

OUR NATION'S DUTY

Proposals for Armed Forces Welfare

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LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

Applicability

With the devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales, many decisions made in Westminster now apply to England only. That means that policies in those nations are increasingly different from those in England – reflecting different choices, priorities and circumstances, and often the influence of Liberal Democrats in government. This document sets out proposals for what a Liberal Democrat government in Westminster could achieve.

Some policy proposals published by the Liberal Democrats may imply modifications to existing government public expenditure priorities. The Liberal Democrats recognise that it may not be possible to achieve all these proposals in the lifetime of one Parliament. The Liberal Democrats intend to publish a costings programme, setting out our priorities across all policy areas, closer to the next general election.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY PROPOSALS	5
Key Proposals	6
“RUNNING HOT”: THE IMPACT OF OVERSTRETCH	8
Reserves	10
Equipment	10
A BETTER DEAL FOR OUR FORCES	12
Pay and Tax	12
Housing	13
Getting a Foot on the Ladder	16
Armed Forces Housing Association	16
Medical Care	17
Mental Health	19
Sports and Recreation	20
Minorities in the Forces	22
Bullying and Harassment	22
POST-SERVICE CARE AND RESETTLEMENT	23
Resettlement	23
Priority Treatment	24
Education and Skills	24
Compensation	25
Veterans	26
Gulf War Veterans	27
SUPPORTING FORCES FAMILIES	28
Establishing Community Roots	28
Education of Forces’ Children	29
Inquests	30
Care Packages	31
SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS	32
REFERENCES	38

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY PROPOSALS

Britain's Armed Forces are second to none in the world for their commitment, bravery and professionalism. Without them, our country would have a fraction of the influence it holds on the world stage today. Whether they are deployed in controversial or widely supported operations, they give their utmost for their country and are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice without asking questions.

For this, our servicemen and women receive the vocal support of the Government and opposition parties, and there is rightly a strong sense of national pride in our Armed Forces. They are the embodiment of those British values of duty, active citizenship and responsibility of which Prime Minister Gordon Brown so often talks. But look behind recent headlines and there is a mismatch between this rhetoric and the reality of daily life for our servicemen and women. Whether it is shoddy housing, faulty equipment, the strains of overstretch, the sufferings of bereaved families waiting for long-delayed inquests, low pay or paltry compensation, there is a growing sense that the Government is failing our Armed Forces.

The Liberal Democrats have long supported a fair deal for the Forces. We recognise that signing up to serve your country is a unique vocation. That is why we have campaigned over the years for a better package for servicemen and women and their families. We have campaigned for a fair deal for Gurkhas, we championed the rights of soldiers who were unfairly treated by the Government's 'Manning Control' policy, and we have run a successful veterans' medal campaign across the country.

Today, however, there is a heightened sense of urgency over the state of our Armed Forces. There has been a wave of unprecedented outcries from senior military figures, both serving and retired. The Royal British Legion, not known for outspoken criticism of government, has launched a public campaign called "Honour the Covenant", highlighting issues such as compensation, health care and treatment of veterans.

It is clear that the present situation is unacceptable and untenable. We are witnessing a dangerous combination of critical overstretch, brought on by fighting two major operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the cumulative effects of decades of failure by Labour and Conservative Governments to invest in the quality of care and fair treatment that service personnel deserve.

In declaring its intention to publish a white paper on forces' welfare Labour has at last recognised that it must do better. We await the MoD proposals with interest and hope that they are serious in intent. Yet we are concerned by the Government's refusal to look at the strategic picture. It is almost a decade since the 1998 Strategic comprehensive defence review. We believe that overstretch and its associated welfare problems are now so serious that they can only be answered by a new Defence Review. This review must take place alongside a serious public debate about what we expect of our Armed Forces. We should not have to rely on our Armed Forces to raise concerns over their treatment. Government and Parliament should have the courage to tackle these issues head on.

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

Of course, we cannot wait for the results of a new Strategic Defence Review to provide a better deal for our servicemen and women. We believe that there are a number of solutions that can be set in train immediately. In this paper, we set out the Liberal Democrat analysis and provide key recommendations for alleviating some of the worst problems faced by today's Armed Forces.

Key Proposals:

- **Complete the withdrawal from Iraq.** Our armed forces are critically overstretched. The Government is now committed to a partial withdrawal from Iraq, but we are concerned that it is being undertaken too slowly and with too much concern for political considerations in Washington. Whilst we understand and support the need for future training and mentoring of Iraqi troops, we remain unconvinced that it requires such a large deployment. The Government must quicken the pace of British forces' withdrawal from Iraq. This is no cure-all for current problems, but it will provide some relief to the problems of overstretch.
- **Renewing the political and military covenant.** Learning from the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, political parties should renew the nation's covenant with the Armed Forces by assuring them that we will not commit to any further interventions without providing the necessary resources, manpower and equipment that ensures our personnel are secure in the commitment.
- **A New Strategic Defence Review.** The Government should undertake a new Strategic Defence Review that revises and updates the assumptions of the 1998 Review based on changed circumstances and threats. We believe that personnel issues can no longer be tagged on to a Strategic Defence Review as an afterthought. They must be central to the conclusions of a future review.

The Strategic Defence Review must become a regular review, as is the case in the United States with its Quadrennial Defence Review. We propose that a Strategic Defence Review be commenced six months after every General Election so that each new Government clearly communicates its defence policy, fully assesses how to match future operations with capabilities and can be held accountable on that basis.

The Government should make greater efforts to honour its obligations under the military covenant:

- **A written covenant for all three services.** We believe that the largely unwritten military covenant must be bolstered by real entitlements and greater public scrutiny of how far the government is meeting those entitlements.
- **Greater scrutiny of forces' welfare spending.** Commitments should be scrutinised by the Public Accounts Committee and have strict benchmarking to enable effective monitoring. For too long, bloated and uncontrolled procurement

projects have eaten away into basic provision of decent homes for our servicemen and women.

- **Set up a Military Covenant Committee** Such a committee could perhaps be established in the House of Lords and be charged with conducting an annual review of the state of the military covenant. As a cross-party body it would be well-placed to provide credible recommendations drawing on the expertise and experience of its members.

The Government should improve the life-long provision of mental and physical health care for Service personnel and their families:

- **Review Armed Forces' health.** The Government should commission a full review of the state of Armed Forces Health. This should incorporate physical and psychological health and make recommendations for how to address the current failings in health care provisions.
- **Military-only wards.** Where serving personnel are being treated the Government should consider more special military-only wards to provide treatment to injured personnel within a military environment. This will help injured personnel to recover and also ease the transition from service to civilian life.
- **Sustained mental health support.** Proper support must be offered to troops returning from service including appropriate medical care and counselling.¹ More should be done to ensure post-conflict de-briefing and counselling for Service members and towards creating an environment in which issues can be addressed openly. Measures should be put in place to monitor the mental health of personnel over a longer period, as the impact of PTSD often emerges after a few, if not many, years.
- **Greater availability of information on medical and mental health care.** Increasing the amount of information available to local medical centres will help ensure that GPs and medical staff are fully aware of the needs of service personnel and that top level measures filter down to reach the people in surgeries and clinics across the country.

The Government should invest substantially more in improving armed forces accommodation:

- **Ring-fenced housing budget.** Spending on welfare and accommodation improvements should be ring-fenced within the defence budget to guarantee that the years of neglect are remedied rapidly.
- **Faster upgrade of service accommodation.** The programme of upgrading Single Living and Family Accommodation units must gather pace as a matter of urgency. The Government should use proceeds from the cancellation of the unnecessary third tranche of the Typhoon fighter jet and invest this in the programme for modernisation of housing.

“RUNNING HOT”: THE IMPACT OF OVERSTRETCH

Almost ten years ago, the Labour Government's Strategic Defence Review (SDR) warned against the dangers of continued overstretch of British Armed Forces:

*“The additional pressures from persistent overstretch contribute to higher exit rates from the Armed Forces thus adding to manning difficulties. We must break this vicious circle. To do so we must match the commitments we undertake to our planned resources, recognising that there will always be the risk of additional short-term pressures if we have to respond rapidly to an unforeseen crisis”.*²

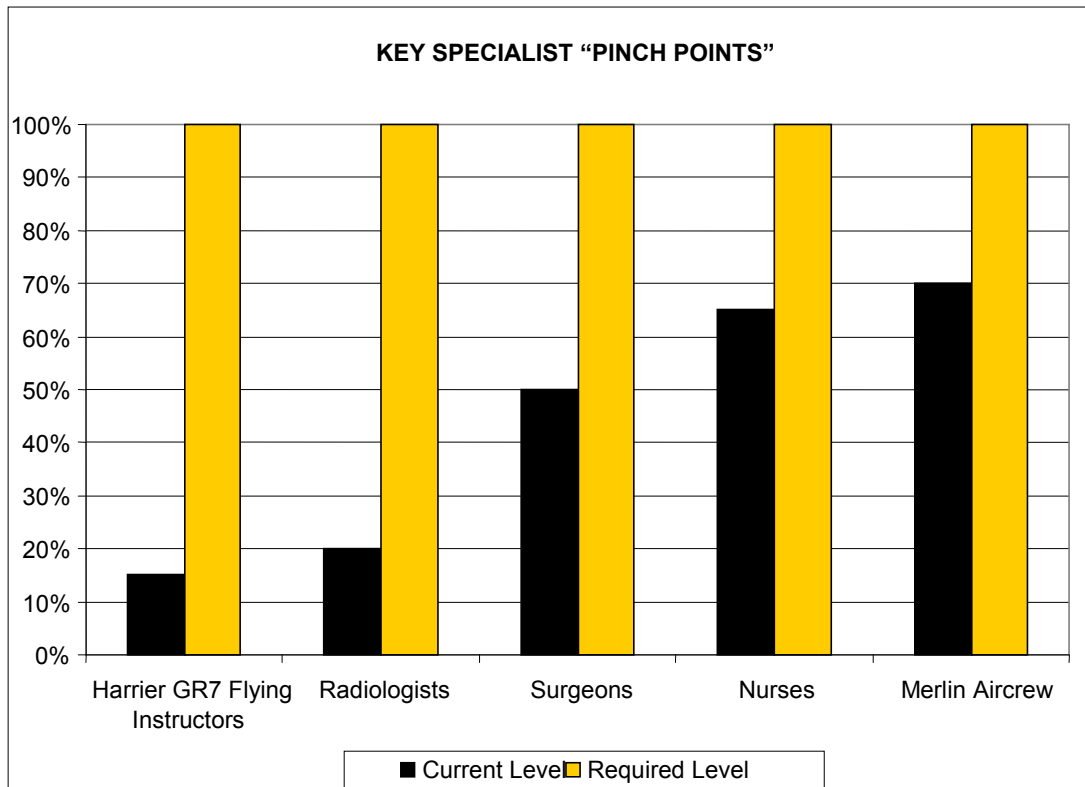
Despite this clear understanding of the dangers of overstretch, the Government has let the problem worsen considerably since 1998. The UK has been involved in several military operations, most significantly in Iraq and Afghanistan. The MoD has gone beyond its defence planning assumptions each year of the last seven. It is clear that the Government has ignored its own warnings and failed to match commitments and planned resources.

More than a fifth of Britain's Armed Forces are currently deployed on sustained operations³ abroad, including almost 13,000 personnel deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴ British forces have shown incredible resilience in the face of this level of overstretch, but they are simply not configured for sustained operations at this tempo. Such is the strain, the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, said recently in a leaked secret memo, “We now have almost no capability to react to the unexpected.”⁵

The impact of overstretch, however, is not just felt in the reduced capability of our forces. It also has a critical impact on the retention of personnel. Together with a long legacy of manning shortfalls in key specialist areas, overstretch is further undermining our forces ability to retain key people, particularly skilled technicians. The “vicious circle” is worsening.

In the most recent survey of opinion in the Army, almost 60% of officers cited operational commitments and overstretch as influencing their decision to leave.⁶ One in five officers felt the situation had “strongly influenced” their decision to leave. For RAF officers the figure has reached a staggering 70%. A National Audit Office report in November 2006 also reported this strong correlation between overstretch and the retention of personnel.⁷

Against this backdrop of opinion, it is hardly surprising that the Armed Forces are undergoing a manning crisis. Of the MoD's requirement of 181,510 personnel, there is currently a shortfall of 6,730.⁸ In some areas, most notably the specialist trades, the shortfall is dramatic – only 15% of Harrier GR7 Flying Instructors, 20% of radiologists, less than 50% of surgeons, less than 65% of nurses and less than 70% of Merlin aircrew.⁹ (See below).



Recent figures show that the Army is under particular strain. Among the ranks there is currently a deficit of 4,460¹⁰. Almost all infantry battalions are undermanned¹¹, and this at a time when service personnel are experiencing sustained high-intensity fighting in Afghanistan of a kind the Army has not seen for decades. Although financial incentives have been used to encourage recruits to all three services, they have only been taken up by 1,539 recruits, at a cost of £6.8million.¹²

Financial incentives¹³ can, however, prove to be relatively effective short term measures.¹⁴ Continuance schemes and Long Service Schemes are helping to retain experienced personnel in some areas.¹⁵ Yet the pinch points in some critical areas will take years to recover, even with a sustained recruitment and retention drive.

The Defence Medical Services are also suffering acute levels of overstretch. According to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body report of 2007, at 1 April 2006 there were 490 trained Medical Officers (MOs), a deficit of 55 per cent against the requirement of 1,080.¹⁶ According to Government figures, there are currently no neurosurgeons employed by the Defence Medical Services and only one neurologist, despite recent concerns over undiagnosed brain injuries. General Physicians and Surgeons are suffering a shortfall of around 45%, as are anaesthetists.¹⁷

Unfortunately, as the MoD does not collate information on the through-life costs of training service personnel it cannot quantify the financial impact of losing its trained personnel.¹⁸ We believe this kind of research should be undertaken if the full cost of overstretch and financial incentive mechanisms are to be fully understood.

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

In the long run, the retention of existing troops will only be improved when the impact of overstretch is tackled. A swifter withdrawal from Iraq would reduce the operational strain on our forces and enable a more concentrated and focused effort on Afghanistan.

Reserves

Reserve forces have been used at unprecedented levels over the past ten years. There are approximately 36,000 volunteer reserves, most of which are Territorial Army, and 52,000 regular reserves. They are a highly adaptable force and bring invaluable skills from civilian life to the forces. However, reserves remain below strength, and with a high-rate of turnover it is essential to ensure appropriate manning levels for the reserve forces we need. The NAO has said that "many Reservists cite personal, family and employment pressures as reasons for leaving but many also give reasons such as "inadequate support".¹⁹

Equipment

The continued deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have put sustained pressure on existing equipment. In Afghanistan, there is an acute shortage of strategic lift aircraft and helicopters. Figures obtained by the Liberal Democrats in October show that our forces' helicopters are struggling to keep up with the demands placed on them. The proportion of Apache helicopters "fit for service" in Iraq and Afghanistan has declined from 60% in 2006 to 50% in August 2007.²⁰ The House of Commons Defence Committee recently reported that "UK helicopter operations in Afghanistan are not sustainable at the present intensity."²¹

The continued use of Snatch Land Rovers has been a source of controversy as have other equipment shortages and the initial failure to fit foam retardant to all Hercules aircraft. Concerns have been raised following the fatal crash of an RAF Nimrod aircraft that the aircraft had been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan despite warnings over safety²². General Sir Richard Dannatt recently voiced his concerns over the equipment issue, saying that some, particularly Scimitar light tanks, "may be at the edge of their sustainability."²³ This is by no means good enough, especially in light of our present commitments.

Proposals

- The impact of the Iraq war and our intervention in Afghanistan is taking its toll on the capability of our forces, on their morale, on retention and recruitment, and on equipment. The Government must undertake a swifter withdrawal from Iraq to ease the burden on the Armed Forces.
- A Strategic Defence Review is necessary to look at whether the defence budget should be radically overhauled to take account of the long-term commitment in Afghanistan and the need for more investment in strategic lift such as helicopters and aircraft. As part of the SDR, the Government should look at the possibility of

pooling resources with NATO and EU allies to procure certain key strategic equipment.

- In the short-term the Government should consider further extension of both financial and non-financial retention measures. Manning requirements should be revised and reviewed as part of the Strategic Defence Review to create a more balanced workload between those on operations and those back in the UK.
- The Government needs to understand better what it is costing to lose highly skilled people and should undertake a study to determine the long-term cost of training and retention.
- With the Reserves under considerable demands, the Government should investigate, through consultation with relevant employers, what the impact of current deployments has been on the work-service balance.

A BETTER DEAL FOR OUR FORCES

The Military Covenant is an unwritten commitment between the State and the men and women of the British Armed Forces. It has developed over time through long-standing convention and custom and is applied across all three services. Though it has no legal basis, it has recently been invoked in a high profile campaign by the Royal British Legion called "Honour the Covenant". There is now a growing public debate over whether that covenant has broken down. Army Doctrine defines the covenant like this:

*"In putting the needs of the Nation and the Army before their own, (services personnel) forego some of the rights enjoyed by those outside the Armed Forces. In return, British soldiers must always be able to expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they (and their families) will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service."*²⁴

The Defence White Paper of 1999 recognised the importance of personnel to the military, "People give us the critical edge that leads to success".²⁵ However, such success is only possible with well-supported, healthy and positive personnel who can rest assured that their courage, dedication and commitment will be recognised and repaid. It is therefore vital for the future of our armed forces that the 'duty of care' embodied in the military covenant is met by government.

In 2003, the Labour Government set out its Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy.²⁶ Unfortunately, it refused to publish the accompanying Action Plan. It therefore remains very difficult to ascertain what progress, if any, has been made. Though the Government has met some modest (and revised) targets for accommodation improvements, the record is largely one of broken promises.

Liberal Democrats believe that the Government has lost its way and abandoned its intentions to put people at the centre of defence policy. We believe that a future Strategic Defence Review must put personnel issues at its heart. The UK should consider a regular defence review at the beginning of each new Government, such as the Americans undertake with their Quadrennial Review.

In future there must be publicly accountable benchmarking of progress on key areas of the military covenant. Liberal Democrats believe that the nation has a duty towards our forces, typified by the Royal British Legion's "Honour the Covenant" campaign²⁷. That bond between nation and military now requires real safeguards. There can be no more "overarching strategies" with unpublished assessments, the Government must spell out what the covenant means and deliver it.

Pay and Tax

Although the upper ranks of the Armed Forces are generally well remunerated, the basic rate of pay for lower ranks and recruits is low by the standards of comparable professions. Considering the unique commitment that our servicemen and women make, they are not

paid well. Bus Drivers can earn £25,000 a year,²⁸ Tube drivers earn an average of £31,000²⁹ and Police Officers earn £23,454 on completion of initial training³⁰.

By contrast many British troops risking their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan get paid less than £20,000 per year³¹. They may well take home less than £300 a week. Indeed, by the hour, many personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan do not even earn the minimum wage.

According to a recent survey of opinion 38% of soldiers and 25% of Army officers are dissatisfied with their pay. 36% are dissatisfied with allowances.³² There is also widespread dissatisfaction with the speed and efficiency of pay and allowances inquiries. What's more, the implementation of the new Joint Payments Administration system for the Armed Forces has been beset by teething problems which have caused serious problems for a number of personnel.³³

Proposals

- Review the pay formula used by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body.
- The Ministry of Defence must undertake an internal review over the high levels of dissatisfaction with payment enquiries and the initial problems with the JPA system.
- A review of moving and relocation allowances to ensure that personnel are adequately covered for the costs incurred.

Housing

In December 2006, former Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mike Jackson described forces' accommodation as "frankly, shaming".³⁴ Almost half of Single Living Accommodation (SLA) remains of the lowest standard (graded 4 out of 4) and only 18% is of the highest standard. The MoD estimates that even if current investment continues, 30% of accommodation will remain at standards 3 or 4 after 2013. 40% of service family accommodation remains below the highest standard.³⁵

Proportion of personnel living in Service accommodation³⁶

Service	Number paying accommodation charges	Total strength of service	%
Royal Navy	14,627	39,390	37
Army	78,902	107,703	73
RAF	27,908	48,730	57

The senior officer in charge of Army accommodation, Adjutant General, Lt General Sir Freddie Viggers recently conceded that "there is still too much accommodation which is of a poor standard, which is old, and which is not modern in the way it is fitted for families."³⁷

Single Living Accommodation

Improving the housing of the Armed Forces is not only a duty of care owed under the military covenant, it is also in the long-term national interest, as poor housing leads to poor retention. The Labour Government's failure to put sufficient resources into improving service accommodation is inexcusable. In January 2007, former Adjutant General, General Sir Michael Rose said, "The situation has become so extreme that it is driving soldiers out of the Army in increasing numbers."³⁸ Indeed, in a recent survey of Army opinion, 40% of officers and 30% of soldiers cited the standard of accommodation as having increased or strongly increased their intention to leave the Army.³⁹

It is particularly disturbing that over the period of some of the most intense fighting seen by British forces for decades in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Government slashed funding from the accommodation refurbishment programme. While Tony Blair was persuading the public of his case to send British troops into Iraq, Gordon Brown's Treasury was cutting back on the modernisation of their homes and accommodation. As the Armed Forces Pay Review Body noted in its 2007 report:

"The initial SLAM (Single Living Accommodation Modernisation) programme launched in 2001 was scheduled to deliver 26,000 bedspaces at a cost of £750 million. Latest estimates show allocated funding of just £463 million to deliver 12,000 bedspaces."⁴⁰

It is worth noting that over the same period, the MoD brought £2.2bn to the Treasury in asset sales. Indeed, in the year that the modernisation plan began, twice as much money went into treasury coffers from asset sales as went into improving soldiers' accommodation⁴¹. Lt General Sir Freddie Viggers recently conceded that the Army has to fight for asset sales to be re-invested in the housing programme. It should not be the job of the Armed Forces to lobby the Government to honour its commitments on accommodation.

Under pressure from the Liberal Democrats and the media, the Government has decided to re-invest some funds from the sale of assets such as Chelsea barracks and RAF Coltishall. These extra commitments are very welcome, but without long-term, sustained investment and ring-fenced improvements they will only be short-term fixes designed to repel bad headlines.⁴²

Single Living Accommodation by grade

Grade (includes scale, environment and location as well as condition)	Single Living Accommodation (SLA)
1	24,254 (18%)
2	23,261 (17%)
3	22,931 (17%)
4	66,836 (48%)
Total	137,282

Families' Accommodation

The situation for forces families housing is little better, and is also a long-standing issue. In 1996 the Conservative government sold off the majority of forces families' accommodation to Annington Homes for £1.6bn on a 999 year lease. Annington Homes now owns the 44,000 forces' families accommodation units. However, the MoD remains responsible for maintenance and refurbishment of the accommodation. The MoD leases back the accommodation at a cost of around £140m a year (over £1bn since 1996)⁴³. The MoD spends around £100m maintaining and refurbishing these homes each year (around £500m since 2001)⁴⁴.

In 1998 the Public Accounts Committee reported that service family accommodation was sold at "a significant discount—£77 million to £139 million less than the assessed value of continued Departmental ownership and management of the estate." The PAC further noted that, "The Department are now in the business of maintaining and upgrading an estate which... is in effect owned by somebody else."⁴⁵ Annington is allowed to dispose of housing stock that is no longer required and the Treasury takes a portion of this money, about £150m to date⁴⁶. However, under the terms of the deal the MoD will no longer receive a proportion of the receipts of housing sales after 2011.

The MOD has estimated that it would cost £750 million in total to bring all SFA up to Standard 1 but a minimum of £50 million would be required each year to make necessary improvements.⁴⁷ In 2001 the Defence Housing Executive was aiming to upgrade "core" SFA accommodation to Standard 1 by November 2005.⁴⁸ The Armed Forces Pay Review Body, however, estimates that full upgrade will not take place until after 2020⁴⁹. Liberal Democrat research has revealed that at the rate at which SFA was actually refurbished in 2006-2007, it would take fifty years to refurbish the entire stock. That is long enough for today's soldiers to see their own children enlist and still see them housed in sub-standard accommodation.⁵⁰

*Families' accommodation by grade*⁵¹

Standard (just condition)	Services Families Accommodation (SFA)
1 (good)	27,687 (59%)
2	16,916 (36%)
3	2,089 (4%)
4 (bad)	139 (1%)
Total	46,831

Such is the absurdity of the previous Conservative Government's sale of MoD accommodation, the current Government's refurbishment and maintenance of forces' family homes, is in effect maintaining and investing in the continued upkeep of someone else's property.

In 2005/6 Defence Estates (DE) awarded the maintenance and repairs contract for families' housing in England and Wales to Modern Housing Solutions (MHS). As opposed to the previous system whereby the regiment was responsible, families now rely on a call centre,

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

based in Speke, Liverpool run by MHS. Liberal Democrat research has revealed that between 21 March 2006 and 21 March 2007 Modern Housing Solutions (MHS) received 8,779 complaints.⁵² The call centre received almost 200,000 "repair call out" calls between March 2006 and March 2007. MHS's call centre dropped 8.58% of the calls it received in its first year⁵³ and it received an average of 8.95 calls per property per year⁵⁴. Few of the staff have any military background. Many of the complaints related to aged boilers needing urgent repair in the depths of winter.

The situation was summed up recently by General Sir Michael Rose,

*"the system for repair and maintenance of quarters has been repeatedly altered, something that has resulted in a much worse service for the soldiers... Subcontracting to commercial companies who have little understanding of the predicament of soldiers or their families has resulted in a bureaucratic nightmare which serves neither the soldier nor the taxpayer."*⁵⁵

Getting a Foot on the Ladder

It has been found that 37% of officers and 42% of other ranks in the Army are either fairly or very dissatisfied with the prospects of buying or renting a house.⁵⁶ Although the MoD provides a Long Service Advance of Pay (LSAP)⁵⁷ worth up to £8,500 this scheme is struggling to keep up with the market. Housing prices have risen at such a rate that this money will do very little to help personnel get a foot on the property ladder. Personnel with high mobility are not able to take advantage of this scheme and it is used by only 10% of officers and 13% of other ranks who own their own home. Of these, only 24% of officers and 38% of other ranks are satisfied with it.⁵⁸

It is important that those personnel who prefer to leave forces' accommodation and buy their own home can do so. In the past, a lump sum payment was made to long term members of the armed forces upon finishing their service to act as a significant contribution to a house purchase. The massive increases in house prices over the last 20 years mean this is no longer a significant help. It would be uneconomical to increase service wages in line with house prices, and a more feasible solution might be to maximise the earning potential of spouses. This could be done in addition to an improvement in the Long Service Advance of Pay (LSAP).

Armed Forces Housing Association

The Government should consider setting up or partnering a specialised Armed Forces Housing Association that will provide advice, information and support for personnel and their families on all aspects of service accommodation and finding accommodation upon leaving the Forces. In particular, it could look into part rent- part buy options and ways to alleviate the problems of accommodation.

Proposals

- The Government must ring-fence accommodation modernisation budgets. Decent housing for our forces must be an entitlement not a luxury for the minority. Too often the budget has been plundered to cover costs elsewhere.
- We believe that cancellation of the third tranche of the Typhoon fighter jet would release significant funds to speed up the programme of refurbishment and contribute to other welfare needs.
- Housing and welfare issues must be subject to annual scrutiny by a special Military Covenant Committee, perhaps based in the House of Lords. This would be accompanied by an annual State of the Forces debate in both Houses.
- The Government must review its contract with MHS over the Call Centre system. There should be extensive consultation with forces' families to ascertain whether it be better to return to a system closer to the families themselves.
- The Government should work with the private sector to underpin a reduced mortgage rate as operates in Australia as a reward for long service and as a further aid to retention.
- A ring-fenced proportion of funds from MoD asset sales should be re-invested in forces' accommodation as a matter of course, at least until accommodation is up to the highest standard.
- The Government should investigate setting up or partnering an Armed Forces Housing Association to assist with finding forces rented accommodation close to their bases. It should consider models of shared equity, allowing personnel to part rent – part buy.

Medical Care

Over recent months there has been a litany of unacceptable incidents concerning the treatment of seriously injured personnel in civilian hospitals. Lord Guthrie, former Chief of Defence Staff said recently *"The handling of the medical casualties from both Afghanistan and Iraq is a scandal"*⁵⁹ Whilst there is generally a very good level of care at the Selly Oak hospital in Birmingham and in field hospitals in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a disturbing shortage of key medical staff. It remains to be seen what the full extent of these shortfalls means for front-line capabilities and whether this is having a detrimental impact on the treatment of forces in the field.⁶⁰ The Government claims that such shortages do not undermine quality of care.

Shortages in the Defence Medical Services

Speciality	Army			Tri-Service		
	Requirement	Trained Strength	Percentage difference	Requirement	Trained Strength	Percentage difference
Anaesthetists	50	20	-60.0	97	46	-52.6
General Physician	13	8	-38.5	3	1	-66.7
Emergency Medicine	24	11	-54.2	30	16	-46.7
Neurologist	3	-	-100.0	3	1	-66.7
General Surgeons	17	10	-41.2	39	20	-48.7
Gynaecological Surgeons	3	0	-100.0	3	0	-100.0
Neurosurgeons	3	0	-100.0	3	0	-100.0
Pathologists	2	0	-100	7	2	-71.4
Psychiatrists	16	6	-62.5	28	13	-53.6

The second major concern, as The Royal British Legion has highlighted, is the issue of poor coordination between the MoD and the NHS. It is essential that more is done to make General Practitioners and local health specialists aware of the unique circumstances of forces personnel. In particular, informing GPs about the impact of conflict on both physical and mental health would prove beneficial.

Brain Injuries

Recent reports suggest that up to 20,000 British troops may be at risk of undiagnosed brain injuries sustained in explosions encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan. Liberal Democrats have welcomed the MoD's recognition of the issue, but we are concerned that Government officials have downplayed the impact.⁶¹

We should always take a precautionary approach to conditions such as this and provide checks for those who might possibly be affected. If the welfare of our troops is genuinely the first concern, the MoD must not cut corners in understanding the scale of this problem and putting in place any available treatment. Given these concerns the complete absence of neurosurgeons and the lone neurologist on the Defence Medical Service's staff is worrying.⁶²

Military Wards

Although the Conservatives lament the shortcomings of the Labour Government in delivering essential care to our armed forces, it should not be forgotten that the legacy of the last Conservative Government was to close all but one of the military hospitals. The last hospital, Haslar, was closed this year. This decision was criticised by the Defence Select Committee who said that: "cuts were too severe and where counterbalancing improvements were planned they failed to materialise and morale, retention and recruitment suffered".⁶³

In comparison with the United States, British dedicated military medical centres are thin on the ground. There are around 180 military hospitals in America, equating to

approximately 1 hospital for every 12,695 active and reserve troops. On that basis the UK would have 33 military hospitals. American military hospitals have armed guards and a strict entry system⁶⁴ to ensure that personnel are treated in a secure and safe environment.

Whilst it is generally accepted that it is no longer feasible to open and run new military hospitals, it is clear that personnel would benefit greatly from military-only wards. Personnel recover more quickly if they are in a familiar environment with those who have shared their experiences.

Proposals

- Where serving personnel are being treated the Government should consider more special military-only wards to provide treatment to injured personnel within a military environment. This will help injured personnel to recover and also ease the transition from service to civilian life.
- Improved coordination between the MoD and the NHS would guarantee that the links necessary for effective care are maintained and increased.

Mental Health

Mental health is one of the most significant long-term issues that government and society will need to address following the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Government has begun a number of good initiatives to address the challenge of mental health in both serving personnel and veterans. However, there may be a significant influx in patients in need of mental health care over the coming years. Already, the number of mental health disorders cited by 16-44 year olds is three times that of the UK population of the same age⁶⁵.

At present the MoD pays little attention to veterans once they have been discharged. If the current arrangements are to be maintained charities such as Combat Stress will require sustained funding to cope with the swell of enquiries from Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Medically discharged veterans appear to be amongst the most vulnerable⁶⁶ and once service is terminated, the primary responsibility for care is passed to the appropriate civilian agency.⁶⁷ It cannot be easy to reconcile the many disturbing and difficult experiences of a conflict zone with the normality of every day life back home, and we must work to make this transition easier.

Future policy must look at ways of tackling the problem at the core, by addressing the stigma attached to mental health problems, and in those instances where the military ethos might hinder diagnosis and treatment. The Government should look at initiatives in other countries, designed to alleviate the impact of conflict on personnel and their families.

It seems that more personnel are coming forward to seek help than ever before. Combat Stress has seen a 30% increase in its cases over the past 3 years with 1,000 new cases each year in addition to existing support. However it cannot fund all the required treatment and

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

welfare support from its charitable income alone. If it is to continue its work it will need long-term support from the Government.

The MoD has put most treatment of veterans with the NHS and with the private sector Priory, which is the main rehabilitation residence for service personnel. However, the NHS has limited experience of dealing with patients from a military background who may have had particularly traumatic experiences.

Additional NHS plans to develop community veterans' mental health services propose that practitioners with a specialism in PTSD will integrate into psychiatry/mental health services in local communities. However, we are concerned that this may end up with Primary Care Trusts footing the bill, which will in practice lead to a "post-code lottery" on the quality and availability of services. There are no criteria for the success or failure of the project.

Many of the new referrals to Combat Stress are from Reservists who return straight to civilian life and get far less support than regulars.⁶⁸ The Government is making some progress on this and recent moves to include Reserves in mental health care through the Reserves Mental Health Programme (RMHP) are welcome. However, as Reserves will be referred by their GP the success of this programme will be partly dependent on the ability of GPs to identify the warning signs and provide prompt referrals. If a condition is found they will be offered out-patient treatment at one of the MoD's 15 Departments of Community Mental Health. We have to guarantee that support does not end here, and that there is regular monitoring and assistance for those most vulnerable.

Sports and Recreation

Sports and recreational activities are vital to promoting and maintaining the overall well-being of personnel. Although many bases have access to recreational facilities these differ in standard, the equipment available and the activities offered. In a recent Continuous Attitude Survey, over a third of personnel reported as being dissatisfied with opportunities for sporting activities and opportunities for adventurous training (see tables below)⁶⁹. This dissatisfaction is clearly linked to the impact of overstretch.

Q10c How satisfied are you with the following – Opportunity for sporting activities?				
Very satisfied	11	101	14	158
Fairly satisfied	32	288	31	355
Neutral	22	197	26	294
Fairly dissatisfied	25	223	18	208
Very dissatisfied	11	101	12	133

Table 1 Taken from the Army's Continuous Attitude Survey 2006

Q10e How satisfied are you with the following – Opportunity for adventurous training?				
Very satisfied	9	78	7	79
Fairly satisfied	25	224	23	267
Neutral	27	241	24	278
Fairly dissatisfied	25	231	25	287
Very dissatisfied	15	137	21	237

Table 2 Taken from the Army's Continuous Attitude Survey 2006

Proposals

- Iraq and Afghanistan have proved to be more challenging and hostile conflicts than was initially expected. We must be properly prepared for returning personnel and be able to give the men and women who have been in difficult and hostile operations the support they need upon their return and help them in the transition from front line to home front.
- Proper support must be offered to troops returning from service including appropriate medical care and counselling.⁷⁰ More should be done to ensure post-conflict de-briefing and counselling for Service members and creating an environment in which issues can be addressing openly. Measures should be put in place to monitor the mental health of personnel over a longer period, as the impact of PTSD is felt more keenly after a few, if not many, years.
- The Government should be more proactive referring former service personnel to the voluntary sector. This should be complemented by further funding to the voluntary sector.
- Although some progress is being made regarding the military's attitude to psychological injuries, the culture needs to be considered. More should be done to remove the stigma attached to mental health issues and encourage people in need to come forward.
- Increasing the amount of information available to local medical centres will help ensure that GPs and medical staff are fully aware of the needs of service personnel and that top level measures filter down to reach the people in surgeries and clinics across the country.
- In addition to this, greater attempts should be made to ensure joined up efforts between the NHS and the voluntary sector that make the most of available expertise and experience. Combat Stress and other similar charities can help by informing and educating NHS staff in the needs and rights of service personnel. This would be a step which would help address existing problems.
- There are many variables in determining the outcome of existing PTSD treatment. However, there should be some form of criteria by which treatment can be measured and evaluated.
- All service personnel should be given time for sport and recreational activities. There should be clear standards of sports and recreational facilities and equipment to help personnel achieve and maintain health, fitness and well-being.

Minorities in the Forces

We should promote greater equality in the Armed Forces. Although there have been welcome steps in this direction, it is clear that there is still a long way to go.

It is a positive sign that more women and more ethnic minorities are being recruited every year and this should continue. Nonetheless, both women and ethnic minorities are still not in the more prominent positions across the services and this should be rectified by encouraging and fostering talented personnel. What is more, both women and ethnic minorities tend to be the most susceptible to bullying, harassment and discrimination. By addressing certain aspects of the military culture, it may be possible to encourage more women and ethnic minorities into the Forces.

Bullying and Harassment

We recognise that life in the Armed Forces is not comparable with civilian working life, but we must still make sure that structures and measures are in place to protect personnel from undue, unnecessary and harmful behaviour - both physically and psychologically.

Sexism remains a problem, although there has been an encouraging increase of women to the services which suggests a wider move to more open and equal environment. In an internal survey almost all (99%) of the 9,384 servicewomen in all three services reported that they had been in situations where sexualised behaviours (jokes and stories, language and material) had taken place in the previous 12 months.

Only 5% of servicewomen who had suffered a particularly upsetting experience made a formal written complaint. Nearly half of these (35) were dissatisfied with the length of time it took to resolve. 46% (33) were dissatisfied with the way they were kept informed and 42% (30) were dissatisfied with the way the outcome was explained. Over half (39) of those who made a formal complaint stated that there had been negative consequences as a result of doing so and 64% (46) were considering leaving the Services.

Proposals

- In our 2005 election manifesto we called for there to be an independent military tribunal or Independent Complaints Commission for such cases to be dealt with, to give people access to free and fair hearings. This was unambiguously endorsed by the Defence Select Committee. We welcome the Government's introduction of an Independent Complaints Commissioner. However, we are concerned that the role in its current form lacks sufficient independence, capacity and experience of the issues likely to be raised. More could be done to provide an outlet for those who wish to express grievances or problems with any aspect of service life.

POST-SERVICE CARE AND RESETTLEMENT

Liberal Democrats believe that the 'duty of care' to service personnel is not time-restricted but should extend beyond active service. This means not only providing service personnel with the skills and assistance to make a successful transition to civilian life, but also supporting them as war veterans and valuing the contributions to society made by the ex-services community.

Resettlement

The transition from life in the forces to life back home as a civilian can often be very difficult. Life in the forces can often be the equivalent of having an extended family, and the camaraderie and community are important for support and morale. However, as personnel move between two very different lifestyles it can cause some distress or present new challenges.

Although civilian life will always be different, it is important to have structures in place to provide a network upon which former service personnel can rely and draw support. Not all suffer difficulties upon leaving service and over $\frac{3}{4}$ of service leavers gain employment after leaving.⁷¹ However, each year there are 8,400 early service leavers⁷² and they form one of the groups who are most vulnerable to mental health and resettlement problems. Studies show that the most vulnerable suffer badly.⁷³

Measures to identify those who might feature in this category and provide additional assistance both before and after leaving the forces as early as possible would help ease the transition and ensure that an effective support mechanism is in place for those most in need.

In particular, homelessness and rough sleeping is a real problem among vulnerable ex-service personnel. Although exact figures are difficult to determine, a high number do end up homeless. We would welcome more measures to address this issue and assist those who find themselves on the street and unsure where to turn for support

The MoD currently operates a full resettlement programme through the Career Transition Partnership⁷⁴ for those with five or more years service prior to September 2002 and six or more years after this date. This programme is a welcome initiative designed to help eligible service leavers find employment, helping with job interviews and job coaching. However, those with less service get less support, which in effect means that early leavers are at a disadvantage. We would still express concern that the more vulnerable personnel require further assistance and long-term support.

Proposals

- Maintaining and fostering connections with both service and civilian networks would help personnel feel less isolated during the resettlement phase.

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

- Greater preparation for the transition, through information, briefings and talks with former service personnel would help personnel know what to expect and detail any unexpected difficulties that others have experienced. This is particularly important for the more vulnerable personnel.
- Extra support should be provided for those considered to be most vulnerable. This includes those with a previous history of mental health problems or alcohol or drug abuse or early leavers.

Priority Treatment

There is a system of priority treatment for war pensioners on the NHS but in practice it has been ineffective, with many veterans unaware of the existence of the entitlement. Whilst we are aware that some personnel may not want to be treated differently because of their time in service, there is a need for enhanced measures to provide priority care when it is required.

We welcome recent measures by the Government to increase awareness of priority treatment and to make it a more prominent feature of medical services to veterans and war pensioners. However, we are concerned that sustained resources may not be committed to the initiative. This cannot be headline-grabbing initiative with a brief life-span. We await to see how the Government intends this new project to function and whether it will be successful.

Proposals

- Government efforts to introduce priority treatment to all veterans should be monitored to assess the impact on improving medical care for veterans and the levels of success. We have to ensure this is not just a 'flash in the pan' idea.

Education and Skills

Providing personnel with transferable and basic life skills, as well as more specialised qualifications, is essential to easing the transition from military civilian life and ensuring that personnel have a range of options available to them upon leaving the Armed Forces.

A report earlier this year entitled 'Army Basic Skills Provision: Whole Organisation Approach, Lessons Learnt'⁷⁵ found that up to half of all recruits have literacy levels at or below those of eleven-year olds.⁷⁶ The problem is particularly visible in army infantry and artillery regiments. This is a worrying problem and should be addressed as a priority in the area of education and skills. The Government has said it is addressing this problem and we will monitor their efforts to raise literacy rates. However, it should be extended to include all serving personnel rather than just recruits.

The Enhanced Learning Credit Scheme (ELC) provides financial support in the form of a single up-front payment in each of a maximum of three separate financial years in order to

pursue a range of course. However, to qualify personnel must sign up within 12 months of joining the forces. If not they must wait until between 8 and 8 ½ years of service for another opportunity to take advantage of the scheme. The Standard Learning Credit Scheme (SLC) provides further opportunities for personnel who wish to further their development.

These are beneficial schemes, but appear to be too bureaucratic and conditional. We should look at ways to make it easier for personnel to develop their training in areas they wish to pursue, and achieve academic or vocational qualifications relating to their potential future service or civilian careers. Such a measure could further be beneficial for retention purposes.

Proposals

- Ensure access to retraining and recognition of service qualification in civilian life – Liberal Democrat Individual Learning Account: entitlement to retrain upon leaving and finance further education.⁷⁷
- Emphasis should be placed on raising literacy levels throughout all levels of the services and assisting all personnel in achieving the recommended literacy targets.
- Personnel should have access to resources and courses on looking for a job, writing a CV and interview techniques, as well as information regarding the benefits they should expect as a service veteran.
- Education and training in life skills and living outside of the forces community would help prepare personnel and reduce the impact of the military ‘dependency’ culture once they leave.
- Measures to identify as early as possible those who might feature in this category would help ease the transition and ensure that an effective support mechanism is in place for those most in need.

Compensation

We welcome the British Legion’s Campaign which places specific emphasis on the issue of compensation for injured service personnel. The most prominent case involved severely injured soldier, Lance Bombardier Ben Parkinson, who received £150,000 for his severe multiple injuries - under a third of what an RAF typist reportedly received for repetitive strain injury. The case raises serious questions over the current compensation system.

Our servicemen and women should not have to further fight with their own Government to get compensation when they return from the front line with injuries. The current system does not give sufficient recognition to the impact of injuries on overall well-being and long-term standard of life, and falls far short of what other compensation schemes offer in the public sector, let alone the civil courts.

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

Whilst we welcome recent moves by the Government to remedy the situation, these limited new measures still only affect those with the most serious of injuries and neglects to help those who have more minor but still life-changing injuries. We need to make the scheme much more all encompassing so that we are properly fulfilling our 'duty of care' to all injured personnel.

Proposals

- Compensation should be based on the overall impact of the injuries rather than providing money for the most serious injury and smaller amounts thereafter, regardless of whether you have five or twenty-five injuries.
- Compensation should be fair, representative and generous. It should be in line with compensation schemes offered in other sectors and should reflect the dangers service personnel are exposed to and the demands placed upon them.
- The Government should recognise that injuries and illnesses relating to service are not time-restricted and may arise at any point. Compensation should not be limited to claims within five or ten years after service and time limits should therefore be removed.

Veterans

Much more needs to be done to prepare veterans for post-service life and to recognise their efforts. The establishment of a designated Veterans' Agency is a welcome measure and shows a step in the right direction in recognising the importance of veterans' welfare. The establishment of a more comprehensive approach and the Strategy for Veterans shows some commitment but it must be backed up by real action.

Current discharge procedures seem quite complex and vague and put most of the responsibility with the returning personnel who will doubtless have many other issues to contend with when leaving the forces.⁷⁸

Although the Agency offers a network on advice and contacts and we welcome the Career Transition Partnership, it would be beneficial for there to be more comprehensive and "joined up" support, incorporating advice on careers, pensions, disability entitlements, housing and what to expect. This support should begin once notice has been given of discharge from the forces.

Such a move would provide someone with knowledge and experience to help address concerns and questions, provide advice and information about veterans entitlements, and deal with all elements of transition rather than personnel having to go through different agencies and charities for different issues. In particular, the presence of a transition coordinator at hearings for disability allowances and medical discharges would help alleviate personnel of the concerns of paper work and bureaucracy and enable advice to

be given immediately should complaints or questions be raised regarding proceedings. It would provide a more joined up approach, incorporating many elements into one.

Proposals

- We recognise that the MoD takes transition from military to civilian life seriously. However, we believe that the Government should review the current provisions and how they are delivered. Personnel still express concerns that support is not as “joined up” and accessible as it should be.
- King’s College have provided a range of sensible and objective recommendations which seek to help veterans. Wholesale adoption of the recommendations of the King’s College London report would be sensible.⁷⁹

Gulf War Veterans

Gulf War illnesses are still not officially recognised, though the Government accepts 'Gulf War Syndrome' as an umbrella term. The clear recognition given to these illnesses by the US authorities has not been adequately reflected in the UK Government's response to veterans' concerns.

For those who suffer from Gulf War illnesses the symptoms can extend beyond those of PTSD, and research published so far shows that Gulf veterans report more health problems than comparable military personnel who were not deployed to the Gulf.

Although the government continues to deny a direct causal link, there is clear evidence that these illnesses have resulted from military service on the behalf of our country. This should be recognised, and, where appropriate, compensated.

Proposals

- Gulf War Illnesses should be taken more seriously and given formal recognition.
- The Government should accept the conclusions of Lord Lloyd's Inquiry, which scrutinised evidence from medical and scientific experts.
- A ‘no fault’ compensation package should be developed for gulf war veterans who are suffering ill-health. Such a compensation package was given to haemophiliacs who contracted HIV and the Government announced a compensation package for victims of CJD in 2000.
- As well as taking full account of the scientific evidence that's available, the Government should give greater attention to work already undertaken in the USA on Gulf War illnesses and, most specifically, toxicology work that appears to prove a direct causal connection between the very beginning of the Gulf war conflict and veterans' subsequent health problems.

SUPPORTING FORCES FAMILIES

Supporting the families of our servicemen and women is integral to a positive Forces community. With a large proportion of armed forces personnel married,⁸⁰ family welfare and support provision is clearly a priority for them. Yet despite renewed attention to the welfare of personnel, family welfare schemes, support networks and recreational and educational facilities have been allowed to decline over the past fifteen years.

Overstretch and prolonged deployments have placed additional strains on forces families with marriages of service personnel two to three times more likely to end each year than civilian marriages.⁸¹

Although Labour created the Service Families Task Force (SFTF) to look at a range of issues including schools admissions policy, student loans, access to dentists, NHS waiting lists, child minders and eligibility for Job Seekers Allowance, nearly ten years ago⁸², there is still very limited information on what action will be taken to address these issues. Moreover, enforced mobility still means that families cannot get on waiting lists for operations, doctors or dentists⁸³ or are placed at the bottom of the queue upon arrival in a new town.

Although there are a range of organisations that provide dedicated service family welfare (with the MoD contributing to 20 of these) such as organising family briefing sessions, crèches and community social events⁸⁴ when spouses are deployed, greater efforts need to be made to recognise and respond to the impact of military life on the families of personnel and their unique situation.

Establishing Community Roots: A New Approach

The Armed Forces are increasingly used as an expeditionary force. With the gradual withdrawal of troops from Germany, the future will see troops stationed either in the UK or serving in active operations around the world.

This transitional period may provide an opportunity for the Government to look at new ways to help our Armed Forces and their families develop stronger roots in their local communities. The Navy has a 'Home Port' policy, and the RAF is moving towards this goal with the consolidation of its bases according to operational role, the Government might consider whether this approach would also be suitable for the Army.

This might be one way to help resolve problems such as repeatedly changing GPs, dentists and schools. Most importantly, it might allow personnel and their families to establish roots in a local community and enable spouses to have a more stable career without having to move on at regular intervals. Rather than having to take lower paid temporary work, they could fully utilize their skills and earn a significant wage.

Allowing service families to stay in one place for longer might help enlarge and strengthen the support network available. Not only will service families get to know other service families in the same area better and be able to talk about their experiences and get

support from others in a similar position, but they will also be able to integrate more fully with the local civilian community and derive support from it. In terms of facilities, rather than replicating local amenities on base at great expense, more use could be made of what the local area has to offer. Indeed, it may allow extra money to be spent on more ambitious family welfare programmes. A 'home base' facility may also pay dividends with regard to post-service resettlement in as much as many troops would, to a large extent, already be settled. Furthermore, they would reap the benefits of a well-established and well-organised forces community.

A new Strategic Defence Review would provide an opportunity to assess and evaluate the efficiency and wisdom of such a measure, based on the experiences of the Royal Navy, for our wider future capabilities and the long term well-being of personnel.

Proposals

- There is a need for a coherent central welfare strategy for forces family support. The MoD should set minimum consistent standards for family welfare that can be applied at all bases. As part of this, social, educational and recreational facilities for service families must be actively supported.
- Sufficient provisions should be made available for the dedicated Families Officer on every base (as we proposed in 2000 and 2002). Current facilities remain under-funded. They should be charged with: overseeing community development, providing systematic help to spouses, improving facilities and coordinating information on local job opportunities, housing choices, local amenities and local schooling.⁸⁵
- A *Charter for Service Families*, which codified this role, would help outline a minimum specification and enable the delivery of confidential, consistent, standardised welfare services to a minimum specification across the entire UK and with annual reporting mechanisms.
- The SFTF should be made more proactive: meet monthly, undertake audit of base facilities for families around the country, implement best practice scheme and draft a Families Charter. The reports and conclusions of the SFTF should be readily available on the internet.

Education of Forces Children

The instability and upheavals of military life can have an impact on the education of Forces' children who are regularly forced to change schools as parents move through deployment rotation. It has been recognised that Forces' children educated by the SCE (Service Children's Education) do better on average than state school students. Yet, unfortunately, the majority of Forces' children are not educated in this way and there are no comprehensive statistics relating to those educated in the state system. Once a "service child" marker is added to the school census in January 2008 the situation should become clearer.

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

One in three soldiers interviewed in 2005 highlighted that their children's education was a concern. Service children in particular would benefit from smaller classes and more contact time with teachers. This would provide a more stable environment and enable schools to better understand and respond to the needs of service children.

In Colchester the Alderman Blaxill school, which has been serving military families and children coming out of the garrison for 50 years—and which the Defence Committee visited last year, and unusually held a formal sitting—is now, astonishingly, threatened with closure. The school provides small classes in a familiar atmosphere, which is particularly conducive to supporting and educating military children, and this closure is a missed opportunity.

Improved use of Information Communications Technology (ICT) could help provide continuity in the education of children who are required to change school when their parents are posted. If more educational records of achievement and coursework could be taken with them as part of a universal ICT programme, it could make their transition from one school to another all the more effective.

Proposals

- Giving servicemen and women more notice of upcoming postings and ensuring that current Family Officers on every base have the resources needed to better organise Forces children's education would be beneficial. The Families Officers should also be able to monitor schooling provision.
- The Government should seriously consider the possible deployment of ICT – modern technology in assisting forces children gain increased continuity in education.

Inquests

With the recent rise in casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan the military inquests system has come under greater strain. Many families have had to wait for months to hear the coroner's verdict on their loved one's death. They can feel alienated and marginalised from the process. Coroners have also suffered from being under funded and under-resourced. We welcome the Government's recent additional input of funding into the coroners' system. We are, however, dismayed that the Government did not include a Coroners Bill this year's Queen's Speech.

Proposals

- The Government must bring forward a Coroners Bill as soon as possible which would provide for funding for bereaved families to seek representation where appropriate at military inquests.

Care Packages

Care packages are a simple but effective tool for helping to boost morale and welfare. At present, families have to pay the standard UK postal charge of around £6.50 to send a parcel to an MoD depot in Britain. The MoD then transports the items to Iraq or Afghanistan by military plane and distributes them to troops on the ground, saving the families a proportion of the cost of sending a parcel through the standard postal system, which could come to £20 or more.

Free parcel schemes have been introduced in the past for limited periods of time - normally prior to Christmas⁸⁶ - and we welcome the Government's decision to repeat this scheme this year. We have estimated that the general cost for Christmas period in previous years is around £577,000, although this sum does not include the costs for additional air transport and onward distribution that were also paid for by the Ministry of Defence. At this rate it would cost less than £7 million a year for free parcels, based on a consistent volume of post throughout the year.

MoD research shows that personnel would prefer to have increased use of email and telephone facilities. At present telephone allowances are 30 minutes a week (changed from 20 last October). This equates to only 13 hours of conversations with loved ones over a six-month tour. We believe that there are only modest costs involved in paying for postage and doubling the telephone allowance.

Proposals

- MoD should consider paying for all-year postage and the doubling of the telephone allowance for troops⁸⁷. As well as increasing the speed of internet connections.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

1. The Government must outline a timetable for the full withdrawal of British forces from Iraq.

Military Covenant

2. We, as politicians, should renew the covenant with the armed forces by assuring them that we will not commit to any further interventions without providing the necessary resources, manpower and equipment that ensures our personnel are secure in the commitment.
3. We believe that the largely unwritten military covenant must be bolstered by real entitlements and greater public scrutiny of how far the government is meeting those entitlements.
4. The Government should set up a Military Covenant Committee, perhaps in the House of Lords, to be charged with conducting an annual review of the state of the military covenant.
5. There should be an annual State of the Forces debate in both Houses to give greater attention to military issues and recognise the valuable contributions of our Armed Forces.

New Strategic Defence Review

6. The Government should undertake a new Strategic Defence Review that revises and updates the assumptions of the 1998 Review based on changed circumstances and threats. Personnel must be at the centre of any future review. What is more, there should be a regular review, commencing about six months after every General Election.

Spending

7. Spending on welfare and accommodation improvements should be ring-fenced within the Defence Budget to guarantee that the years of neglect are remedied.
8. There should be greater scrutiny of Forces' welfare spending by the Public Accounts Committee and strict benchmarking to enable effective monitoring over the long-term.

Retention

9. In the short-term the Government should extend both financial and non-financial retention measures.

10. The Government needs to better understand what it is costing to lose highly skilled people and should undertake a study to determine the long-term cost of training and retention.

Pay

11. The Government should review the pay formula used by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body.
12. The Ministry of Defence must undertake an internal review over the high levels of dissatisfaction with payment enquiries and the initial problems with the JPA system.
13. There should be a review of moving and relocation costs to ensure that personnel are adequately covered for the costs incurred.

Housing

14. Decent housing for our forces must be an entitlement not a luxury.
15. The programme of upgrading Single Living and Family Accommodation units must be sped up as a matter of urgency. The Government should use proceeds from the cancellation of the unnecessary third tranche of the Typhoon fighter jet and put invest more in the programme for modernisation of housing.
16. The Government should work with the private sector to underpin a reduced mortgage rate as operates in Australia as a reward for long service and as a further aid to retention.
17. The Government should investigate setting up an Armed Forces Housing Association to assist with finding forces rented accommodation close to their bases.
18. The Government must review its contract with MHS over the Call Centre system. There should be extensive consultation of forces' families to ascertain whether it be better to return to a system closer to the families themselves.
19. Money from MoD asset sales should be re-invested in forces' accommodation as a matter of course, at least until accommodation is up to the highest standard.

Medical Care

20. The Government should consider more special military-only wards in areas where serving personnel are being treated, to provide treatment to injured personnel within a military environment. This will help both recovery and recuperation and ease the transition to civilian life.

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

21. Improved coordination between the MoD and the NHS would guarantee that the links necessary for effective care are maintained and increased.

Mental Health Care

22. More should be done to ensure post-conflict de-briefing and counselling for Service members and creating an environment in which issues can be addressed openly. Measures should be put in place to monitor the mental health of personnel over a longer period.
23. The Government should be more proactive referring former service personnel to the voluntary sector. This should be complemented by increased funding to the voluntary sector.
24. The military's attitude to psychological injuries needs to be considered. More should be done to remove the stigma attached to mental health issues and encourage people in need to come forward.
25. Increasing the amount of information available to local medical centres will help ensure that GPs and medical staff are fully aware of the needs of service personnel and that top level measures filter down to reach the people in surgeries and clinics across the country.
26. Greater attempts should be made to ensure joined up efforts between the NHS and the voluntary sector that make the most of available expertise and experience.
27. There should be some form of criteria by which treatment of mental health problems can be measured and evaluated.
28. Wholesale adoption of the recommendations of the King's College London report should be considered.

Gulf War Illness

29. Gulf War illnesses should be taken more seriously and given formal recognition.
30. An inquiry into Gulf War Illness is required to ensure all available evidence is scrutinised by medical and scientific experts. The inquiry should examine not only the causes of ill health in Gulf Veterans but also to determine if there has been Government negligence in responding to this problem.
31. A 'no fault' compensation package should be developed for Gulf War veterans who are suffering ill-health.
32. The Government should give greater attention to work going on in America on Gulf War Illness and, most specifically, toxicology work that appears to put some of the problems down to events at the very beginning of the Gulf war conflict.

Independent Complaints Commissioner

33. We welcome the Government's introduction of an Independent Complaints Commissioner. However, we are concerned that the role in its current form lacks the level of independence and autonomy. More could be done to provide an outlet for those who wish to express grievances or problems with any aspect of service life.

Free Time

34. All service personnel should be given time for sport and recreational activities. There should be clear standards of sports and recreational facilities and equipment to help personnel achieve and maintain health, fitness and well-being

Resettlement

35. We must be properly prepared for returning personnel and be able to give the men and women who have been in difficult and hostile operations the support they need upon their return and help them in the transition from front line to home front.
36. Service and civilian networks should be maintained and fostered at many different levels to help in the resettlement phase.
37. Greater preparation for the transition, through information, briefings and talks with former service personnel would help personnel know what to expect and detail any unexpected difficulties that others have experienced. This is particularly important for the more vulnerable personnel.
38. Extra support should be provided for those considered to be most vulnerable. This includes those with a previous history of mental health problems or alcohol or drug abuse or early leavers.

Priority Care

39. Government efforts to introduce priority treatment to all veterans should be monitored to assess the impact on improving medical care for veterans and the levels of success.

Education and Skills

40. Ensure access to retraining and recognition of service qualification in civilian life – Liberal Democrat Individual Learning Account: entitlement to retrain upon leaving and finance further education.⁸⁸

Our Nation's Duty: Armed Forces Welfare

41. Emphasis should be placed on raising literacy levels and assisting all personnel in achieving the recommended literacy targets.
42. Personnel should have access to resources and courses on looking for a job, writing a CV and interview techniques, as well as information regarding the benefits they should expect as a service veteran.
43. Education and training in life skills and living outside of the forces community would help prepare personnel and reduce the impact of the military 'dependency' culture once they leave.

Compensation

44. Compensation should be based on the overall impact of the injuries rather than providing money for the most serious injury and smaller amounts thereafter, regardless of whether you have five or twenty-five injuries.
45. Compensation should be fair, representative and generous. It should be in line with compensation schemes offered in other sectors and should reflect the dangers service personnel are exposed to and the demands placed upon them.
46. The Government should recognise that injuries and illnesses relating to service are not time-restricted and may arise at any point. Compensation should not be limited to claims within five or ten years after service and time limits should therefore be removed.

Families

47. There is a need for a coherent central welfare strategy for forces family support. The MoD set minimum consistent standards for family welfare that can be applied at all bases. As part of this, social, educational and recreational facilities for service families must be actively supported.
48. Sufficient provisions should be made available for the Families Officer on every base. Current facilities remain under-funded. They should be charged with: overseeing community development, providing systematic help to spouses, improving facilities and coordinating information on local job opportunities, housing choices, local amenities and local schooling.
49. A *Charter for Service Families*, which codified this role, would help outline a minimum specification and enable the delivery of confidential, consistent, standardised welfare services to a minimum specification across the entire UK and with annual reporting mechanisms.
50. The SFTF should be made more proactive: meet monthly, undertake audit of base facilities for families around the country, implement best practice scheme and draft a Families Charter.

51. The reports and conclusions of the SFTF should be readily available on the internet.
52. Giving servicemen and women more notice of upcoming postings and ensuring the Family Officers have the necessary resources and support on every base would help families to better organise their children's education.
53. The Government should seriously consider the possible deployment of ICT – modern technology in assisting Forces' children gain increased continuity in education.

Inquests

54. The Government must bring forward a Coroners Bill as soon as possible which would provide for funding for bereaved families to seek representation where appropriate at military inquests.

Care Packages

55. MoD should consider paying for all postage and double the telephone allowance for troops.

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