From the Chair, Rory Stewart MP

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The Armed Forces Covenant in Action? Part 3: Educating the children of Service Personnel

The Defence Committee published the Government Response to our Report on The Armed Forces Covenant in Action? Part 3: Educating the children of Service Personnel in October 2013. We welcomed the positive approach to many of our recommendations taken in the Government Response.

As you know the Committee routinely follows up the outcome of inquiries six months after the Government Response. I would be very grateful for a progress report on the actions detailed in the Government Response. I attach a detailed list of areas where we wish to know how the Ministry of Defence is progressing. The Committee would also find it useful if you would update us on any work undertaken since the completion of our inquiry, for example, progress on the New Employment Model and plans for the withdrawal from Germany.

I would be grateful if we could have your reply by 12 September.

CHAIR
Recommendation 2

It is encouraging to note that Service children’s progress is broadly in line with other pupils even though they face considerable challenges. However, mobile Service children do not perform as well as non-mobile Service children. With greater recognition of their needs and focused additional support, Service children could do even better. The Government should ensure that these children are given every opportunity to maximise their potential.

The Committee would like an up-date on the results of the MoD’s engagement with other Government Departments, schools, Local Authorities and the devolved assemblies to highlight Service children’s needs and what additional support has been provided for Service children. The Committee is also interested to know the results of the conferences run by the Service Children in State Schools network during 2013 and early 2014.

Recommendation 3

The nature of Service life means that families have to be mobile if they are to accompany the Service parent. That moves can be made at short notice, or during term-time, means that parents may not have time to research the schools in the area, and may not get a place in their preferred school, as places in high performing schools are unlikely to be available either at short notice or part way through the school year. It is clear that there is a contradiction at the heart of the Covenant, in that Service families’ mobility makes it difficult for parents to get places in the schools of their choice. The timescale for the implementation of the New Employment Model will not help those children currently in education. The MoD needs to consider further how it can assist parents to gain access to their preferred choice of schools.

Has the Government identified any areas where Service families have experienced any disadvantage getting access to school places, and if so what action has been taken to resolve this. What action has the Government taken to help Service parents gain access to their preferred choice of schools?

Recommendation 4

The Government should explain how it intends to resolve the conflict between the Armed Forces Covenant, which says that Service children may need special arrangements to access school places, and the Schools Admissions Code which sets out a strict timetable for
admissions, to ensure that Service families can access the schools of their choice when they need them.

Has the MoD or DfE identified any potential amendments to the School Admissions Code which may mitigate any disadvantage experienced by Service children?

Recommendation 5

Availability of school places will be a significant issue as large numbers of Service families are re-located as a result of re-basing and the withdrawal from Germany. We seek reassurance that there will be sufficient places for the children moving as part of major re-basing moves and the withdrawal from Germany. The Ministry of Defence must provide information promptly to allow the Department for Education to liaise with Local Authorities and the Devolved Administrations to ensure that the right number of places and adequate funding will be provided in advance of major moves.

Recommendation 6

6. Schools with significant numbers of Service children on their roll experience additional challenges, including a lack of the appropriate level of funding throughout the school year and difficulties caused by high levels of admissions through the school year. The Government should work with Local Authorities to ensure that appropriate funding is available. Where there is competition for places between Service children and the resident population, and both have equal merit, we question who will provide the funding for additional school places. One option may be for the Ministry of Defence to fund additional buildings, if needed, and the Local Education Authority to pay for staff and ongoing maintenance costs.

Thank you for the Minister’s letter of 25 February 2014 regarding Service children’s education. The Committee would appreciate an up-date on the latest arrangements for dealing with the large scale move of Service children from Germany to the UK, including information on the progress of the Education of Service Children Change Programme.

Recommendation 12

We are dismayed that no appreciable progress has been made on the transfer of pupils’ records since our predecessors’ 2006 report. Service children and their families deserve better. Only now is work being undertaken to develop a Service children’s transition document. We are pleased that the Devolved Administrations are broadly supportive of a common approach to the transfer of information. We recommend that the Government liaise with the Devolved Administrations, local authorities and others to reach a UK-wide agreement on a transfer document for Service children and a process for ensuring it is used, to resolve this issue once and for all.
Given the length of time it has taken to resolve issues on the transfer of Service pupils’ records, the Committee would like information on the effectiveness of the Pupil Information Profile (PIP) since its introduction in autumn 2013. Has the PIP been adopted by all schools with Service children across the UK and overseas?

Recommendation 8

The lack of clarity about the number of Service children with Special Educational Needs is disturbing. The Ministry of Defence and the Department of Education should liaise with the Devolved Administrations to establish how many Service children have Special Educational Needs across the UK so that the scale of the problem is known.

Recommendation 9

Service children with Special Educational Needs are spread across the English local authorities, the Devolved Administrations and SCE schools overseas. The number in any one local authority or administration is likely to be small. We consider that, with the will and support of Government and engagement with the Devolved Administrations, it must be possible to make things easier for those families in this difficult situation. It is unacceptable that no progress has been made on our predecessor Committee’s 2006 recommendation that Service children with a Special Educational Needs should be given a statement which would be accepted by all schools. We welcome the Minister’s commitment to resolving the issue, and expect to see prompt action.

Recommendation 10

10. The Children and Families Bill has no specific clauses relating to the needs of those children of Service personnel who have Special Educational Needs. It is disappointing that the Government has not taken this opportunity to incorporate the commitments made in the Armed Forces Covenant into this new legislation. However, we hope that the provisions of this Bill will ease some of the difficulties faced by Service families who have children with Special Educational Needs.

Recommendation 11

We urge the Government to work with local authorities and the Devolved Administrations to reach agreement that Service children’s SEN statements are recognised by all, without exception, across the UK, demonstrating the country’s ‘moral obligation’ to this very small number of children and their families, who deserve our full support.

The Committee wishes to know what progress has been made on meeting the specific needs of children of Service families who have Special Educational Needs. In particular, the
Committee asks what progress had been made on its recommendation that Service children with Special Educational Needs be given a statement which would be accepted by all schools throughout the UK. The Committee would like an up-date on the progress of the new SEN code and the benefits introduced for Service families. The Committee wishes to receive a copy of the new Code if it has been finalised.

Recommendation 13 – New Employment Model

We recognise that as a result of mobility children encounter difficulties in the consistency of their education. When moving mid-year pupils can repeat topics, for example. Evidence also suggests some children may not be academically stretched as much as they should be. We recommend that under the New Employment Model, Future Army 2020, and Future Force 2020, the MoD undertakes to minimise, as far as possible, moves during the school year, and restricts, wherever possible, the movement of whole units to an appropriate time in the academic year.

The Committee would like an up-date on the consultations undertaken on the New Employment Model. In particular, the Committee wishes to know of any progress in the minimisation of moves during the school year. The Committee would find a comparison of figures over the last five years helpful.

Recommendations 17-19 Service Pupil Premium

We support the payment of the Service Pupil Premium to support Service children. However, we are not convinced that this expenditure is adequately monitored for value for money for the taxpayer, and to ensure that it is used to the best possible advantage to the Service children themselves. The Government should introduce guidelines on how the Service Pupil Premium should be spent. It should also require schools to make more transparent how this money is spent. The Government should monitor and publish this information and share examples of best practice.

Ofsted should be asked to report in more detail on the results achieved by use of the Service Pupil Premium to ensure that the funding is meeting the particular needs of Service children. The DfE and the MoD should also report on the overall level of expenditure on the Service Pupil Premium.

The anomalies in the payment of a Service Pupil Premium across the Devolved Administrations indicates a contradiction between the Armed Forces Covenant and the practice across the UK. The Government should liaise with the Devolved Administrations to encourage the same level of support for all Service children across the UK in line with the Covenant. In its response to this report the Government should set out why the
Service Pupil Premium can at the same time represent good value for money in those areas which have it and be unnecessary in those areas which do not.

The Committee wishes to know how the MoD’s continued championing of the benefits of a distinct and separate pupil premium for Service children has progressed, in particular what is happening across the Devolved Administrations with regard to the Service Pupil Premium.

Recommendation 20

We are concerned that the introduction of the Service Pupil Premium has replaced other forms of funding, so that schools with a significant number of Service children may not benefit as much as was intended. The Government should ensure that Local Authorities do not use the Service Pupil Premium to replace other funding.

The Committee wishes to know what progress MoD and DfE officials have made to ensure that the Premium is not replacing other funding.

Recommendations 21 – 22 Support Fund for Schools

The Government should publish figures showing the distribution of the Support Fund for Schools across all parts of the UK, and encourage applications from Welsh schools to ensure all regions get their fair share.

The Government should publish details of the ways in which the Support Fund for Schools money is spent in support of Service children, and give examples of good practice so that best use is made of this limited resource. We agree with the Scottish Government, that the Government should maintain this Fund after the planned four years to provide pastoral and other support to individual schools where needed. The need will rise as significant numbers of Service children move during re-basing and the withdrawal from Germany.

Has up-dated information on the distribution of the Support Fund for Schools across the UK been published?

The Committee is pleased that its recommendation that the Fund is extended beyond the planned four years has been accepted and notes that the School Support Fund has been doubled to £6 million a year for the next four years.

Conclusion

In our view there is a conflict at the heart of the Armed Forces Covenant because the Government is dependent on the commitment of those who provide education services—Government Departments, Local Authorities and the devolved administrations—offering the same provision to all Service families wherever they live in the UK. The Government
must demonstrate its commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant by seeking the cooperation of the Devolved Administrations and Local Authorities to ensure that its obligations are met.

The Committee wishes to know what progress has been made in addressing the complexity of the Government’s dependence on local authorities, devolved assemblies and government departments to ensure that the commitments it made in the Armed Forces Covenant regarding the education of Service children are being met.