



Ministry
of Defence

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
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THE RT HON EARL HOWE PC
MINISTER OF STATE IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

MSU/4/8/2/3/ap

29th February 2016

Dear Reg,

Thank you for your contribution to what was a very well-informed and constructive Second Reading debate on the Armed Forces Bill.

The Government is deeply committed to ensuring the Covenant is delivered effectively in Northern Ireland, to ensure that Serving personnel, Veterans and their families are provided with a robust and diverse programme of support. To underline this, the former Minister for Defence Personnel Welfare and Veterans, the Rt Hon Anna Soubry, visited the Province in early 2015. The breadth and depth of engagement she found there led her to suggest that Northern Ireland's approach to delivering the Covenant could be a model of best practice for the rest of the UK to follow. The current Minister, Mark Lancaster MP, is planning to visit Northern Ireland this year.

I am delighted that Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council and Ards and North Down Borough Council have signed the Armed Forces Covenant.

We have now published the details here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/armed-forces-community-covenant/armed-forces-community-covenant#community-covenants-by-region>

I am also pleased to note that a number of other councils in Northern Ireland have agreed to sign the Armed Forces Covenant. We will publish further details once they are finalised. Further advice and assistance for Veterans living in Northern Ireland is available from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) Veterans Welfare Service, which has offices in Belfast, and additionally there is also the Aftercare Service, unique to Northern Ireland, which provides a range of services for Veterans.

These and other developments in Northern Ireland were highlighted in the 2015 Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, published in December 2015. The report included the most comprehensive contribution to date from the Northern Ireland Executive, detailing the good progress that is being made in delivering Covenant commitments particularly in the key areas of Health, Education, and Accommodation.

Lord Empey OBE
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We continue to develop and evaluate our programmes to ensure that they are effective and provide the support that our personnel and their families need. To this end, we will continue to seek engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive. We will also continue to evaluate the way we communicate about the network of support that is available in Northern Ireland to ensure that it remains effective and appropriate. We will make changes where necessary.

Importantly, Northern Ireland is now represented at the cross Government Covenant Reference Group, which takes strategic level decisions on the planning, prioritisation and delivery of Armed Forces Covenant commitments. Northern Ireland is also represented on the decision panel for the £10M per annum Covenant Fund. The fund is designed to ensure that funding for the delivery of Armed Forces Covenant commitments is provided in perpetuity. I hope you will be reassured to know that in terms of the distribution of funding, it is my understanding that the success rate of bids from Northern Ireland matches that of the rest of the United Kingdom.

It is sensible that in 2016 we update our assessment of how the Armed Forces Covenant is being delivered in Northern Ireland. That will be a priority. However, I do not believe Northern Ireland should be treated any differently to Scotland, Wales and England; our focus must be on ensuring delivery for all.

We continue to urge organisations in Northern Ireland to apply for Covenant funding, particularly where they have identified a clear need that is not already provided for by existing Public or Charitable Sector provision. Work and funding in support of the Community Covenant continues to be focused through 38 (Irish) Brigade and the Northern Ireland Veterans Forum. The MOD would urge any organisation that wishes to access this funding to work with the Brigade and the Forum in the first instance.

A copy of this letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

I hope this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Frankie

THE RT HON EARL HOWE PC