

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

## Public Bill Committee

### ARMED FORCES COMMISSIONER BILL

*First Sitting*

*Tuesday 10 December 2024*

*(Morning)*

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#### CONTENTS

Programme motion agreed to.  
Written evidence (Reporting to the House) motion agreed to.  
Motion to sit in private agreed to.  
Examination of witnesses.  
Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

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**not later than**

**Saturday 14 December 2024**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chairs:* CLIVE EFFORD, † SIR EDWARD LEIGH

Akehurst, Luke (*North Durham*) (Lab)

† Campbell, Juliet (*Broxtowe*) (Lab)

† Cox, Pam (*Colchester*) (Lab)

† Dearden, Kate (*Halifax*) (Lab/Co-op)

† Downie, Graeme (*Dunfermline and Dollar*) (Lab)

† Francois, Mr Mark (*Rayleigh and Wickford*) (Con)

† Holmes, Paul (*Hamble Valley*) (Con)

† Hopkins, Rachel (*Luton South and South Bedfordshire*) (Lab)

† Jermy, Terry (*South West Norfolk*) (Lab)

† Jopp, Lincoln (*Spelthorne*) (Con)

† Maguire, Helen (*Epsom and Ewell*) (LD)

† Martin, Amanda (*Portsmouth North*) (Lab)

Martin, Mike (*Tunbridge Wells*) (LD)

† Pollard, Luke (*Minister for the Armed Forces*)

† Ranger, Andrew (*Wrexham*) (Lab)

† Reed, David (*Exmouth and Exeter East*) (Con)

† Scrogham, Michelle (*Barrow and Furness*) (Lab)

Simon Armitage, *Committee Clerk*

† **attended the Committee**

**Witnesses**

Mariette Hughes, Service Complaints Ombudsman

Angela Kitching, Director of Campaigns, Policy & Research, Royal British Legion

Ted Arnold, Senior Public Affairs and Policy Manager, Help for Heroes

Lieutenant General Sir Andrew Gregory KBE CB DL, Controller, SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity

Lieutenant General Sir Nicholas Pope KCB CBE, Chair, Cobseco (The Confederation of Service Charities)

# Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 10 December 2024

(Morning)

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

## Armed Forces Commissioner Bill

9.25 am

**The Chair:** We will first consider the programme motion as on the amendment paper. We will then consider a motion to enable the reporting of written evidence for publication and a motion to allow us to deliberate in private about our questions for the oral evidence session. In view of the time available, I hope that we can take these matters formally, without debate.

*Ordered,*

That—

1. the Committee shall (in addition to its first meeting at 9.25 am on Tuesday 10 December meet—

- (a) at 2.00 pm on Tuesday 10 December;
- (b) at 11.30 am and 2.00 pm on Thursday 12 December;
- (c) at 9.25 am and 2.00 pm on Tuesday 17 December;

2. the Committee shall hear oral evidence in accordance with the following Table:

TABLE

Date	Time	Witness
Tuesday 10 December	Until no later than 9.55 am	Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces
Tuesday 10 December	Until no later than 10.40 am	Royal British Legion; Help for Heroes
Tuesday 10 December	Until no later than 11.25 am	SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity; COBSEO, the Confederation of Service Charities
Tuesday 10 December	Until no later than 2.20 pm	Defence Medical Welfare Service
Tuesday 10 December	Until no later than 3.10 pm	Army Benevolent Fund; Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity; Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund
Tuesday 10 December	Until no later than 4 pm	Army Families Federation; Naval Families Association; RAF Families Federation
Tuesday 10 December	Until no later than 4.20 pm	Ministry of Defence

3. proceedings on consideration of the Bill in Committee shall be taken in the following order: Clause 1; Schedule 1; Clauses 2 to 5; Schedule 2; Clauses 6 to 8; new Clauses; new Schedules; remaining proceedings on the Bill;

4. the proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 5.00 pm on Tuesday 17 December.—  
(*Luke Pollard.*)

*Resolved,*

That, subject to the discretion of the Chair, any written evidence received by the Committee shall be reported to the House for publication.—(*Luke Pollard.*)

*Resolved,*

That, at this and any subsequent meeting at which oral evidence is to be heard, the Committee shall sit in private until the witnesses are admitted.—(*Luke Pollard.*)

**The Chair:** Copies of written evidence that the Committee receives will be made available in the Committee Room and will be circulated to Members by email. We will now go into private session to discuss lines of questioning.

*The Committee deliberated in private.*

## Examination of Witness

*Mariette Hughes gave evidence.*

9.26 am

**The Chair:** Good morning. We are now sitting in public and the proceedings are being broadcast. Before we start to hear from our witnesses, do any Members wish to make declarations of interest in connection with the Bill?

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): My son is in the Navy.

**The Chair:** I think we can forgive you for that; thank you. We will now hear oral evidence from Mariette Hughes, the Service Complaints Ombudsman. Before calling the first Member to ask a question, I remind the Committee that questions should be limited to matters within the scope of the Bill and that we must stick to the timings of the programme order that we agreed. For this panel, we have until 9.55 am. Will the witness introduce herself for the record and say a few words?

**Mariette Hughes:** Good morning; thank you for having me here. I am Mariette Hughes, the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the armed forces. I am pleased to be here to talk about the Bill, which is a positive and important piece of legislation. I am happy to answer any and all questions.

**The Chair:** A lot of Members are unused to Bill Committees, so if you want to speak, put up your hand in good time, the Clerk will let me know and we will get everyone in. I call Mark Francois.

**Q1 Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Good morning, and thank you to the witness for your time today. You describe the Bill as “positive”. In your opinion, what are the main differences between your position and that of the commissioner, as proposed in the legislation? How do you see those as advantageous?

**Mariette Hughes:** My remit is extremely narrow. It does what it needs to do in providing oversight of the service complaints system, but it restricts me and those who work in my office to looking only at issues related to service complaints—those complaints that have been through the system and applications that have been made directly to my office.

We know that one issue is that not enough people complain. Between the number of people who report that they experience poor behaviours or unacceptable things in the workplace and the number of people who complain and come through to my office is a huge delta.

We are not able to look into the reasons why. The ability to look behind those issues raised as pure service complaints is incredibly advantageous.

For me, there is also an element of being able to look at the further level of “So what?” Too many times when we look at a service complaint, we are considering whether the individual has been wronged because of whether or not a policy has been applied correctly to them, and that is as far as our analysis can go. What the Bill will provide is the ability to go behind that to say, “Does this policy provide the best for our service personnel in terms of their welfare?” Those are the key issues for me.

**Q2 Mr Francois:** When you were doing your role, would you have preferred the opportunity to do the thematic reports envisaged in the Bill?

**Mariette Hughes:** Yes, absolutely. When I last spoke in front of the Defence Committee, we mentioned that we would like those powers, and my predecessor had asked for them as well. We were told previously that until we got our backlog and performance sorted, they would not be able to be extended to us, but that is the direction we have been pushing in. We have been asking for them for years, and we would be very excited about it.

**Q3 Mr Francois:** Lastly, what is your current backlog of complaints? We are working on the assumption that when the roles transition, anything that is metaphorically in your in-tray will transfer across to the commissioner. As of today, how many legacy cases—if we can call them that—do you envisage transferring across to the new organisation?

**Mariette Hughes:** I say this with a pinch of salt because I have not logged on this morning to check whether we have had any new applications, but the backlog is zero. We have around 30 cases in active investigation. Any new cases coming into my office are instantly allocated out. We have brought the backlog down to nothing, and we are at 100% timeliness.

**Q4 Mr Francois:** Having served on the Defence Committee and interviewed your predecessors, but not you, I commend you on that. Clearly, a lot of work has been done to catch up. There were hundreds before, so for the record, congratulations if you are down to just 30 live cases.

**Mariette Hughes:** Thank you. It has been very important to us. When I took on the role, the wait time for individuals to have their cases looked at by me was around nine months. When we are the organisation holding the services to account for how swiftly they deal with complaints, that does not fly very well. If we are going to be the champion of what good looks like, we have to be able to demonstrate that we can apply those lessons to ourselves to make the services trust us, so I am pleased that we have been able to do that over the last three years.

**Mr Francois:** Thank you very much.

**Q5 Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab):** Good morning, and thank you for joining us. On the point about transfer, how do you envisage the transfer of staff from the existing system operating? I have just a couple of little points after that.

**Mariette Hughes:** One of my main concerns is ensuring a smooth transition. My staff are quite excited for the new remit. Again, we as an organisation have been pushing for it for a while, but naturally there is consternation and a bit of anxiety about what it means for them. Broadly under the scope of the legislation, if the powers and functions of the ombudsman are simply lifting and shifting to the commissioner role, I anticipate that the majority of my staff will continue operating as usual.

It is key for us that we do not disrupt the good work that has been happening. A lot of my staff have been at the organisation longer than I have, and they remember when the backlog was even worse. They are the ones who have done the work and delivered that performance. It would be absolutely devastating for them to see it disrupted, so ensuring that they have somewhere to operate from, have clear legislation, understand what they are able to do and can just continue as usual will be key.

The other element to be considered is the other side of our business—those who look after our finance, IT and stats. Their roles will potentially need to expand to cover more under the Armed Forces Commissioner’s office, and that is what needs to be established through a transitional period.

**Q6 Graeme Downie:** That is helpful. The Bill provides for the Secretary of State to provide additional staff. Do you envisage that being required very quickly, or do you think the current staff will be able to cope?

**Mariette Hughes:** That depends on the speed at which the legislation goes through and the plans—I noticed that there is an amendment on setting a proposed timeframe. Depending on when you want the office to go live, there needs to be a significant scoping period to determine how many staff will be required and what the budget will look like. Certain roles will be needed ahead of others, and for certain roles, current staff at SCOAF will simply be able to pick up some of the work. We have staff in our organisation who were working for us at the point of transitioning from the commissioner to the Service Complaints Ombudsman, so they have done this process and will be able to guide it through.

**Q7 Graeme Downie:** Lastly, how do you envisage the new role working with the devolved Administrations? As a Scottish MP, I am thinking particularly of Scotland. How will the role interact with the veterans commissioners in place at the moment, and do you see any benefits from this role compared with the existing one?

**Mariette Hughes:** Absolutely. It is all about collaborative working. There will certainly be areas where the commissioner cannot reach in and touch—or have control over—the provisions for service personnel, but it is about maintaining those good relationships. We are all trying to do the best for people, so it is about ensuring that we have those sensible conversations and everyone understands one another’s remits, and that we are able to bring issues to the fore and talk about them as we go. We are already doing some really good work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission on uniformed protective services and behaviours. That is the sort of work I see expanding with this, and with the devolved Administrations we just sit round the table and talk about whose job it is to take this forward, because we can all agree that this is what needs to happen for people.



**Q8 David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Thank you, Mariette, for being with us today. Is it possible to go into the timeline of how we have got to this point? You talked about limited powers, and I completely agree with you. From your perspective, from raising those concerns with the MOD and Ministers, how have we got to this point where we are sitting here talking about the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill?

**Mariette Hughes:** I am not entirely sure I can answer that one for you. We have approached it from two different paths that have converged at a very convenient time. I am aware that the new Government have been pushing this very hard and that it is something they feel very strongly about. I am certainly in favour of it. Separately to that, within the ombudsman community there is a lot of talk about own motion powers and thematic investigations. I think there are only one or two other schemes in the UK that currently have those powers. This is game-changing for everyone. We have been talking about this since I came into role.

When we set up our new five-year strategic objectives, one was around changing our performance, one was around changing the relationship with the services, and the third one was around looking at the strategic and political landscape and how we need to be fixed. What powers do we need to be able to effect real change for service personnel? This has been part of our ongoing conversations for around five years.

**Q9 Amanda Martin:** Thank you for your service and for doing what seems to be a great job in the circumstances. You alluded to the fact that this has been a long time coming, that you have been pushing for this and that there had previously been no backlog. The aim of the new Bill is to improve service licence conditions for service personnel. I have spoken to a number of them in my Portsmouth constituency, and one of the concerns, which you echoed, is that there seems to be a delta between the people who come forward and the things that happen. How do you see a change in the commissioner role improving things for those who come forward? Some service personnel say that they still have concerns around the trust and whether it will affect their career if they make a complaint.

**Mariette Hughes:** Trust and confidence in the service complaints system is something that we have been driving hard as SCOAF, and that work would continue. This is what I think is interesting about the commissioner role. When we do outreach visits, I sit down and do focus groups with service personnel, where I kick all the chain of command out of the room and get them to tell me what they actually feel and experience. What is really interesting for me is that in those conversations, a number of issues, frustrations, grumbles and gripes are raised, and they are not the sorts of things that normally become service complaints, because to the individual they do not feel big enough or they do not feel that they have been personally wronged—it is just part and parcel of their service life—or they do not think that raising a service complaint will change it. We have those conversations because it relates to service complaints. It talks about that mental resilience, the things they are putting up with that chip away and then lead them to situations where they feel they have to complain.

Under the commissioner's powers, you would be able to raise those issues and put those into reports that can be laid in the House and brought into the light—all the

issues that people are telling us about, such as their accommodation or concerns around food or policies that affect their families. At the moment, I am gathering that information as good background for service complaints, but the commissioner role would be able to take that forward and say, "This is affecting all three services" or "Actually, it is affecting this service more than the other." So this really rich information will help promote those welfare things that currently do not have enough light shining on them.

**Michelle Scrogam** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): Can I ask for your views on the German armed forces commissioner? Obviously, this measure has been modelled on that.

**Mariette Hughes:** You can, of course. I know Dr Eva Högl quite well. We are both members of the International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces, which is a mouthful, so I will say ICOAF. We have a conference every year. She is an absolutely incredible person and has done really good things with that office. It is an interesting model for this to be based on. There are some differences that we have to be alive to. The key one for me—apologies if this comes up later—is around the terminology. Dr Högl is the Commissioner for the Armed Forces. Germany does not have a fully established ombudsman scheme in the same way that the UK does. We have 22 established schemes under the Ombudsman Association. On Eva's website, she describes herself as "the ombudsman for the armed forces". It is simply that the title "parliamentary commissioner" fits with their legal framework.

There are also some interesting differences. Eva has had these powers for a long time and uses them very well. However, she does not have the oversight of service complaints that I have, so this would be an extended remit compared with the German model. It is brilliant to draw inspiration from it. Being members of those communities together, we are always looking at best practice in other countries. There are necessarily some differences in this country, but it is certainly a good starting point.

**Q10 Michelle Scrogam:** Do you think the German model will translate to the UK?

**Mariette Hughes:** I think we have to build our own model; we have to look at what our key issues are. Germany is a different landscape and a different framework and has been operating for a huge number of years. We cannot just pick it up and start doing things the way they do. We need to start with what our key focuses are and how we think we can have the most impact and scale up operations, and go from that.

We might end up looking at things slightly differently. A lot of Dr Högl's focus is on investment in defence and pushing for bigger budgets. Does that necessarily tie in with what we are seeing about the welfare of service personnel? There may be issues that cross over into that, but we would have a slightly different focus from the German parliamentary commissioner.

**Q11 Michelle Scrogam:** What should we be learning from the German model to make improvements here?

**Mariette Hughes:** For me, the best thing from the German model that I would like us to learn from and take forward is the voice that Dr Högl has within the

German Parliament. She has a permanent seat; she sits in all the sessions. I am not saying that the commissioner should have that, but they should certainly have the ability to lay reports directly or have them laid in the House so that more focus is placed on this. There is absolutely no point having all this access and information and creating the reports if they do not go anywhere and nobody talks about them. That level of parliamentary oversight and visibility is what we should mirror from the German system.

**Q12 Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab):** Thank you for joining us. The Ombudsman Association has questioned the use of the term “commissioner” in relation to this role, on the grounds that it is usually used for bodies with less influence. What are your views on that?

**Mariette Hughes:** I am also a board member of the Ombudsman Association. You will not be surprised to know that my views align very closely with those of the chair of the Ombudsman Association. I understand why we are using the word “commissioner”, based on the fact that we were mirroring the German system, but as set out in the letter from the chair, the Cabinet guidance is very clear that “ombudsman” is the gold standard.

As I have mentioned, we have 22 established schemes; we have a very wide network of ombudsmen. Within my office, we have spent a lot of time trying to get people to understand the value of an ombudsman, what it is and what it does. Having been the service complaints commissioner previously, I worry that going back towards “commissioner”—going from service complaints commissioner to service complaints ombudsman to armed forces commissioner—is a step back. It feels like if we are doing that, is the next step not armed forces ombudsman? Do we not just go there straightaway?

**Q13 Pam Cox:** What is your view of the comparison between the broad powers of an ombudsman and a commissioner in this scenario?

**Mariette Hughes:** The Cabinet Office guidance simply says that if you do not meet the standards for independence, impartiality, integrity and fairness, you cannot use the term “ombudsman”. There is an inherent elevation to “ombudsman”. There are no real prescriptive powers for what an ombudsman can or cannot do compared with a commissioner; it is all broadly set out in the legislation or the rules that govern. Each ombudsman scheme in the UK, whether they are statutory or voluntary ombudsman schemes, have different powers and remits. It is broadly what you make of it. It is about the gravitas of that term and the understanding in the wider landscape of what “ombudsman” means. We as the UK have accepted that an ombudsman is the top tier of fairness and oversight. Unless there are overriding reasons, I simply do not understand why we would use the term “commissioner” instead of “ombudsman”.

**Q14 Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con):** I have two quick questions. First, you clearly laid out what is new under the commissioner set-up, the broader thematic, but it strikes me that it is an “access all areas” pass, a backstage laminate—“Go where you want.” Do you think the legislation as drafted constrains or directs you sufficiently? How would you set your agenda, given all that freedom?

**Mariette Hughes:** Under the Bill as drafted, the remit is very wide. The key thing will be the secondary legislation—the regulations and schedules that cover exactly what the work looks like. It is also key that the individual sets out what their focus is and where they want to focus the work. There is a danger of thinking this is a magic silver bullet that will fix everything. You simply cannot fix everything, and even with the power to go where you like and look at what you like, you must have that focus on what is key to welfare.

The initial first year would involve a lot of scoping around, “What do we already know, what do we think we can fix, and what do we wish we knew?” We would focus on that within the broad categories set out in the Bill, but this is about welfare, not about going into all the back rooms and looking at all the sneaky files and exciting buttons just because we can. We must always ask the questions, “Why am I looking at this, what do I think I am going to achieve, and how will this make life better for service personnel?” It is very wide, and it will need to be set out in regulations how that is to be directed, but I would not want to constrain the individual in deciding what they need to look at, based on their experience.

**Q15 Lincoln Jopp:** My second question is, will you be applying?

**Mariette Hughes:** If I am allowed to apply. As the ombudsman, I can do only one term, but obviously this is a new role. If it is decided that I am allowed to put myself forward for the job, I would love to be considered for it. I love what I do, I feel very passionate about it, and these are the powers we have been asking for. It would also provide the opportunity to ensure that the work of SCOAF, which we have got to a really good standard, can continue uninterrupted, while then focusing on, “What does this look like, how can we take it forward, and how can we make this work?”

**Q16 The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard):** Thank you, Mariette, for all the work that you and your team have been doing. As the shadow Minister mentioned, the transition in what SCOAF has been delivering has been quite remarkable. I want to continue that journey.

One of the key provisions for the Armed Forces Commissioner is their independence. In my mind, if they are not regarded as independent, it will not work in enabling people to raise concerns and issues with them. Could you talk us through how independence works in your current role, and how you feel an Armed Forces Commissioner independent from Government, Ministers and the chain of command might operate on a day-to-day basis?

**Mariette Hughes:** Absolutely. The key point is that independence does not mean you are completely isolated, or that you cannot talk to Ministers and work collaboratively. It is about having an unfettered ability to decide how your work is shaped. When I took on the role of the Service Complaints Ombudsman, a key thing we always got asked, particularly on social media or in questions and queries about our services, was, “How are you maintaining independence? You are funded by the Ministry of Defence. You must therefore be in MOD’s pocket and none of your decisions is actually independent.” All ombudsmen face this, because we have to be funded from somewhere and it is usually the sector that we are overseeing. It is not an unusual thing.

One of our key priorities was setting out to the public, in a way that people could understand, how we maintain that independence. We designed a governance framework, which, to be honest, I was quite shocked that we did not have already when I took on the role. That has now been laid out to the House, and it sets out publicly that although the Ministry of Defence will provide my funding, it is not allowed to touch my cases, design my business plan, or tell me what I can and cannot do in pursuing the aims set out within the remit of my role. I would expect something similar with the commissioner, setting out who has the power to do what. It will need to be set out that although they report to the Secretary of State and are funded by Defence, they are entirely independent in the decision making.

**Q17 Luke Pollard:** That is helpful, thank you. Related to the role's independence is the approach you take to national security. A challenge of a Bill like this is that its powers are deliberately drawn very wide. You mentioned briefly what decisions you are taking. Could you talk us through how you assess national security in your current role? There is a legislative scrub of reports contained within the Bill, but it would be helpful for the commissioner and for Members to understand what you mean by national security when it is included in there. Could you talk us through how you would regard that at the moment?

**Mariette Hughes:** Currently, we do not assess national security. We are overseeing just the service complaints system, which is about personnel issues—the issues service personnel face in the workplace. We naturally have a few cases where information is redacted because it is sensitive, because of the nature of where that individual works, and we work very well with the services on deciding what should and can be redacted. In a report where we are just talking about someone's workplace experience, they should probably not be putting in information that needs to be redacted.

Going forward with the commissioner role, if the focus remains on welfare, I do not think it is as much of an issue as it might be. I understand the concern, because the Bill is so wide and gives those powers, but again, I cannot really see a situation in which the commissioner would need to get that involved in those issues, if that makes sense.

**Q18 Luke Pollard:** Good. My final question is about the powers in the Bill about dismissing a commissioner in the event of their being incapacitated or unable to fulfil their job. Could you talk through how that would work? Currently, if you were not able to fulfil your duties, how would that work? Is there any difference between the framework that establishes your office and the commissioner's office?

**Mariette Hughes:** The framework proposed in this Bill is significantly stronger than what is currently in existence with my office. I have similar provisions in my terms and conditions that if for any reason I am unable to fulfil my functions, the Secretary of State can terminate my employment; equally, I can give notice. What is not in the current legislation or in my terms and conditions is the ability to appoint a deputy or an acting person to fill that role. That is a very real risk and it is a gap.

When I took on the role, there was actually a gap between myself and my predecessor during which nobody in the office could do any work, because there is no

power unless it is delegated directly from the ombudsman and there is no power for the Secretary of State to put in an interim. There was a small period when nothing could happen. That is a real risk. At the moment, if I get hit by a bus—touch wood—and cannot come into work, there is nothing in the legislation that allows my staff to continue working unless I am there to delegate that power. The Bill allows for the commissioner to appoint a deputy, to delegate specific functions, and, in the event of incapacity or their being unfit to do the job, to be removed from post and an acting commissioner to be put in place. That gives us a lot more security than what we have currently, and I am in favour of it.

**Q19 Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab):** Thank you very much for joining us. In part of your introduction, you spoke about the number of complaints that you receive. Clearly, the number of complaints that you receive is lower than the number of valid complaints that probably should be made. How do you think that this role will encourage people who might not have actively come forward, such as people from LGBT backgrounds and non-UK personnel, and enable them to come forward and make those complaints?

**Mariette Hughes:** I think it will allow people who are experiencing an issue that affects a wider group or a demographic to bring forward that complaint as a whole. There is a lot of onus in service complaints on the resolution of individual grievances. You cannot bring a group complaint; it has to be an individual's complaint with a named respondent. We are doing as much as we can to make sure that that system does not feel onerous, combative or scary, but some people are simply not comfortable putting their name down and saying, "I want to complain about my employer because of this."

This new role has a wider focus on welfare, so you could form really good links with some of the networks to say, "Okay, when people come to you for advice, what are the things they are worried about? What are the things they are scared about? What policies are affecting them?" If those people are still not comfortable raising individual complaints, we need to ask what issues they are facing and whether we can cast a light on them. I want everyone to feel safe to come forward, but equally, if we know there are problems, it should not take the individual coming forward. If we know there are problems, we should be able to go and shine the light on it for them, so that they do not need to do that.

**Q20 Juliet Campbell:** That leads on to my second question, which is about patterns and trends of complaints and whether this role will enable people to look at them, rather than waiting, as you said, and think, "Oh, I have got to be the person who comes forward." How would you be able to address any patterns or trends that you see in complaints?

**Mariette Hughes:** I think it is key to look at the front end of complaints. By the time things come to us, they have been all the way through the process, they are still unhappy with it and they are asking us to fix it. It is really important that we can fulfil that function, but the thing that went wrong for that individual happened maybe 12 months ago, so we have to see what people are coming to welfare for, what people are coming to the networks for, and what people are using "Speak Out"



and the “Call it Out” hub for. When people are saying, “I am seeing certain behaviours and I’m having an issue,” where can we get the sources of data to look into it? It will be really important for the commissioner to try to get ahead of some of those issues. It is really important that, when things go wrong, people can use the formal system, but ideally I would like to stop them going wrong, to be able to look at where the hotspots are and to really focus welfare work on them.

**The Chair:** We have to finish at 9.55 am, but do you want to ask a very quick question, Amanda Martin? You have one minute.

**Q21 Amanda Martin:** One of the biggest changes is made by clause 3, which allows people outside the armed forces to make a complaint or raise a concern. Do you think that will be a good thing?

**Mariette Hughes:** I think it absolutely will be a good thing. The Bill pitches it right: such individuals will be able to raise concerns but, as I understand it, the intention is to form a secondary service complaints system for them all to go through. Essentially, those relevant family members are people we expect to live in certain conditions; there are various aspects of service life that apply to them, that they simply have to live by and that affect everything they do, but they are not subject to service law so they cannot come into the system. Understanding how that affects them and how we are providing for the family members of those who serve us and protect us is really important. It also gets around that problem where individuals might not want to raise a complaint because it will go on their record; their spouse might be able to put it forward for them, and say, “They would never say this to you, but this is really affecting our family and I am worried.”

We also have the issue where we know that people still do not like to talk about their emotions or about what is affecting them. It is their family members and the people around them who see clearer than anyone what is happening and when there is a concern. Giving them an avenue to put their hand up and say, “Look, I think we need a bit of help here,” or, “I think you need to look at this issue,” is absolutely brilliant.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That brings us to the end of the time for the Committee to ask questions. I thank our witness on behalf of the Committee. We will now move to the next panel.

### Examination of Witnesses

*Angela Kitching and Ted Arnold gave evidence.*

9.55 am

**The Chair:** We will now hear oral evidence from Ted Arnold, senior public affairs and policy manager for Help for Heroes, and Angela Kitching, director of campaigns, policy and research for the Royal British Legion. For this panel we have until 10.40 am. Could the panel introduce themselves?

**Angela Kitching:** Thank you for inviting us to give evidence. I am Angela Kitching, the campaigns, policy and research director for the Royal British Legion. We have been holding focus groups on the Bill with members

of the armed forces community and their families—those who are currently serving—to see what their views are. Some of the interesting points that we would like to draw out today are around how we can measure the impact of the role, and what the proper balance is between thematic and individual complaints, given the new scope of the role. We would also like to explore the question of relevant family members and who will be able to raise complaints.

**Ted Arnold:** Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence this morning. My name is Ted Arnold, and I am the senior policy and public affairs manager at Help for Heroes. We are a veterans’ charity, supporting veterans and their families and I will very much be making comments from that perspective. We very much welcome the Bill and we see the key underlying principle as calling for a more transparent culture to make it harder for Defence to hide embedded problems. That is a conversation that we want very much to be a part of. We believe the veteran community has substantial insights to offer to that conversation, as we seek to improve the lives of serving personnel who one day will become veterans themselves.

**Q22 Mr Francois:** Good morning to both of you. Thank you for joining us. First, to the Royal British Legion, your briefing note makes a number of positive suggestions about the Bill. You say quite a bit about the armed forces covenant and the duty that that places upon Government and parliamentarians. How, if at all, do you think the new role of the commissioner will help to strengthen our obligations under the covenant?

**Angela Kitching:** As colleagues will know, the covenant is the promise that the Government make on behalf of the nation to those who serve and who have served, their families and the bereaved. I think the role of the commissioner can help to give that some teeth. Hopefully, the way that the welfare remit is written will go beyond the current legal duties under the covenant and will allow the commissioner to consider thematic issues where service personnel and their families face significant problems.

I hope that in places where the covenant does not have legal force, such as Northern Ireland, the commissioner will be able to bring parties together and co-ordinate a proper response from local authorities or national Governments to improve the experience of service personnel and their families.

I particularly want us to think about the position of the bereaved, who are often not well considered in terms of the covenant. They are one of the groups of people who are supposed to be given special consideration under the covenant, yet they are often missed out when local authorities and others plan their services related to the covenant. I hope that, through the definition of “relevant family members”, the commissioner will be able to bring to the fore some of the experiences of the bereaved community.

**Q23 Mr Francois:** The Bill focuses on serving personnel; what, if anything, do you think the commissioner will be able to do for veterans? As drafted, the legislation does not give the commissioner much of a role in regard to veterans, and some people would argue that that is a lacuna in the Bill. What is what is the RBL’s perspective on that?

**Angela Kitching:** If the powers transfer as they are at the moment, veterans who have experienced a problem in service and raised that through the service complaints system will, we hope, be able to continue to pursue their individual cases. We would like clarity on that point, because I feel it was not well explained on Second Reading.

In terms of the commissioner's relationships, it is really important that they think about their relationships with the veterans commissioners and the veterans advisory and pensions groups that exist around the country. If Haythornthwaite is to be properly implemented, it is going to be a spectrum of service where people pass from serving into reserve and into veteran, and back again, so it will be really important to spot the themes to make sure that we have a group of people in the armed forces community who can rely on the knowledge that they will be well treated when they are in a serving scenario.

**Q24 Mr Francois:** I have one more question on that subject. One issue that cropped up on Second Reading was the proposed UK veterans commissioner and how, if at all, this commissioner would interact with that commissioner. It is not clear how much progress has been made on the veterans commissioner; what is the RBL's perspective on that? Do you have any concerns about the rate of progress on the UK-wide veterans commissioner?

**Angela Kitching:** Yes. You will be aware that that was an open advert and people were being invited to apply just prior to the election. We have not yet heard an update on what will happen to that role. We think it is really important that there is a national veterans commissioner, as described. Clearly, the Armed Forces Commissioner will have a wider, deeper and better resourced role than any of the other commissioners. I think a lot could be learned, particularly from the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, because they report directly to Parliament. The Armed Forces Commissioner can look to that community of commissioners regularly to make sure that they pick up issues as people are leaving service.

**Q25 Mr Francois:** Let me turn to Help for Heroes. For the record, Mr Arnold, I had the privilege of knowing Bryn Parry, who is of course no longer with us. We still think of his widow, Emma. He was an exceptional man and he did a great thing.

What is Help for Heroes' perspective on some of the veterans' issues that I have just put to the RBL, please?

**Ted Arnold:** To build on what Angela said, in our experience, and from what we are told, the military works well and looks after its own until there is a problem in service, be it injury or illness, when it often closes ranks, withholds vital information, or provides inconsistent or varied support.

The last part of the mantra, "Join well, serve well, leave well", is often an afterthought, particularly for the wounded, injured and sick. Very much a key message from our beneficiaries relates to that variability, inconsistency and uncertainty during their service, and particularly at the point of discharge and building up to transition. For instance, the German model has looked at the issues of transition out of service, and how those

policies and procedures would impact personnel post service. Veterans can probably talk with greater openness about their experiences with their service, with the benefit of distance and hindsight, to really crack some of those issues open. The Minister was right to point out on Second Reading that the agencies and services in place are very different for veterans, and it is important to make that distinction, but a lot of these issues stem from the point of discharge or transition.

One issue on which we have been working closely with the Veterans Minister is the call for an independent review into the medical discharge process. We believe that the policies and processes are very much there but are followed inconsistently across the three services, or not followed properly by the chain of command. Building on the other thematic reviews, in regard to issues such as welfare more broadly, leadership style or elements of training, kit or housing, we believe that we hold a wealth of experience, and a wealth of data and evidence, from that community that we would very much like to build into those thematic reviews.

**Q26 Mr Francois:** Lastly, on the veterans point, most local authorities, in accordance with the covenant, have appointed armed forces champions, but I think it is probably true to say—this is not a party political point—that that is very patchy across different local authorities. Some, bluntly, pay lip service but do not really make a lot of difference for veterans. Others really do go the extra mile, particularly in the allocation of social housing. What is your experience, as Help for Heroes, of how that system works at the local government level?

**Ted Arnold:** I think we would broadly say something similar. It is a postcode lottery in terms of support and how the covenant is applied, and there are inconsistencies with the armed forces champions. Some areas are very good—they have some density of serving personnel or veterans, and they are very aligned with some of those issues—and others less so. That seeps into the whole culture, and it touches on a previous point made by the ombudsman about having someone else to advocate on your behalf on those issues, be it getting the right welfare support or getting the right healthcare support. For many, the armed forces champion is seen as that point, but others have to draw on family and the charity sector to get access to the support that they need.

**Q27 Graeme Downie:** I want to raise two points, and the first is mostly for Angela, from the issues you have been discussing in the focus groups. Do you feel that the terminology in clause 4 on general service welfare is appropriate and suitable for purpose? First of all, do you feel that the term "general service welfare" itself covers the correct areas? Similarly, in subsection (2) of new section 340IA, which the Bill will insert into the Armed Forces Act 2006, do we feel that words such as "may materially affect" welfare are the correct terminology? Do we feel that is sufficient?

In subsection (3) of that new section, do we feel that a "relevant family member" is correctly drawn? Further down, subsection (7) of the new section states that the Secretary of State will give the commissioner "reasonable assistance". From the focus groups and the work you have done with your members, is there a feeling that that is the correct terminology? Will that capture everything

that they feel the commissioner needs to be involved in, or is there any work that can be done to broaden or tighten some of those definitions?

**Angela Kitching:** I will do my best with that technical question. I think welfare is a well understood term in the armed forces community. Calling out particular experiences of discrimination, bullying and harassment is useful, because that is not held to be a welfare issue; it is held to be an employment and discrimination issue. On that one, that feels appropriate.

The second part that you raised was about a relevant family member. That really does need significant further exploration in Committee, and further definition. I understand that the Government intend to publish regulations when the Bill passes from the Commons to the Lords, but understanding what a “relevant family member” is has been a really disputed point in the armed forces community. For example, the bereaved parents of people who have lost their service person often feel that they are not included in the world of the armed forces community, and it is the same for the siblings of those who are bereaved. The families of non-UK personnel who are not resident in the UK also often feel outside the environment. The issue is about understanding who a relevant family member is, and being open to the fact that that person could raise relevant information.

Establishing really clearly whether somebody can raise a complaint or a concern—three terms are being used, “complaint”, “concern” and “issue”—and getting clarity over who is allowed to do what is extremely important, because otherwise it will unduly raise people’s expectations that they will be able to follow something through in a formal process, when what they are being invited to do is offer additional information for a thematic review. We need absolute clarity in the way that is communicated to the armed forces community—who has right to a complaint versus who is able to raise a concern or issue more broadly.

The only other thing I would mention is that the process will be everything. I was surprised by the focus groups: we thought that we would collect information about issues that people were likely to want to raise with the commissioner if their scope were broadened, but what people wanted to talk about was how safe they would feel in the process—would they be prepared to raise something, would they be able to do it jointly as the commissioner just raised, would family members feel that they were able to raise concerns and would it affect their person’s career progression or ability to continue to make progress?

There is a high level of distrust in certain areas of current service complaints, for example service-to-type complaints, where people are making accommodation complaints. At the moment, there is already a three-stage process that has to be closed before someone is able to approach the ombudsman. The middle section of that process is so overwhelmed at the moment that people are getting standard messages to say, “We are not able to progress your complaint on the current timelines.” That in itself would be a reason for somebody to be allowed to go to the ombudsman, but they will already have been through an extensive paperwork process to try to pursue their individual complaint before they get to the stage where the commissioner is reviewing the process.

It is getting the balance of expectation right for individuals who are serving and their family members of whether this is likely to be effective and get faster, or whether thematic reviews would be a better place to put their efforts if they have a broader based complaint such as an accommodation issue.

**Q28 Graeme Downie:** Related to that is new section 340IA in clause 4(2), which states:

“in the Commissioner’s opinion...may materially affect the welfare”.

Is the concern that that word choice creates the possibility almost of a bottleneck being artificially created?

**Angela Kitching:** There is a very broad invitation in new section 340IA in clause 4(3), which states:

“The Commissioner must consider any request made by a person subject to service law or a relevant family member to carry out an investigation under this section.”

That is a very broad funnel, which is helpful, but the question of how material the impact is on the individual could be the point at which it narrows. It is the question of the clarity of the process. If yours is not the issue that is taken forward from an individual complaint into a thematic review, how will you feel about that? Will you feel that your concerns are being dismissed or that you need to get together many more people to make a similar complaint? There will need to be a high degree of transparency about the decision-making in order for that to feel appropriate.

**Q29 Graeme Downie:** As I mentioned the ombudsman, can I ask how you think the Bill will work with the existing veterans commissioners, especially in Scotland, and how can we make sure this is applied equally across different parts of the United Kingdom?

**Ted Arnold:** To build on the RBL’s point in its briefing, it is vital that the commissioner is seen as independent. There is certainly a lot they can draw on from the experience of those independent veterans commissioners throughout Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—and, it is hoped, soon in England too. They bring valuable knowledge and insight and act as a voice for veterans in the entire armed forces community throughout the UK.

We would certainly encourage that co-ordination between the two agencies, particularly around data and evidence sharing—not just with the veterans commissioners, but other agencies such as the Office for Veterans’ Affairs, the defence transition services and organisations in the charitable sector. It is important that the work of commissioners is communicated and integrated as clearly as possible with other veterans agencies. That builds on the ombudsman’s point that those key relationships should be built and the right thematic reviews carried out.

**Q30 Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD):** We briefly touched on family. It would be really interesting for the Committee to understand what you class as family, given that nowadays families come in all different shapes and sizes. Could you help us understand what your thoughts are on that?

**Angela Kitching:** Obviously, there are family members—and, from our point of view as a charity, we have a definition of beneficiary that would mean that there was a degree of dependency between the family member and the person who had served, or the serving person, or somebody who is bereaved of somebody who was in service.



In the real world, though, there is often a much wider group of people who feel most relevant to the person who was serving. That could well be the household that they came into service from; it could be the family that they left behind when they came from another country to serve on our behalf; it could be their grown-up children; or it could be the group of people who immediately surround them and offer them support.

The issue is about trying to make sure that, as you are peeling back the layers of the onion, it is the people who are closest to the person who are serving, but not just their immediate household. If you think about the person who they live with, it might be much more relevant to also think about their parents. At the moment, a large number of non-ranking people in service are typically passing through service between the ages of 18 and 30, so they often do not have other immediate spousal relationships. It is their parents or grandparents, whose household they have come out of, who are closest to them.

**Q31 Helen Maguire:** Would you rather see a broader principle of inclusion rather than exclusion when we are defining family members, so that people do not feel excluded from the process?

**Angela Kitching:** Yes; and it is about where somebody can offer relevant information to the matter under consideration. It is about how much relevant information they could have. However, it is worth thinking about how to challenge the commissioner's outreach into countries that a person has come from—where that information might be held, for example. Unless there is an active outreach into those immediate relationships, I think people naturally think, "Well, I am not in country and therefore I won't be able to offer my views on this process."

**Q32 Helen Maguire:** What do you think the commissioner could do in advance to support personnel as they are serving, to help prevent some of the issues that we then see in veterans? Is there anything in the Bill that will help with that?

**Angela Kitching:** Some of the issues that Ted has raised about discharge are massively important throughout somebody's career. How somebody leaves the armed forces is crucial to their ongoing experience in life.

In terms of what people raised during our focus group sessions, housing issues are key. Good transition around housing makes a huge difference. Healthcare and education access for family members is a hugely important issue. If you look at the families continuous attitudes survey and the armed forces continuous attitudes survey, the two main opinion-based surveys, issues around family and the extent to which family have access to outside services are key concerns of serving personnel. I understand that those issues will not directly be in the purview of the commissioner but, as part of building relationships, decent healthcare access at discharge, support for family members in accessing local services, and housing are the three things that I would really focus on.

**Q33 Helen Maguire:** You touched briefly on trust; it is really important that armed forces personnel should be able to have trust. How do you think the commissioner can be presented in such a way as to gain the trust of military personnel?

**Angela Kitching:** Independence is really key. It is really important for personnel to be able to see that the chain of command are listening and taking action as a result of the commissioner's report. To be honest, the key thing is that the reports are seen to have impact—they should be reporting not just on the flow of cases and the themes that have come out but on what has happened as a result. That is really the issue at the moment, I feel: people can see that their individual complaints have got so far but cannot see whether there was a wider impact on the system or whether anything was changed as a result. I am hoping that the parliamentary element will add that additional layer of transparency and trust.

One other thing: people talked about being able to raise concerns anonymously, understanding that that meant they would not then personally get feedback on what had happened. But they were very keen on a system that would allow them to raise those concerns, in the manner of Crimestoppers—when you can give information in detail but that does not come directly come back to you as the person who raised it.

**Q34 Helen Maguire:** One final question. The Bill makes no reference to the armed forces covenant. Do you think it should?

**Angela Kitching:** I have not considered that directly. I understand that there is consideration of the extension of the covenant in law. It is really important that we do not tie ourselves to the current legal definition, which is much more limited in the policy areas that it looks at. But anything that demonstrates that the covenant is the promise that the nation makes would be really useful. Among employers, in the healthcare system and in local authorities, it is beginning to be the golden thread that runs through the promise that is made. Anything we can do to strengthen that will be helpful, but I would not want it to be too limited by the current narrow definition of the covenant in law.

**David Reed:** I thank Angela and Ted for being here today. The title of the role is changing from "ombudsman" to "commissioner". We previously heard that different perceptions come with those different titles. Do you think that moving to "commissioner" is a good change? If not, where are the limitations?

**Angela Kitching:** I think it is helpful because it indicates a move from a system that reviews the administration of an appropriate action in relation to individual complaints into a wider and more thematic system. For me, that signals that we are not in a situation where the system is only going to be following through individual complaints and that wider representations can be made. It sounds more like the action of the Children's Commissioner, for example.

I completely understand concerns that the ombudsman groups would have about the fact that, outside the courts, "ombudsman" is the highest way of considering individual complaints. But as long as it is well communicated within the community that the new role and office are capable of doing both, I do not have particular concerns about the change in title.

**Ted Arnold:** To build on that, the change is to set expectations and make very clear to the community what the new role is and the new powers will be. Angela spoke about trying to influence a cultural shift to make people



feel comfortable about going to the new commissioner and take forward not just grievances but other issues up and down the chain of command—best practice, for example.

**Q35 Andrew Ranger (Wrexham) (Lab):** When people leave the armed forces, they state that morale is one of the biggest reasons for why they intend to leave. Do you think the commissioner's appointment and the powers they will be given will have a direct impact on improving morale and therefore decrease the number of leavers in the forces?

**Angela Kitching:** At the moment, if you look at evidence from the armed forces continuous attitude survey, they say that the impact of service life on their families, the opportunities that they have outside of service and the amount of pay they have are the things that are currently undermining morale. For family members, it is their experiences of living a service life, so you can see that there is an obvious potential for this role to try to improve that experience.

It is helpful to think about not just the individual complaints, but those wider welfare issues that chip away at people's experiences of their time in service. The No. 1 reason given by service people for leaving is the impact on family and personal life, so anything we can do to improve that has got to help with the broader morale issue.

**Ted Arnold:** To build on that, persistent issues with the current complaints system have deepened that dissatisfaction with service life. If we look at the various reviews—Haythornthwaite, Etherton, Atherton, Lyons and those that the Defence Committee has carried out over the years—attempts have been made to address concerns with morale or certain groups. The commissioner could bring a much more robust approach to addressing some of those problems. We envisage, as does the Bill, trying to involve the commissioner in day-to-day military life so that there is a real granular understanding of what those issues are.

**Q36 Andrew Ranger:** What do you think would be a sensible timeframe in which we could say there had been a direct correlation between the commissioner being in place and seeing an improvement? What would be a timeframe to measure that over?

**Ted Arnold:** Again, I think that will be difficult to measure. Having an annual review that reports to Parliament, and perhaps the community making observations—not just on thematic reviews, but in the annual report as well, in a similar way as we do as a sector to the covenant—would be an appropriate way of measuring progress.

**Angela Kitching:** How you measure the impact of the thematic reports is crucial to that. After that annual report, you would then need to think, "Okay, what did we see that changed as a result?". At that point, I suspect that you will see an impact on morale, with people feeling the difference because there will be something to point to. It is also about the mechanism for the commissioner to follow up on recommendations from previous reports and look at change over time.

There needs to be an adequate capacity in the office for them to have access to data that allows them to track the change over time as a result of it—I note that an amendment has been tabled on this today—particularly for groups whose experience might otherwise be invisible.

Those groups are very small percentages of people, such as LGBT personnel, women in particular branches of the armed forces, and the experience of non-UK personnel, but otherwise they would end up being subsumed into the whole. It is important, as in the German reports, that some of those experiences are drawn out in the annual report and we track change over time for particular groups, who otherwise end up being lost in the wider picture.

**Q37 Luke Pollard:** Thank you both for giving evidence. Can I take you back to independence and trust? Legislating for independence is one thing, but building trust in a system is quite different. Can you talk us through your expectations of how an Armed Forces Commissioner could build trust with armed forces personnel and—withstanding that their remit is predominantly people who are serving and their families—with the wider armed forces family as well?

**Angela Kitching:** What people mentioned to us when we spoke to them in groups was that they needed to understand who the commissioner was. They needed to understand their relationship with the existing welfare services in the individual branches, but also with the wider service complaints process. Knowing exactly what to expect from them was really important, as was their office being seen to be open, both for serving personnel and their family members, so that they could make a direct approach and not feel as though they had to chase through another system to be allowed to approach that person. Also important was that the person was prepared to visit, which obviously is the case for the current Service Complaints Ombudsman.

The digital access is a real issue currently, as you will be aware, on areas of our Defence estate, but also where people are operationally deployed or are struggling to get access to enough technology to allow them to engage with complex digital systems. What they did not want was something where they would have to log in to understand the ongoing process of what was happening. They needed somebody who could be reached via a variety of different sources and, as I have previously mentioned, something that would allow for transparency and a degree of anonymity, if they wanted it, in relation to thematic information, so that they were able to offer what evidence they had, even if they did not want to pursue it as an individual complaint themselves.

Particular attention needs to be given to experiences of bullying, harassment and discrimination. In any other service that we look at that deals with those complaints, people have a significant amount of protection when those are being considered. If, for example, a thematic review were to be opened into an issue that touched on bullying, intimidation or harassment, particular consideration would need to be given to how that evidence was collected, because people understandably feel very vulnerable about offering that evidence. The armed forces is a unique employer in that way, because it is not just a job, it is a life, and the life of your family, and it can potentially control your future career. The level of trust needs to be built because the level of exposure and risk is so high if somebody chooses to step out of line and raise something.

**Ted Arnold:** To build on that, I think an effort must be made to change the current culture to encourage individuals and people on their behalf to know that

they can come to a commissioner. Building on the German model, that is not just to raise issues of grievance, but maybe the spectrum of duty-related issues, and not just those problems, but personal and social problems as well.

**Q38 Luke Pollard:** Thank you for that. Secondly, in relation to the ability of armed forces personnel to raise issues, people in civilian roles have greater access to do that. Can you talk us through how you think it might work, being able to raise an issue that is outside the chain of command, but is still within what is, in our military, quite a hierarchical structure? Can you talk us through how organisations such as yours would be able to communicate the ways in which that could work, but which do not undermine discipline and military order, and which provide the opportunity for the commissioner to hear from people about their particular concerns?

**Angela Kitching:** When we have gathered evidence before, particularly on sensitive issues, often we have allowed people to speak openly to us with a very clear and ethical statement about how we are going to use that information, which they previously agreed to. There is certainly the potential for us to be able to pass on that information on behalf of armed forces groups. We did that in relation to the Etherton report when people did not want to give individual evidence and did not want to step forward themselves. We gathered those views and submitted them to the review team on behalf of people who did not want to identify themselves. There is potentially a role for organisations—not just us, but many others—to do that. Thinking about the location of those conversations is really important. They cannot be on bases; they need to be in an environment where people feel comfortable to express themselves.

Overall it is the assurance that the office of the commissioner has a degree of separation from chain of command that is the most important thing. Ensuring that the office has adequate resources to be able to do the kind of work that I have just described will be important, and trying to make sure that that person is able to demonstrate that they are sufficiently independent of the current chain of command, and are really able to bring forward views that will very difficult for chain of command to hear, is important.

**Ted Arnold:** Also, it is important for chain of command to feel that they are comfortable raising those issues as well, knowing that it is going to the Secretary of State and being considered by Parliament.

That also builds on and adds to the importance of the commissioner drawing upon data and evidence from the veterans' community, particularly those who have been recently discharged. For some, it takes many years for them to get help and to reach that crisis point—to have those reflections and be able to say what could have been done better during their service. The removal over time—being away from your service and not fearing repercussions, particularly in terms of your career, can add to that. As Angela said, the Etherton review was a great example.

**Q39 Pam Cox:** Thank you for joining us today. I recognise much of what you say about the challenges of service life through my experience in the armed forces parliamentary scheme and representing a garrison city, Colchester. We all hope that the Armed Forces Commissioner will help to address those challenges. We

talked about how we might measure the impact of the commissioner role, but how might that impact be communicated? What role might your organisations play in helping to communicate that?

**Angela Kitching:** I think it is really important to lay out from the start what the intended change is. When we are asking the commissioner to report, it needs to be a report that looks at the intended impact and then tries to measure against that. It cannot just be a report of activity.

I also think that, as the commissioner opens thematic reviews, they need to make sure that they invite evidence from organisations, academics and others who have depth of experience in some of the best ways to address some of those issues, and looking at the change that could be achieved over time. Many of them are well-trodden paths as research issues either in this country or internationally. They need to be looking at what works and addressing some of the concerns—that evidence is readily available, and we need to make sure that the commissioner is on the front foot in drawing that in.

In terms of Parliament, as soon as reports are laid in Parliament, we obviously do our best to try to make sure that they are well communicated in the community, but it is very difficult to reach into somebody's service life. They are in the middle of their job, as you will have experienced, and their head is on the job. It is about making sure that they are well networked in the armed forces community. The armed forces champions who were mentioned would be one way of making sure that the wider system understands the changes that are necessary. Armed forces liaison officers, who are Government-appointed in Wales, are a good model for people whose role it is to reach into communities and are additionally resourced to do that, unlike the armed forces roles in local authorities and the NHS, which are usually voluntary. It is about being well networked in the existing armed forces communications structures.

There is also something about the in-service welfare system, which, as Ted mentioned, can be incredibly patchy in the way that it delivers outcomes for people. I think there is probably a duty there that thinks about how better we can require the in-service welfare system to consider changes that come out of the commissioner's office, perhaps requiring them to write back to say, "This is the impact and this is what has changed as a result of it."

I am afraid that the way to do it is probably all of those methods at once.

**The Chair:** That brings us to the end of the session. Thank you very much to our witnesses. We will go on to our next panel.

#### Examination of Witnesses

*Lieutenant General Sir Andrew Gregory KBE CB DL and Lieutenant General Sir Nicholas Pope KCB CBE gave evidence.*

10.39 am

**The Chair:** We will now hear oral evidence from Lieutenant General Sir Andrew Gregory, controller of SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity, and Lieutenant General Sir Nicholas Pope, chair of the Confederation of Service Charities. We have until 11.25 am for this panel. Could our witnesses introduce themselves, perhaps saying a bit about themselves and what they do?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** Good morning, sirs and ma'ams. I am Andrew Gregory. I spent 35 years in the Royal Artillery in the British Army. My last three years were as Chief of Defence People in the Ministry of Defence—very much looking at these sorts of areas—during which the Service Complaints Commissioner became the Service Complaints Ombudsman, so I have seen some of the transition. I left the military in 2016 and have been the controller and chief executive of SSAFA, the Armed Forces charity since then. I am also a trustee of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust, which runs the armed forces parliamentary scheme.

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Nick Pope. I know some members of the Committee. I was an Army officer for 39 years—I am struck by this witness panel's age compared with the previous panel's. I finished in my job as effectively the Army's second in command, so I dealt with the likes of Mariette and Nicola from the Service Complaints Ombudsman from a single-service perspective. As the Army's 2IC, I was the principal personnel officer for the Army. I left the Army in 2019 and am now chair of the Confederation of Service Charities, Cobseo. A couple of years ago, I also helped Rick Haythornthwaite to produce the Haythornthwaite review of the armed forces community, which was probably the first time in a generation that we had had a systemic look at the people function for the armed forces. So I sit here in three guises to answer your questions.

**Q40 Mr Francois:** Generals, good morning. Nick, could you give us some idea of how many service charities Cobseo now covers and some idea of the different topics? I know you have banded them together; how does that work? When you have done that, could you explain the charitable sector's broad view—if it is possible for so many different charities, large and small, to have a collective view—of the Bill and any strengths and weaknesses therein? Please take it in those three parts.

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** I must start by commending you for the “Filling the Ranks” report, which I have mentioned here before, and which was one of our opportunities to look at the way we carry out armed forces recruitment. I still go back to that report and read it by my bedside table.

We believe there are currently around 1,735 military service charities. Some people would say, “Golly, that's an awful lot,” but we are the one percenters—there are 160,000 charities in the UK and about 1,700 military service charities. The first thing to say is that whether that is too much or too little is irrelevant, because each charity is answerable through its board and trustees to the Charity Commission. We are not stuck with the number, because it changes, but that is the number of charities.

All charities are not the same. Of that number, a vast swathe is focused on heritage, museums and monuments, or service funds—ship stations and aircraft stations. About 500 really cover welfare and benevolence—the kinds of military charity organisations you would typically think of. Of the 500, about 25 raise about 90% of the money. If you are going to focus on money and impact at the national level, the likes of Andrew in SSAFA, the Royal British Legion or Help for Heroes are the typical charities you would think of.

That is not to decry the enormous contribution made by smaller charities. At local level, a fantastic amount of work is done, if you are thinking of a drop-in centre or breakfast club—a means of bringing together veterans, particularly for comradeship and belonging—but my point is that the word “charity” covers a smorgasbord of activities.

In the sector, we tend to slice and dice in how we bring our charities together through what are known as clusters or communities of interest, where like-minded charities come together to talk about, for example, mental health, housing or employment or issues affecting non-UK or female personnel, so we use the charity sector to think thematically about issues. Sectorally, we have an executive committee that Andrew sits on, alongside 16 other chief executives—it is like a United Nations council—where we try to garner the systemic issues across the sector. It is right to say that there is not a sector view, but what the sector can do is bring together information to say, “These are the kinds of views that exist across the military charity sector.”

It is probably also fair to say that the sector focuses not exclusively but predominantly on the veterans community, albeit some charities also link back into serving personnel. We tend not to think about either veterans or serving personnel; we try to use the nomenclature of “the armed forces community”, because it picks up the bereaved, spouses, dependants—the entire gamut of those who exist in that community. At the broadest, you might say that around 6 million or 7 million people, so gusting 10% of the UK population, have some relationship with the armed forces. That is a large number.

**Q41 Mr Francois:** That is a good description of the breadth of the waterfront that Cobseo covers—thank you. Are there any particular strengths or weaknesses in the Bill that you, on behalf of Cobseo, would like to highlight to the Committee before we debate it on Thursday?

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** I am well aware, having read the Second Reading *Hansard* scripts, that most of the issues I cover will not be unfamiliar to you all. The sector welcomes the Bill and it welcomes the creation of an Armed Forces Commissioner. As we approach the selection of the commissioner and further determination of the scope, we will be looking to pick up on some of the issues you have talked about with regard to independence and the boundary between the armed forces serving community and those who have served. We are interested in the ambit and the responsibilities of the commissioner function. From a selfish, sectoral perspective, we are also interested in the way in which we as a stakeholder will engage with the commissioner. Those are the kinds of activities that we are looking at.

**Q42 Mr Francois:** Thank you very much. General Gregory, could you answer a similar question on behalf of SSAFA? I am sure you looked at the Second Reading report, too; I know you are a very thorough chap. Are there any strengths or weaknesses in the Bill that you would like to highlight to the Committee?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** First, for those who do not know, I will highlight that SSAFA is just coming up to 140 years old. It was formed in 1885 as the



Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association. Although Nick says that military charities have mainly focused on the veterans community, we actually do a lot of work in the serving community in many different ways. I will not expand on that now.

Like Nick, I have read the *Hansard* report. Initially, I was concerned that the commissioner would potentially undermine the chain of command, but I am not concerned any more. I have had a good session with the Minister for the Armed Forces—we both have—and I am reassured on that. The challenge, as Nick has talked about, is that there is a continuum running from before people join the armed forces to when they are thinking about it, to their first day of service, through their service, to their departure and to their subsequent life. Trying to state that the commissioner will look at only the time when people are subject to military law, regular and reservist, will be quite difficult. You cannot divorce some of the consequences of military service from welfare issues within and during military service.

I want to go back to Haythornthwaite and some of the propositions being considered as part of the defence review, particularly the people proposition. The review is quite rightly looking at what we are choosing to call one defence—people in uniform, full and part time, people not in uniform, full and part time, or people delivering to defence outputs. That is absolutely right. That is exactly the model that should be used, but potentially the commissioners will look at only a part of that ability to deliver defence outputs. My only concern is that the commissioner should be looking at how best to sustain defence outputs. The person is tasked to look at welfare issues. I worry that there are some artificial divides that may not help the person do their work.

**Mr Francois:** Thank you very much.

**Q43 Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): Sir Andrew, I work closely with SSAFA. You have some fantastic volunteers in Norfolk. Thank you for the work your organisation does.

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** Thank you very much.

**Terry Jermy:** Prior to my current role, I was a local councillor for a number of years. I worked with SSAFA to encourage people to come forward, first of all to raise an issue, but more often to formalise the issue. Encouraging people to go through that process was quite a barrier. Do you think these proposals will encourage people to be prepared to raise and formalise issues?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** That is a great question. Your previous session discussed how to generate trust. I thought that was a good question too because this person must be trusted. They have to be sufficiently trusted by the chain of command, but equally trusted by the community, to fairly champion their views without, when appropriate, revealing their identity. The challenge we find with many service personnel, particularly veterans, is that they are often too proud to admit they are finding life difficult, perhaps while they are serving and often once they have left the military. They do not want to admit they are a charity case.

Going back to the question of trust, this commissioner is going to have to work hard to say, "I really am here for you. I am here to champion your issues in whatever

way we feel is collectively appropriate." They will also have to work hard to ensure that the chain of command does not get defensive, but instead sees this as an opportunity. I was not serving when Mariette Hughes was the Service Complaints Ombudsman, but when Nicola Williams was doing the job we talked regularly. I was effectively on one side as the policy lead in the Ministry of Defence and she was on the other side. Success to me would have been more complaints. For those of you who have not met Nicola, she is a very approachable person, but trying to get people to have the confidence to step forward, to go to her and say, "This ain't fair," was really difficult. The intent is good and I support it, but I think building confidence will continue to be a challenge.

**Q44 Terry Jermy:** The word "commissioner" means different things to different people. Do you have any views on the use of that title and do you think it is appropriate?

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** I heard the answers given by the previous panel. I am relaxed about this. What is in a word? We use "veteran" to pick up smorgasbord of individuals. We use "service" for the sector indivisibly. Moving from ombudsman to commissioner does, I suppose, demonstrate a shift in a position. If we use a word from a communications perspective, to get people to think differently, there is utility in that. Having spoken to Mariette about this, although I do not want to put words into her mouth, I suspect she feels she is prescribed in some of her activities by the way that her job has been set up. In moving to "commissioner" we have a chance to think about seeing the new post through a different prism and communicating that well, both to the current armed forces serving community and to those who are to come.

If I may go slightly off-piste, the average tenure of somebody who is serving is about seven years. In that time, most individuals will graze through without ever coming across the ombudsman. Looking forward, one of our challenges—probably a challenge both for the commissioner's post and for the wraparound of the Department—is to ensure that young men and women who join in the future recognise that function and the idea of a champion who sits outwith the chain of command and gives them a chance to have their voice heard. Thinking about generation Z and beyond, in an area in which agency at the individual level is increasingly important, that matters.

**Q45 David Reed:** Flipping Terry's question on its head, could it actually have negative implications in terms of culture in service life and usher in a new wave of complaining?

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** What we have to be very careful about, in relation to the commissioner's role, is ensuring that we do not chase demons unnecessarily. I love the phrase, the bumper sticker, that underpins the armed forces covenant:

"a thriving Armed Forces community that is valued and supported within our society."

It has five key points: thriving, armed forces community, value, support and society. Some 97% or 98% of the young men and women who go through service have a fantastic time and come out with additional skills,



valued by the individual, valued by organisations that employ them, and valued by society for having served. As for support, in my territory, in the charity sector and in some of the statutory service provision, it is about catching those who need support and getting them back to being thriving members of society.

There is a danger that by concentrating on the areas of damage, harm and complaint, we will not have the context in which we see people thrive. Why is that important? It is because we want young men and women to join the armed forces in the future. They have to recognise that there is value in so doing and that service benefits not only the nation but also themselves as individuals. That is the area in which we need to capture the context, I suppose.

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** I completely agree. We need as a nation to better promote the narrative that service in the armed forces is good for people, it makes great people; that it does not damage the majority, and there are systems to pick up those who are damaged.

I do not see the commissioner as a threat. As I said earlier, that did worry me previously. Nick and I have both been commanding officers. When I was a commanding officer, who could the soldiers and officers go to if they wanted to talk to somebody outside the chain of command? They could go to the padre, the doctor, and perhaps the welfare officer, but particularly the padre and the doctor because they were independent. The padre or doctor would have to get the trust of those individuals because often the solution was within the remit of the chain of command. They had to get those individuals' trust so that they could say, "I would like to go back to the commanding officer with this, and then we can see how we can work through it." For some, that was a tricky hurdle to overcome.

What the Service Complaints Ombudsman has provided, and what the commissioner will provide, is something at a higher level. I know it is simplistic, but it is not dissimilar to those people who can pick up individual and systemic themes that are affecting people. The chain of command has got to get used to it. The role is not that of a federation or a union, which would have been very different and very dangerous in my view. I do not see it as that. It is an opportunity to improve life and to improve trust on both sides. I really mean that.

**Q46 David Reed:** On that point, how do you think the new role will be communicated downward, from a commanding officer to their service personnel? What level of severity do you think would warrant going to see the commissioner, and how do you think that would be communicated to soldiers?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** Service people are intelligent people and they will make an appropriate judgment. The commissioner will need quite a lot of support to manage two quite different things: the individual issues that will percolate up to that person, and the systemic themes they want to investigate, such as poor-quality housing or whatever issues it happens to be. The commissioner and his or her office will challenge Ministers in Parliament with their reports.

As goes communicating to young servicepeople, you now have a separate opportunity. You have someone who will pick up your issues and run with them for you. I think people will get that actually, I really do. I understand

that there is a fine balance here, but if intelligent commanders at various levels see issues that really are to the detriment of their people, they will start to have a conversation. People will have to judge it very carefully with this commissioner, but I can see that happening.

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** I would like to tier the answer to this question into political ambition, policy formulation, service delivery and lived experience. You will be looking to the Armed Forces Commissioner to tap into all those areas. On the point that Andrew brings up about lived experience, one of the aspects of the commissioner's work will be direct interventions with individuals who raise issues that concern them. That is fine and necessary. Part of the commissioner's function is about dealing with individuals at their individual level.

The next issue, to bring it to the service delivery level, is about whether the system that the Ministry of Defence has set up is sufficient to deal systemically with some of the issues that individuals bring to the commissioner's attention. That takes you back into policy formulation. To what extent are the current policies—the service complaints system, for example—designed to be efficient, effective and fair? Do we need to look at the policies as well?

The final level becomes a political choice, I suspect. Thinking about the accommodation, we know the answer to this already. We know that service families accommodation and single-living accommodation is not where we would like it to be, but within a finite budget are there political choices to start to address these issues more systemically? The commissioner's function will tap into each of those four tiers of activity.

I suspect that we will look these things with the commissioner when the commissioner's report is laid before Parliament. Having the report laid before Parliament and having the opportunity at parliamentary level to debate the report feeds back into the MOD. To what extent will the recommendations that the commissioner makes be manifested in demonstrable changes in the way that the Department thinks? I think about the last eight Service Complaints Commissioner and Service Complaints Ombudsman reports: all of them have said that the system is not effective, efficient and fair, QED, so is the report driving the change in the Department that we seek?

**Q47 Amanda Martin:** You touched on this, Sir Andrew, when you talked about the size of the job and the role. Do you think that the proposals for resourcing the commissioner's office are adequate to fulfil those functions? You talked a lot about trust and transparency, and others have spoken about impact. To either of you, is there anything else we need to think about to make sure that the interaction between chain of command and the commissioner is coherent and successful?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** In terms of resources, the honest answer is, how long is a piece of string? Would one always like more? Possibly. Assuming the Bill is approved by Parliament, the Government will want to see the first commissioner given a fair chance to succeed. Once that person is in situ and has looked at the scale of the job, they will challenge the Secretary of State for Defence in particular. Given the ability of the commissioner to go back to Parliament, he or she could then say, "I can't do my job." I think there will be an appropriate balance struck.

In terms of this business of gaining trust, once again—I agree with the earlier answers from Mariette and others—it is down to the person to really project themselves, to get out, to be seen on the ground and to talk to the various parts of the community. That is how it is going to work. So in the first year, this person will spend an awful lot of time doing that.

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** I would add that I think the figures in the paper are based on analysis from compatriots in Germany and build on the current SCOAF function, so there is a logic to them. Whether we in the Department choose to expand or contract is probably an issue for three or four years hence.

I really buy the idea of trust. The word I would use is “culture”. I will be interested to see how the commissioner starts to pick at some of the issues we have regularly seen through the Wigston report, the Lyons report, the Atherton report and so on, to start to get at the cultural issues and move towards a more inclusive armed forces.

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** If I could come back for a second bite at the cherry, the other challenge is seeing through recommendations, which does worry me. I have been part of the armed forces covenant reference group almost since it was established in 2010. As part of that, the Secretary of State is tasked to put a report before Parliament each year. Some of the themes are consistent in all those reports—I think that is the polite way of putting it.

How do we make sure that recommendations made by the commissioner are either addressed or properly answered? It goes back to the question of resources for service family accommodation and single living accommodation. We cannot do it at the moment, but we will go on a journey to improve life for families in that way. That is one of the things that worries me, because these things have their moment in court—their moment in Parliament—and then we move on and forget them.

**Q48 Helen Maguire:** Thank you for coming. General Gregory, the armed forces are a tri-service, and there are slightly different cultures within that, and the Gurkhas as well. Do you feel that the role of the commissioner needs to be adapted slightly, in order to be trusted by service personnel?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** You are absolutely right. We are all part of the armed forces but we are quite different as tribes, and then within the Army we have sub-tribes called regiments, and they are pretty different too, each with its own traditions and culture, and things like that. Then you have the Brigade of Gurkhas, with which Nick has served very closely, and which has a wonderful tradition and history. How do you capture all that? We do it within SSAFA. We support the whole community. How do we do it? We take the case of each person and each family on its merits. We support 2,000 Gurkha families each year. The support we provide to them is quite different from the support we provide to some of our other beneficiaries.

I am flannelling a bit but, to answer your question, I think the commissioner will need to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the armed forces so that he or she understands the various components of how they live their lives. As I am sure many of you know, Navy personnel have traditionally lived their lives—this is a

generalisation—in different ways from the Army. The Navy serviceperson goes to sea and their family stays static, perhaps around Portsmouth, Faslane, Devonport or near their own family. The Army has traditionally had more camp followers, and families have moved as the regiment has moved. That means it is very different, and it puts different pressures on both the serviceperson and their family. The commissioner will have to get his or her head around that.

**Q49 Helen Maguire:** Given that SSAFA is such an old charity, you will have seen that the needs of military personnel have changed over the years. What do you think that will mean for the role of the commissioner?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** The needs of people who come to us are absolutely changing. I have been the chief exec of SSAFA for eight-and-a-bit years, and we have seen a significant change even during that time. The people coming to us are younger, and not just because the world war two and national service generation are slowly passing on, sadly. More working-age veterans are coming to us, and there are more complicated, multifaceted issues. I say that one or more of the d’s has gone wrong in their lives: drink, debt, drugs, divorce, depression, domestic violence, a dependency culture, digs or housing, disease, death, or disability. It will not be all of them—I will test you on them later—but it will be more than one.

To take it back to your first question, our people are taking each case on its merits and looking at it. The commissioner will need to understand that, in terms of service families and service personnel, the cases will be different, and he or she will have to pick that up.

**Q50 Helen Maguire:** General, from your past experience with the ombudsman service, what would be your biggest ask of the commissioner in their new role?

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** If the commissioner is going to be shining a light on the current welfare conditions of the armed forces community, in a way that enables Parliament to have the evidence for a sensible discussion about the way in which the Ministry conducts its business and makes its choices—about resource allocation, policy formulation and service delivery—then, to have proper teeth, I would want to see, within three, four or five years, some tangible changes in either resource allocations or the metrics that are coming back through the commissioner to Parliament. Unless we see that, there will be no real impact or effect out of creating the post. To get real teeth, we have to have the feedback loop that Andrew talked about, in a way that matters.

**Q51 Graeme Downie:** First, I thank SSAFA for the work it does in Fife. The work it has done, when I was a councillor and on an ongoing basis, has been incredible.

To pick up on something you mentioned earlier, SSAFA has been around for a very long time, so what do you see as some of the thematic issues that have existed with forces personnel over the years? Where do you think the commissioner should be looking first? Are there two or three things from those thematic areas that they could look at?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** I will come to your question. There is an interesting discussion going on. The Minister for Veterans and People, Al Carns, has

commissioned Operation Valour, which is great—both Nick and I have engaged with that—to look at how better we can support veterans. I do worry that we have bits looking at veterans and bits looking at servicepeople and their families, working slightly in isolation. I come back to the point about the continuum: for veterans, setting the conditions in service for success outside is absolutely critical.

In terms of themes and areas that the commissioner might wish to focus on, there are some obvious ones, such as the issue of service accommodation. In defence, during my time, we started off with something called the future accommodation model, which then became the new accommodation model. What is the current term?

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** Accommodation offer.

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** Trying to get something that meets the aspirations of modern servicemen and women and their families has proven quite difficult. So I think that will be an area.

I am very proud of my service. People say, “What would have made you leave early?” I would answer, “Had the services ever compromised on their values and standards.” But I do think there are some cultural areas of shame in the armed forces, and how better we can tackle some of those issues would be another area that the commissioner would certainly wish to look at relatively early in their tenure.

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** I will go back to Haythornthwaite to answer the question. One of the pieces of evidence that we put in the report was about how over time the role of the family has changed, and how family conditions drive individual aspects. I was struck when I took Rick down to visit some of the Blades in Poole. We had a table like this one, with 25 members of the Special Boat Service sitting around it, and the question I posed to them was, “Who is going to be here in five years?” Not one hand went up, so I said, “That’s shocking. Why?” The reasons were family-based: time away from Christmases, accommodation standards and the inability to get spousal employment. The issues that matter are focused on spouses. If we have a commissioner who focuses on one area to make a difference, that should be spousal employment.

I remember, about 10 years ago, taking the decision to bring the Army out of Germany, and selling it to the then Secretary of State, Phil Hammond, as a savings measure, because it was a lot cheaper to have the UK Army based in the UK—for the first time in 300 years. The reason we took the decision as an army was predominantly around the lack of spousal employment opportunities in Germany, to be brutally frank. Yes, there was a change in the geostrategic landscape, but we could not get enough young men—particularly men—to want to serve in Germany because it was going to impact on dual-income families. Spousal employment and opportunities and looking at family conditions would be an area I hope we could unpack in a big way.

**Q52 Graeme Downie:** On your point about shame factors around the Armed Forces in the past, do you see the role of the commissioner as being essentially proactive and preventive in heading those off?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** That is a great question. I hope the commissioner would, in that space, want to work to support the chain of command. I think the

chain of command is trying desperately to get it right—I would say that of when I served. Nobody likes the awful headlines we have had over suicides. Obviously the biggest issue ever was Deepcut, but there have been plenty of examples where those of us who are part of the military community have hung our heads in shame, as we should have, because that is not how young people should be treated.

The chain of command is not complacent; it is doing its best. You need someone who is there to say, “Right, I am going to challenge you,” which the commissioner must do, but equally to say, “I am going to support you, because we are all collectively on a journey to make this part of society and employment better.”

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** Can I add a little codicil to that?

**Q53 Graeme Downie:** I am conscious of the time. Could you answer that question, and include the role that you feel your charities would have with the commissioner in heading off some of those issues on a more practical, day-to-day basis?

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** I will start with the codicil, if I may, which goes back to my beaten record about context. The suicide report is a good example. The report on suicide in the Armed Forces community said that in every sector with young men aged 18 to 24, the Armed Forces were better than UK society. The headline in the paper at the weekend said that young men in the Army aged 18 to 24 are at equal risk as the population to suicide or damage. The commissioner needs the ability to say what it is about the service that is a prophylactic activity. One is too many, but by golly we are doing well.

**The Chair:** May I interrupt you? We are running out of time, so will the Minister ask his questions?

**Q54 Luke Pollard:** Thank you for allowing me to interrupt, Sir Edward.

Wearing the hats from your previous roles, can I ask you to think about the unannounced visits power in the Bill? One of the bits that I feel strongly about is the ability of the commissioner to visit any base in the UK unannounced to look at general service-welfare matters. First, could you talk us through the effect that the commissioner having that power would have on how our military would address general service welfare matters in the broadest sense? Whether used or not, it would be a power that the commissioner had in their toolbox.

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** There are probably two aspects to that. First, if this works well, units should embrace the perception of challenge that comes with an unannounced visit. If you are a unit that is functioning effectively, you should have no worries about it. If you are a unit that is hiding cultural issues, good—you are going to be found out.

If it is an issue about systemic stuff like housing or accommodation, it will be well known. Your ability in the chain of command to address some of these issues is rather circumscribed, but I hope you would welcome the chance to give evidence to the commissioner and say, “Look at the mould on the walls. Look at the living accommodation. It is provided by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, which is outwith my control.



Please help me to try to make improvements for the young men and women under my command.” I hope people would start to welcome it. The optics of the commissioner coming out to do his or her job are fantastic and will act as a real catalyst for change.

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** I would support that entirely. If you have something to hide, you should be worried. If you do not have something to hide, you should be proud of your unit, garrison or base and welcome the commissioner coming to look at some of the wider issues.

**Q55 Luke Pollard:** Brilliant. Secondly, one of the key parts of the legislation is something that we cannot actually legislate for: Parliament picking up the issues when the commissioner reports their findings and recommendations to it. Can you talk us through how your organisations’ roles will change in that situation? You will have the ability to say, “Here is a recommendation,” and the opportunity to say to parliamentarians of all parties and structures, “Shine a spotlight on this.” How will you behave differently when those reports are brought forward? How will that be different from when, say, the SCOAF reports, which do not enjoy large-scale parliamentary scrutiny, are brought forward?

**Lt General Sir Andrew Gregory:** In SSAFA, we have deliberately chosen not to be a lobbying organisation. We work with officials in the Office for Veterans’ Affairs, in the Ministry of Defence. We feel that is our best role. Other charities do a great job in that space—in particular,

I commend the Royal British Legion and Fighting With Pride, of which I am proud to be the patron. There is a debate on Thursday about some of these issues.

We will not change. Thank you for the compliments about SSAFA. We will continue to work to support serving personnel, veterans and their families. We will not change our position.

**Lt General Sir Nicholas Pope:** We in the sector have two or three ways of interacting with the commissioner. First, during the generation of a report, I suspect that we as a community will build up a relationship with the commissioner, particularly through the serving UK personnel cluster, so charities with an interest in the serving communities will engage in that fashion.

When a report is laid before Parliament, and when we have looked at the annual covenant report, the Committees tend to come back to the charities for a session such as this to ask our opinions. I suspect that that kind of opportunity will again be of use, particularly with charities that have skin in the game and focus on the serving community.

**The Chair:** I think we have to stop it there; otherwise, we will not finish on time. Thank you very much for your evidence, gentlemen.

11.23 am

*The Chair adjourned the Committee without Question put (Standing Order No. 88).*

*Adjourned till this day at Two o’clock.*