

New legislation to help ensure fair treatment for armed forces

- the Armed Forces Bill will enshrine the Armed Forces Covenant in law and help prevent service personnel and veterans being disadvantaged when accessing services like healthcare, education and housing
- the Bill will improve the Service Justice System for our personnel wherever they are operating.

New legislation to help ensure armed forces personnel, veterans and their families are not disadvantaged by their service when accessing key public services will be introduced in the House of Commons on the today (26 January 2021).

The Armed Forces Bill will embed the Armed Forces Covenant into law by introducing a legal duty for relevant UK public bodies to have due regard to the principles of the Covenant, a pledge to ensure the UK Armed Forces community is treated fairly.

Focusing on healthcare, housing and education, it will increase awareness among public bodies of the unique nature of military service, improving the level of service for members of the armed forces community, no matter where in the UK they live.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

For the first time ever we are putting into law the Armed Forces Covenant. This will break new ground, ensuring we live up to the principles of the Covenant and treating all UK Armed Forces personnel, veterans and their families with fairness.

It builds on progress we have already made, helping veterans into work through our guaranteed interview scheme, supporting service families with childcare, and providing personnel with more choice of accommodation.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans Johnny Mercer said:

More than 6,000 businesses, charities and public organisations have already pledged to support veterans, service personnel and their families by signing the Armed Forces Covenant. This a fantastic feat and has changed lives up and down the country.

Today, we are going further still to help ensure all personnel across the UK have equal access to vital services like healthcare, education and housing. This is no less than those who have risked their lives defending this country deserve.

Since the launch of the Armed Forces Covenant in 2011, many businesses have committed to offering part-time or flexible working patterns to reservists, military spouses and partners. Many have also pledged to offer free training and to actively recruit veterans.

Enshrining the Covenant in law also builds on a number of initiatives implemented over the last year to support service leavers and veterans. These include the Defence Transition Services organisation which was established to assist those facing the greatest difficulties successfully transition to civilian life after leaving service. 800 GP practices in England are also now accredited as veteran friendly. This helps doctors provide extra support to ex-military personnel who may face additional challenges when returning to civilian life.

Maintaining the effectiveness of the Service Justice System

The Bill will also help deliver a series of improvements to the Service Justice System, ensuring personnel have a clear, fair and effective route to justice wherever they are operating. These include:

- providing clearer guidance for prosecutors on how serious crimes committed by service personnel in the UK should be handled, placing a Duty on the Director of Service Prosecutions and the Director of Public Prosecutions to agree a protocol where there is concurrent jurisdiction to provide clearer guidance to assist those independent decisions
- creating an independent body to oversee complaints, overseen by a Service Police Complaints Commissioner who will ensure there is an independent line of redress if someone is dissatisfied with the outcome of a complaint
- making the complaints system more efficient by bringing the time given to personnel to lodge an appeal in line with timings offered in the private sector.

Other measures in the Bill

- the Bill will also renew the Armed Forces Act 2006, following the Armed Forces Acts of 2011 and 2016
- as well as strengthening the Service Justice System and Armed Forces Covenant, the Armed Forces Bill will provide flexible working for Reserves and extend posthumous pardons for those convicted of abolished service offences.