The UK Government should commit to an audit of these schemes to evaluate the level of satisfaction with them and to establish whether reforms are needed.

¹² Independent Review of the Armed Forces' Manpower, Career and Remuneration Structures: Managing People in Tomorrow's Armed Forces, Chairman: Michael Bett CBE (HMSO, 1995)

SECTION III: HOUSING AND FACILITIES

Everyone should have access to good-quality housing, something which is fundamental to peoples' wellbeing and welfare. Service personnel are no exception. The UK Government must implement a military housing policy that refuses to reward the failures of the past and gives serving personnel the accommodation they need and deserve. Below, we set out three steps towards such a policy.

1. Greater community integration

Forces personnel are socially and physically isolated from civilian life, with pressures on family or personal life repeatedly cited as the biggest driver for people leaving the Armed Forces.¹³ A transition towards a model where serving personnel can live in their own homes as much as possible when not on exercise (while retaining the option for personnel to live in Single Living Accommodation if they so choose) would not only improve housing satisfaction and morale but would save money maintaining outdated, run-down facilities.

With independence, an important priority of the government will be to improve and expand the stock of quality housing available to citizens of all incomes and needs. In undertaking this, we have the opportunity to incorporate the needs of personnel and their families into a strategy for building new social and privately-owned housing as part of an independent Scottish state's commitment to ensuring that all citizens enjoy the right to a good home. As an example, Denmark has shown that personnel can live alongside civilian communities whenever not serving on deployment abroad, with an assurance that they will never be expected to commute longer than two-and-a-half hours to their places of work in the vast majority of cases.. Given the substantial assets of the defence estate across a wide geographical area in Scotland, the implementation of such a policy should be approached on a transitional basis.

2. End the culture of outsourcing

The current management of the defence estate with respect to housing has provided poor value for money for taxpayers, offering no protection against the private sector from making excessive gains at the expense of public assets. Private companies like CarillionAmey have repeatedly been rewarded for their failure to deliver with more government contracts.¹⁴ The UK Government should call time on its monomaniacal

¹³ Ministry of Defence, UK Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey 2021, May 2021

¹⁴ Public Accounts Committee Report, 'Service Family Accommodation', July 2016

SECTION III: HOUSING AND FACILITIES

obsession with outsourcing to companies who have repeatedly failed to deliver and introduce a presumption in favour of contracts being delivered by the public sector.

3. Greater investment in housing stock

Following 'decades of under investment', the defence estate faces a raft of issues with its housing stock, with a third of personnel living in 'poorer grade' housing and thousands of personnel living in accommodation that is deemed to be so poor that they are not even charged rent.¹⁵ It is beggars belief that the Ministry of Defence believes it has £200m to spend on a new trade ship while it continues to under-invest in housing stock for serving personnel. The UK Government must make the improvement of the military housing an urgent spending priority.

¹⁵ National Audit Office, 'Improving Single Living Accommodation', 3rd February 2021

SECTION IV: EDUCATION AND HEALTH

We are committed to ensuring that all serving armed forces personnel and veterans can access the best possible care and support, including safe, effective, and patient-centred healthcare. This commitment to welfare will run alongside a commitment to career development and to meeting the unique health and education needs of personnel.

1. Priority treatment for veterans

We support the policy on priority treatment for veteran that the Scottish Government has communicated to all NHS Boards and which states that all veterans should receive priority treatment for health problems that are a result of their service. Those with serious wounds and injuries should be assured that they will receive a commitment to life-long specialist medical care that is specifically devoted to treating their conditions. This would be a departure from the UK's veterans' services, which are primarily led by charities and foundations.

2. Greater integration with the NHS

There are significant opportunities for integration with the NHS for the provision of health services and the introduction of flexible solutions using existing civilian infrastructure. While the larger military locations would likely justify the retention of a military GP/Practise Nurse and Pharmacy operations, smaller locations could be supported by local GP practices.

3. Mental health support

It is crucial to support the mental wellbeing of our armed forces. The UK Government has already established a new 24/7 Mental Health Helpline for serving personnel and their families. A framework for combined working between Combat Stress who fulfil this programme, the MoD and the NHS regarding an out-of-hours mental health helpline has been developed and we would continue to support this as a permanent programme.

3. Greater integration with Job Centres

The Scottish Government has already taken substantial steps to ensure that recently discharged personnel are able to access bespoke career services through an Armed

SECTION IV: EDUCATION AND HEALTH

Forces Champion at every local Jobcentre Plus. Through formalising links between higher education institutions, prospective employers, and a network of Armed Forces Champions, we can take a substantive step towards ensuring that the right support is readily at hand to make the most of the skills and talents of our greatly valued Armed Forces community. Accessing such a service, and exploring the opportunities available through this service, should be readily available online with bespoke services being available in Jobcentres where all career and educational support services can be consolidated.

4. Greater support for post-military employment

It is important that those who are leaving the Armed Forces feel confident that there are educational and career opportunities available to them as soon as they leave. It is too often the case that those that join the Armed Forces, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, join the forces without substantive civilian qualifications and then are left without the guidance to use their experiences or develop new ones in civilian life. The Ministry of Defence should offer career development guidance to military personnel during their service to provide them with skills and knowledge they need to pursue a variety of career options within and outwith the Armed Forces. Many existing issues for veterans can be improved for future recruits by making preparation for life after service a component of personnel career development; the foundations of this would be advice on housing, using training opportunities to train for a post-service career and developing life skills such as budgeting and debt management.

SECTION V: VETERANS

There are around 240,000 veterans in Scotland, the majority of whom leave service and integrate well into civilian life.¹⁶ However, access to healthcare, housing and employment are three principal areas where veterans may require additional support, particularly early service leavers who often received little or no support when leaving from training or after only a few years in uniform and require assistance with re-integration into wider society.

1. Citizenship after three years' service

Service by people who are not UK citizens should be recognised with the automatic right to citizenship after three years of full time service: this would include the right to live and work in the UK for immediate dependents, and all application fees should be waived. Generous visa policies should also apply to interpreters who have worked in service of Armed Forces deployments overseas.

2. An independent veterans' agency

In considering the specific interests and concerns of the veterans' community, an independent agency across Government may be the best way of developing and promoting policies that address this specific community's distinct needs within the Government. In the United States and New Zealand, there are entirely separate Government Departments for veterans' services. In South Korea, a veteran's council is responsible for the implementation of veterans' services and strategies. This would ensure a distinct Government focus and provide a central point of contact for veterans.

3. Full inclusion of war widows and widowers

It is also crucial that war widows and widowers are fully incorporated into the veteran's community, and that they can be offered services that reflect their specific needs. Under the current UK Government system, the War Disablement Pension is counted as income by the Department for Work and Pensions and can therefore lead to veterans – and their widows/widowers – being materially disadvantaged when claiming Employment Support Allowance. The UK Government should follow the

¹⁶ Scottish Veterans Commissioner, *Positive Futures: Getting Transition Right in Scotland*, November 2019, p. 11

SECTION V: VETERANS

Scottish Government in altering the rules to ensure that the War Disablement Pension and the War Widow's Pension is exempt from income assessments and that veterans and their dependents receive its full value.

4. Future work

The reports and recommendations from the Scottish Veterans Commissioner would form a good basis for future work.¹⁷ The current Scottish Government's strategy, which we remain committed to, sets out the following objectives:

- helping to fund advice and support for veterans through the Scottish Veterans Fund.
- setting out our future vision for supporting veterans in our veterans strategy.
- working with the NHS to improve armed forces' and veterans' healthcare.
- publishing guidance, such as the armed forces and ex-service personnel housing guide.
- funding Veterans Scotland to support programmes for the veteran community.¹⁸

We are committed to retaining the 2028 Outcomes as outlined in the UK's Veteran's Strategy which commits to ensuring veterans are able to integrate to their communities, have a secure place to live, enjoy a state of positive physical and mental health, are able to enter appropriate employment and are financially self-supporting.¹⁹

¹⁷ See for example: Scottish Veterans Commissioner, *Positive Futures: Getting Transition Right in Scotland*, December 2020; Scottish Veterans Commissioner, *Veterans' Health & Wellbeing A Distinctive Scottish Approach*, April 2018; The Scottish Government, *The Veterans Community: Employability, Skills and Learning*, November 2016

¹⁸ HM Government, *The Strategy for our Veterans*, November 2018; The Scottish Government, *The Strategy for Veterans: Taking the Strategy Forward in Scotland*, January 2020

¹⁹ HM Government, *The Strategy for Our Veterans*, November 2018