

Welsh Government Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Context

The Welsh Government is committed to supporting the Armed Forces Community in Wales and endeavours to ensure that they suffer no disadvantage in accessing public services. In Wales, there are estimated to be at least a quarter of a million members of the Armed Forces Community which includes Serving personnel, Reservists and Cadets as well as their families and ex-Service personnel. This document sets out the specific policies that the Welsh Government plans to implement in the coming year and beyond in areas that are devolved.

This is a living document and will be revised as and when new initiatives are agreed.

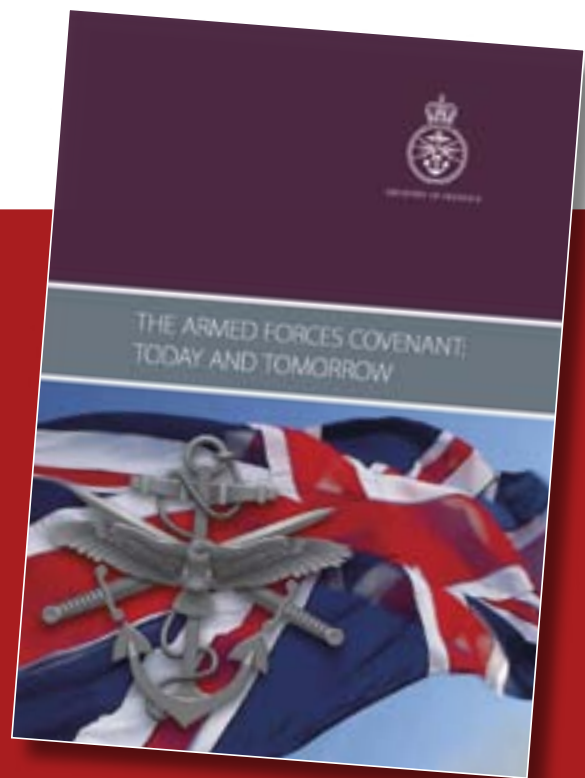
Background

In May 2011 the UK Government published an Armed Forces Covenant package including the Armed Forces Covenant text and guidance, 'The Armed Forces Covenant: Today and Tomorrow' and the full government response to the independent Military Covenant Task Force Report.

'The Armed Forces Covenant: Today and Tomorrow' summarises the measures that the UK Government is implementing and non-devolved activity across the whole of the UK across all the different areas which relate to the Armed Forces Covenant.

This includes matters such as healthcare, education, deployment, pay, compensation and Ministry of Defence estates.

The Welsh Government Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales



should be read in conjunction with the UK Armed Forces Covenant publications described above which sets the UK Government's overall intent for supporting the Armed Forces Community.

<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/WhatWeDo/Personnel/WelfareArmedForcesCovenant/TheArmedForcesCovenantDocuments.htm>



1. Overarching Measures

1.1 Contribute to the production of an annual Armed Forces Covenant report

The Armed Forces Bill will place a statutory duty on the Secretary of State for Defence to lay before Parliament an annual Armed Forces Covenant report. In doing so the Secretary of State will be required to obtain and include the views of the Welsh Government.

Each year the production of the UK Armed Forces Covenant report will set out how the Government is supporting the Armed Forces, their families and veterans in key areas such as healthcare, housing and education. It will allow us to report on progress against some of the initiatives outlined in this Package of Support. It will also allow the UK Government, in conjunction with the Covenant Reference Group, to examine what further steps need to be taken across Government to re-build the Covenant. These will be added to the Welsh Government Package of Support where appropriate.

1.2 Armed Forces Advocate for Wales

The legacy of the 2008 Service Personnel Command Paper is one on which the UK Government wishes to build. This includes taking forward the specific commitments which the UK Government made in the Service Personnel Command Paper and those made in the 2010 Service Families Employment and Skills Taskforce. This includes continuing to monitor progress in areas such as dentistry provision, educational attainment of Service children and their access to school places, childcare provision, and supporting spouses into employment. In taking forward our devolved commitments, we are providing an Armed Forces Advocate to represent Wales within the network of Armed Forces Advocates in Government Departments and the Devolved Administrations. The Advocate will continue to represent Wales on the Covenant Reference Group to assist the Government in its work on the Armed Forces Covenant.

1.3 Expert Group on the Needs of the Armed Forces Community in Wales

The Welsh Government will hold biannual meetings chaired by Welsh Ministers with representation from the Ministry of Defence, three Armed Services, the three Families Federations, the Royal British Legion, Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA), the Confederation of Service Charities (COBSEO), HIVE and the Veterans Pensions and Advisory Committee.

The Terms of Reference of the Group are to consider:

- the public service needs of Armed Forces personnel, their families, and veterans in Wales;
- whether existing service delivery meets the needs of the Armed Forces Community on equal terms with civilian society;
- what scope there may be for making services more responsive to the needs of the Armed Forces Community.

1.4 Communication with the Armed Forces Community

The Welsh Government is committed to ensuring that the Armed Forces community, including veterans and carers, are given information on services and support that they are entitled to. We will consider, with the various groups that represent the Armed Forces community, the best ways of doing this.

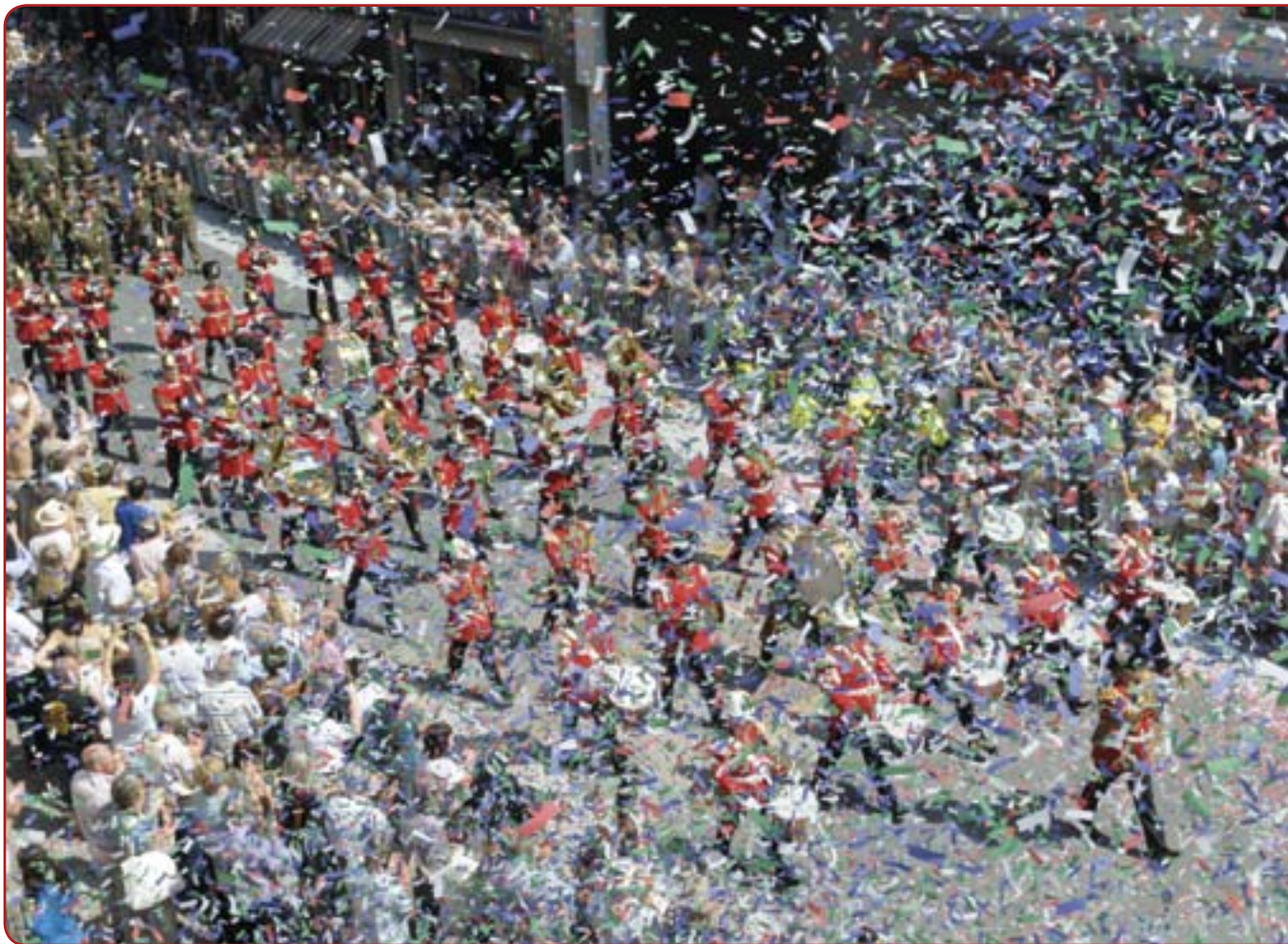
1.5 Welsh Regulation, Inspection and Audit Agencies

The Wales Audit Office, Estyn, Healthcare Inspectorate Wales, and Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, will provide the checks and balances with regard to local authorities, Health, Education and Social Care and how they are operating.

2. Recognition

2.1 Support for Armed Forces Day

The Welsh Government is committed to supporting a flagship event to celebrate Armed Forces Day in both North and South Wales each year.



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3. Participation as Citizens

3.1 Improving the ability of Service Personnel to vote

The Welsh Government acknowledges the problems faced by Service personnel and their families in voting in national and local elections. Cabinet Office, the Electoral Commission and relevant stakeholders are working together to support Service personnel, especially those serving in Afghanistan, to be able to participate in the elections and referendums. The initiative encourages Service personnel to register ahead of a tour of duty and provides advice on postal and proxy voting. Through the Elections Planning Group, Returning Officers in Wales will be encouraged to support the scheme.

4. Healthcare

4.1 Veterans' Mental Health

The Welsh Government will provide access and support for veterans through the all-Wales Mental Health and Well-Being Service for Veterans. Since April 2010, the Welsh Government is investing £485,000 each year in this NHS service which is being developed and implemented across Wales by Local Health Boards (LHBs). This is supported by a Steering Group which includes stakeholders from LHBs, Combat Stress, Royal British Legion and the Ministry of Defence.

The Mental Health and Well-being Service is producing Wales-wide publicity and information on the service and has developed a website with information for each LHB area for veterans (www.veteranswales.co.uk). The Welsh Government is also funding the free 24 hour phone mental health Community Advice Listening Line (CALL) which is available to veterans.

The Welsh Government is also currently taking forward the recommendations contained within the Health Well-Being and Local Government Committee Inquiry into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Services for Veterans (February 2011).

4.2 Identifying Veterans' Health Needs

In order to provide extensive survey data on veterans' health needs in Wales, the Welsh Government commissioned a Veterans' Health Needs Assessment project led by Professor Jon Bisson.

Public Health Wales NHS Trust is also undertaking a Veterans' Specialist Health Care Needs Assessment:

- to predict the increase in future demand on specialist health services over the next five years arising from former Service personnel; and
- to predict the specialist service requirements necessary to meet this additional demand.



4.3 NHS Annual Quality Framework Target

An Annual Quality Framework target requires LHBs to specifically consider the health needs of veterans/Service personnel when planning services.

4.4 NHS Waiting Lists

The Welsh Government has written to all Welsh LHBs informing them that if a member of the Armed Forces, or their immediate families, are on an elective waiting list, and they get transferred to their LHB, then their accrued waiting time should be taken into account.

4.5 Priority Care & Treatment Policy for Veterans

Health bodies and their staff are being reminded of their obligation to offer priority treatment and care for veterans whose health problems result from their service. This policy is outlined in Welsh Health Circular 051, which was published in 2008 and distributed to all relevant individuals and health bodies across Wales.

4.6 Prosthetic Limbs Provisions

When prosthetic limb provision is supplied to Service personnel by the Defence Medical Service this is often leading edge technology. The Welsh Government has committed that as a minimum this will be matched post service. Welsh Health Specialised Services Committee was specifically funded for this.

4.7 Veterans & Armed Forces Champions

Champions for Veterans and Armed Forces have been established in every LHB and NHS Trust in Wales. They will advocate for veterans and Service personnel to ensure that their needs are reflected in local service plans and will improve links between health and social care, veterans groups and UK Government to the benefit of veterans.

4.8 Strategic Partnership with Combat Stress

The Welsh Government will work in a strategic partnership with Combat Stress, NHS Wales and the Ministry of Defence to ensure better co-ordination and delivery of mental healthcare and support for veterans in Wales.

4.9 Transition Protocol and Pathway for Injured/ill Service Personnel

The Welsh Government is working with the Ministry of Defence to develop a transition protocol and pathway for injured/ill Service personnel leaving the Armed Forces and being discharged into Wales. A Wales-specific care pathway is included in the UK-wide transition protocol pilot scheme for severely injured personnel, and the protocol has been piloted in England. The scheme includes the transfer of medical records from Ministry of Defence to GPs.



4.10 Bereavement Counselling

The Welsh Government provides funding to Cruse Bereavement Cymru which includes developing support for bereaved families of the Armed Forces in Wales.

4.11 Treat injured personnel in dedicated military wards where clinically appropriate

The Ministry of Defence policy is that Armed Forces personnel should have the best possible care and Welsh Government will work with the Department of Health/NHS to provide this.

Wales does not currently have a sufficient critical mass of injured veterans to require dedicated wards. Welsh Government will review this should that situation change. For serving personnel this a matter for Ministry of Defence and Welsh Government support this approach.

4.12 Building a greater focus on mental health into routine service and discharge medical examinations

Work to introduce enhanced mental health assessments (EMHA's) is currently being developed for Service medicals following a three month pilot in selected units across the Navy, Army and the RAF that was completed in July 2011. Following evaluation in August 2011, roll-out will take place in the Autumn 2011. As this is a non-devolved area, we will await the results of the evaluation with interest and consider the implications for Wales.

4.13 Establishing a Veterans' Information Service to allow follow-up of discharged regulars and reserves after 12 months, including transfer of relevant details to the veteran's GP

Welsh Government support these proposals for action by Department of Health in England.

4.14 Creation or access to a mental health wellbeing website, for Service personnel and veterans, to engage those reluctant to access traditional clinical services

The online website for serving personnel, Service families and veterans is currently being trialled in selected areas with the evaluation due to take place in April 2012. The Welsh Government will consider the outcome of the evaluation with interest and consider the implications for Wales. The Health and Wellbeing Service has developed a website with information for each LHB area for veterans in Wales and this was officially launched in October 2011 (www.veteranswales.co.uk).

4.15 Double the number of mental health professionals

As already stated at 4.1, the Welsh Government is investing £485,000 per year to develop a Mental Health and Well-Being Service which will more than double the number of veterans' mental health professionals in the field.



4.16 Local Health Boards to formulate plans for managing referral cases

As stated at 4.7, all Welsh LHBs have Veterans and Armed Forces Champions and when the pilot work on veterans pathways is complete this should be integral to any pathway.

4.17 Medical assessment programme and Reserves mental health programme continue to support referrals and self-referrals

The Medical Assessment Programme and Reserves (MAP), available to all ex-service personnel (including Reservists), provides access to consultants with the knowledge and skills of a military background. Access and referrals to the MAP is available either via their GP's or self referrals via their LHB. The Welsh Government continues to support this programme.

4.18 Introduction of an E-learning veterans health package

The Welsh Government are in discussion with the Welsh Deanery and Veteran's Health and Wellbeing about appropriate training for GPs and other health staff on the health needs of veterans. GPs in Wales will have access to the e-learning package developed by the Royal College of General Practitioners for the Department of Health in England.

4.19 A healthier approach to alcohol

The Welsh Government is very supportive of the healthier approach to alcohol which fits well with our Welsh Substance Misuse strategy, Working Together to Reduce Harm. Alcohol Concern Cymru are exploring potential opportunities for a project that aims to meet the needs of current and former service personnel around alcohol misuse.

Public Health Wales (PHW) have been commissioned to produce a Substance Misuse Treatment Framework module for the treatment of veterans by October 2012. A specialist sub group is in the process of being convened to support PHW to prepare a scoping paper to take this work forward.

The Welsh National Database for Substance Misuse has also been amended to collect information on veterans attending substance misuse treatment services where they self identify. This information will provide commissioners with a better understanding of the prevalence of substance misuse amongst veterans in order to inform the future planning and commissioning of substance misuse services.

4.20 Military medical professionals in NHS Trusts

Doctors employed by the Defence Medical Services are part of the overall National Healthcare Asset Base and for the majority of their Service careers will provide a clinical input into the NHS. The NHS facilitates the training of these doctors. Progress and developments on the training of medical professionals is provided on an ad hoc basis through the UK Health/Ministry of Defence Partnership Board. Welsh Government will work with the Partnership Board on this matter.



4.21 Better information for GPs on available help for Reservists via the Reserves Mental Health Programme

NHS Connecting for Health and the Defence Medical Information Capability Programme are working together on developing the process of transfer of records on discharge.

Veteran Reservists are also eligible for the mental health and wellbeing service as identified at 4.1.

4.22 Healthcare Provision for the Armed Forces Community in Wales

Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW) has embarked on a review of the adequacy, availability and accessibility of health provision for Armed Forces personnel, their families and veterans in Wales. This will draw on the experiences of the Armed Forces Community and will contribute to an assessment of whether existing service delivery is meeting their needs effectively. The outcome will also inform whether there is a need for specific quality standards and how HIW will incorporate a focus on the needs of the Armed Forces Community into its routine inspection and review activities.

5. Education

5.1 School Admissions

In Wales, a new School Admissions Code and School Admission Appeals Codes, came into force on 15 July 2009 following consultation. These Codes have been updated and revised to reflect Regulations and good practice already existing in Wales. One of the changes made is that, admission authorities must treat a Forces family as meeting the residency criteria for a school catchment area, so long as they can provide evidence that they will shortly be posted there. The Welsh Government will remain alert to the needs of Service families and will consider changes to the code if they appear necessary.

5.2 Scholarships for bereaved children to support study through university and higher education

A new scheme will provide university and further education scholarships to the children of servicemen and women killed on active military service since 1990.

5.3 Financial Support for Service leavers to study at University

The financial support offered to Service leavers to study at university has been extended to more people by reducing the qualifying period of service from six to four years and abolishing the qualifying period for personnel who are medically discharged. The financial support will cover the total cost of tuition fees.

5.4 Build stronger relationships with universities

The Defence Academy is pursuing new opportunities to improve and extend existing linkages with universities and the academic community in general.



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6. Childcare

6.1 Provision of childcare

Childcare is a major commitment of the Welsh Government, and a strategic priority, linking into a number of policies and programmes across portfolios. By focusing on the needs of a community we wish to improve on the life chances of all children and their families. We are committed to working with our partners to support and develop the sector to improve the accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare.

On 16 February 2011 the Childcare Policy Statement 'Nurturing Children, Supporting Families' was launched by the Deputy Minister for Children; the policy statement provides a strategic direction and the priorities for childcare in Wales. Many of the statements of intent will impact on Service families.

In 2008 the Welsh Government placed a statutory duty, under the Childcare Act 2006, on all Local Authorities in Wales to secure, as far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient childcare to meet the requirements of parents in their area who require childcare in order to train, work, or to prepare for work. The Act aims to maintain and strengthen the diversity of childcare, giving parents a choice of high quality provision in a variety of settings. Local authorities have duties to assess the sufficiency of childcare provision locally, and to secure sufficient childcare for working parents in their area. This includes the availability of childcare to support parents working atypical hours. Local authorities also need to ensure that people have access to the full range of information they need as a parent.

7. Housing

7.1 Homebuy

Service personnel and veterans have priority status in our Homebuy scheme. This has also been extended to the widows and widowers of personnel who have been killed in Service. The Welsh Government's forthcoming guidance on Rent First and Homebuy will make clear that these groups should be given priority for Homebuy products where housing problems result from events linked to service. This position will also be reflected in the revised code of guidance on allocations and homelessness.




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7.2 Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

Veterans are entitled to Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) from local authorities, enabling disabled ex-Service personnel to continue to live in their own homes. The Welsh Government introduced amendments to the Housing Renewal Regulations in May 2009 which now mean that where a member of the Armed Forces receives specified retired pay or a pension under the Naval, Military and Air Forces etc (Disablement and Death) Service Pensions Order 2006 and constant attendance allowance, the amounts so received are disregarded in the determination of income other than earnings in the means-test for DFGs.

7.3 Homelessness

Veterans Guide - The Welsh Government has set out its commitment to preventing homelessness amongst veterans in its Ten Year Homelessness Plan.



Funding has been provided for the development of a directory of services for veterans who may be at risk of homelessness. This work is being taken forward by Cymorth Cymru. This will help ensure people in contact with vulnerable veterans can make the connections to the appropriate housing and welfare organisations so that veterans can be helped before they become homeless.

The Welsh Government are also working with the Ministry of Defence Joint Services Housing Advice Office to make sure that people in the services have access to housing advice before discharge.

8. Benefits and Tax

8.1 50% Discount on Second Homes

On 1st April 2010, the Council Tax (Prescribed Classes of Dwellings) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2010 came into force. This ensures that billing authorities in Wales give a 50% council tax discount on second homes owned by Armed Forces personnel who live in accommodation provided by the Ministry of Defence. The introduction of these regulations brings Wales into line with England.

Previously local authorities had the discretion to award such a discount, as they have with any second home in Wales. The introduction of this legislation however, means that authorities are now obliged to provide a 50% discount to Armed Forces personnel whose properties in Wales are not permanently occupied.

These qualifying properties must be second homes, which are defined in legislation as unoccupied and furnished dwellings. Properties where the armed service personnel live and to which the personnel return on leave are considered main residences and will not qualify for the discount.

8.2 Ministry of Defence deployment Tax-free payment

Since January 2008, in recognition of the effort and commitment of service personnel working abroad, the Ministry of Defence has arranged that all Armed Forces personnel deployed on operations overseas, who normally pay council tax, will benefit from a tax-free payment. Troops who pay Council Tax for a property in the UK or Contributions in Lieu of Council Tax (CILOCT) for Service Family Accommodation receive financial support through a relief payment, based on the number of days on operations, and worth £140 over a six-month tour. Those living in Single Living Accommodation do not pay any charges for their accommodation, including CILOCT, while deployed on operations.

The rebate is a flat rate payment based on 25 per cent of the average Band D Council Tax bill for a six month period. This discount is in line with the standard reduction in Council Tax where an eligible adult is absent from the property.



9. Transition

9.1 Employment of Reservists

The Welsh Government is committed to supporting Reservists and has endorsed the Supporting Britain's Reservists and Employers (SaBRE) Statement of Employer Support. The Welsh Government values the role played by Reservist employees in defence and in employment. Their Reservist activities give them a wealth of transferable skills such as leadership, decision-making and communications. We recognise the significant benefits such training brings to the workplace and to delivering high-quality services to the people of Wales. The Welsh Government is committed to providing practical support for Reservist employees to undertake training and mobilisation. Welsh Government will also positively consider any request from Reservist employees for any additional support to undertake this important role.

10. Support after Service

10.1 Automatic entitlement to Blue Badges for seriously injured Service personnel and veterans

Access will be eased to the Blue Badge scheme for seriously injured veterans in England, Wales and Scotland. This will ensure automatic entitlement to a blue badge for those injured war veterans and injured Armed Forces personnel who are in receipt of payments made under tariffs 1-8 of the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme and who are certified as having a permanent and substantial disability which causes an inability to walk or very considerable difficulty in walking. The provision came into force in Wales on the 1 August 2011.

10.2 Eased access to concessionary travel for seriously injured Service personnel and veterans

The Welsh Government have introduced new guidance so that seriously injured veterans and Service personnel who fall within the categories of disability set out in the Transport Act 2000 (and equivalent legislation in Scotland) will get automatic eligibility without further assessment to concessionary bus travel. New arrangements came into practice in October 2011.

10.3 'Be the Boss' Enterprise Support for ex-Service personnel

'Be the Boss' scheme delivered by The Royal British Legion is aimed at supporting recent UK Armed Service leavers to pursue either self-employment or a business idea. Programme of support is open to ex-Service personnel who left active service after 7th October 2001. Funded by the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) the Legion and its partner organisations, which includes the Welsh Government, the scheme offers tailored support that can include information, finance and mentoring, to applicants. The business must be based in the UK and can be a start up or an existing business trading for less than 2 years.

Applicants initially register on the Legion's employment and training website www.civvystreet.org and if based in Wales will be referred to relevant support that includes the Welsh Government start up service.

From Autumn 2011 arrangements for the delivery of the service for new applicants may change. The British Legion is currently producing directly on a UK wide level the start up business advice and training support due to the closure of the Regional Business Link service in England. The Welsh Government will work with the provider appointed to ensure effective signposting and referral system.

10.4 Recruitment of veterans

The Welsh Government welcomes applications from veterans for posts within the Welsh Government. Recruitment is subject to fair and open competition and appointment on merit according to the terms of the Civil Service Commissioners' Appointment Principles. We have developed links with the Regular Forces Employment Association (RFEA) to ensure those about to leave the armed services are made aware of recruitment schemes.



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11. Working with wider society

11.1 Develop and support a new Community Covenant Scheme

In June 2011 the UK Government launched the Armed Forces Community Covenant scheme which encourages public service providers, the private sector and the voluntary and community sectors to offer targeted support for their local Armed Forces Community. The Community Covenant is intended to be a two way arrangement and Ministry of Defence is actively encouraging the local Service population to provide support to their local community. The scheme is relevant to all parts of the UK, as areas which do not have a large operating military presence will still have a significant number of veterans within the community. We are already aware of examples of good practice in this area, for example, access to leisure services. The Welsh Government will work collaboratively with Local Service Boards, Local Authorities and the Welsh Local Government Association to support the Covenant and enhance these arrangements.

The Welsh Government is starting discussions, and will work with Local Authorities, on the provision of free swimming for Service personnel on leave and veterans.

11.2 Military Museums and access to heritage sites

The Welsh Government will continue to work with, advise and support, Accredited military museums and military collections held in other Accredited museums across Wales. Military museums provide important insights into the inspirational deeds of courage, bravery and fortitude of military personnel past and present. Military museums provide a bridge between civilian and Service communities creating volunteering and educational opportunities for all.

The Welsh Government seeks to work with regiments based locally to the heritage sites in its care. For example, serving Royal Welsh Regiment personnel receive free admission to Caernarfon Castle, which contains the regimental museum. The Castle also hosts regular events in partnership with the regiment.

The Welsh Government already encourages the use of its heritage sites for community events and anniversaries, including by groups working with veterans and those currently serving with our forces. In our experience the best approach is to develop targeted activities which are locally relevant and locally inspired.



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