When my predecessor gave evidence to your Committee last year in respect of the application of the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland, he advised that some 93% of the covenant measures extended to Northern Ireland and he deposited an Memorandum that set out the measures requiring further work and undertook to update the Committee in a year’s time on further progress.

I am pleased to be able to provide that update to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee today and you will see from the updated Memorandum that practically all of the outstanding covenant measures now apply, or will soon do so, in Northern Ireland.

I am sure that the Committee will welcome this excellent news. While there will always be some differences across the UK in how the Covenant measures are applied (and you will be aware that in some areas such as the pupil premium Northern Ireland does better than Great Britain), the attached updated Memorandum certainly confirms the Committee’s findings that section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act has not proved to be the barrier that some thought it would be in implementing the Covenant.
In respect of the Committee's main recommendations that the Government should respond to the identified needs of the Armed Forces community and report on how these will be met this will always be a work in progress but you will see from the attached Memorandum that we can now say that the Armed Forces Covenant will shortly extend almost in its entirety to Northern Ireland.

In respect of your other recommendation concerning contributions from the Northern Ireland Executive to the Annual Report on the Covenant that is a matter that the MOD is taking forward.

You also recommended that both NIO and MOD work with the Northern Ireland Executive towards the appointment of a NIE representative on the Covenant Reference Group. I am not able to report any progress on that as of yet, but it may be something that could best be advanced once a successful cross-party agreement on parading, the past and flags is secured which is one the current issues of focus between the First Minister and deputy First Ministers.

I am copying this letter to the Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans at the MOD.

RT HON ANDREW ROBATHAN MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
MEMORANDUM FOR THE NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

UPDATE ON ARMED FORCES COVENANT AREAS OF DIFFERENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Repair and Replacement of Prosthetics

Our aim has been to provide veterans with repairs and replacement prosthetics that match the quality of prosthetics that are provided to serving personnel. At an earlier MOD and UK Departments of Health Partnership Board, all three Devolved Health Departments restated their ambition to provide prosthetics services that specifically cater for military amputees.

Edwin Poots MLA, Minister for Health, Social Security and Public Safety, in meeting the former Minister of State at the NIO has confirmed that veterans in NI will now receive the same high quality of prosthetics that serving personnel do.

Comments: Covenant measure now fully extends to Northern Ireland.

Provision of IVF

Service personnel are offered up to three cycles in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham regardless of where they reside in the UK. For veterans who wish to have IVF treatment because of service related injuries there are differing levels of provision across the UK. In England all those with Service related genital injuries are entitled to up to three cycles. The same provision applies in Scotland. In Wales, two cycles are guaranteed but in Northern Ireland only one – this is the same as is offered to civilians.

The Northern Ireland Assembly passed a motion calling for all couples in NI to receive three cycles – but the Executive Health Minister rejected this saying his Department would require more funding. Each cycle costs the NHS around £3,500. The numbers of veteran couples across the UK requiring IVF as a result of Service-related injuries are likely to be small.

Comments: The Covenant Measure extends across the UK but the extent of assistance varies between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

If the fewer number of cycles in Northern Ireland proves to be a problem, MOD officials have undertaken to explore if further provision can be funded or provided elsewhere, for example through private treatment provided by a charity or exceptionally, for a veteran, at the MOD facility within the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham.
Priority NHS Treatment for Wounded, Injured and Sick Veterans

Subject to the clinical needs of others, wounded, injured and sick veterans are entitled to priority NHS treatment in Great Britain for conditions that are attributable to their service in the Armed Forces. Priority treatment is not available in the same way for veterans in Northern Ireland and a significant issue circumscribing this is that veterans are often reluctant to declare previous Armed Forces service to medical practitioners on security grounds.

The bespoke UDR & R IRISH Aftercare Service has in place physiotherapy and psychological therapies contracts which the 63,000 eligible veterans are able to access.

The Aftercare Service has dealt with 765 psychotherapy referrals to date, with 32 currently in treatment, and 677 physiotherapy referrals with 28 currently in treatment but this does not cover all veterans or all conditions.

That said, charities are not reporting concerns that a lack of priority ‘subject to the clinical needs of others’ is really resulting in different outcomes in different parts of the UK given that NHS provision in Northern Ireland is considered good.

Proposed Next Step: Work is being undertaken with the Service charities to ensure a sustainable signposting service is available to all veterans and ensure widespread coverage is achieved to provide assistance at the point of first contact.

**Comments:** No further action required. A signposting booklet on how to access NHS services in Northern Ireland has been produced by 38 Bde and has been distributed to veterans.

Government Home Purchase Schemes

Serving personnel are granted priority access to Government home ownership schemes in England, Scotland and Wales. Similar schemes are available in Northern Ireland but Armed Forces personnel are not given any priority access. However, whilst there are strict limits on who can apply to Home ownership purchase schemes in Great Britain, the schemes in Northern Ireland are open to all.

**Comments:** No further action: this covenant measure is not required in Northern Ireland. There is no quota in operation (unlike Great Britain) and anyone in Northern Ireland can apply for a Home Purchase Scheme immediately.

Priority for Social Housing

Local Authorities in Great Britain are required to consider Service leavers as if they have a ‘local connection’ and be given points accordingly. In addition further priority is often given to veterans on the waiting list for social housing in Great Britain, although this varies between different Local Authorities. This is not the case in Northern Ireland because of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
That said, proving a 'local connection' does not appear to be an issue for Northern Ireland veterans. The Housing Executive does not keep statistics that identifies if an applicant for social housing is a veteran but the service charities are not reporting cases of homeless ex-Servicemen in Northern Ireland and the Minister for Social Development is not aware that this is an issue.

**Comments:** No further action required. This covenant measure is not required in Northern Ireland given the protection afforded by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the fact that the Minister for Social Development has advised that he is not aware of any homelessness being reported among the Armed Forces and Veterans Communities.

**Waiving of Domestic Rates for unoccupied property**

In Great Britain most Local Authorities offer a discount of 50% on Council Tax in respect of empty properties owned by service personnel who live in MOD property elsewhere as a result of serving in the Armed Forces.

Northern Ireland does not have Council Tax as in Great Britain but retains the older rating system.

**Comments:** The Minister for Finance and Personnel has confirmed that Northern Ireland cannot provide the same discounts that some local authorities provide for service personnel in Great Britain for an empty property and has pointed out that rate bills in Northern Ireland are substantially less than Council Tax bills in Great Britain.

**Further and Higher Education Commitment Scheme**

The Further and Higher Education Commitment Scheme pays the tuition fees of Service leavers living in Great Britain when they study for a first full Level 3 qualification, a first undergraduate or foundation degree, or a first HNC or HND. No provision is made at present in Northern Ireland.

**Comments:** The DEL Minister has formally requested that the Further and Higher Education Commitment Scheme is extended to Northern Ireland. The MOD has agreed to amend the Armed Forces (Enhanced Learning Credit Scheme and Further and Higher Education Commitment Scheme) Order 2012 during the course of the year to enable the scheme to extend to Northern Ireland.
**CRB checks**

Criminal Records Bureau checks undertaken in Great Britain are not valid in the same way in NI and last year’s announcement by the Home Office that employees and volunteers in England & Wales would no longer have to apply for a criminal records check each time they apply for a new position does not apply in Northern Ireland. This is a disadvantage for partners frequently changing employment to accompany their service person.

It is intended that an update service will be introduced in Northern Ireland at a later stage. In the meantime, volunteers will still be able to obtain criminal record checks in Northern Ireland free of charge. When the Update Service is introduced in Northern Ireland it is intended that these will be free of charge for volunteers here also.

**Comments:** No further action required. The Minister of Justice has confirmed that he intends to introduce legislation to give effect to portable checks by Spring 2015.

**Community Covenant Grants**

Community groups in Northern Ireland have not been able to apply for grants under the Community Covenant Grant Scheme because of a lack of any signed Community Covenant agreements. In Great Britain an agreement must be in place with the local authority before a grant can be applied for.

An alternative system has been established under which HQ 38 (Irish) Brigade in Northern Ireland would consider grant applications and, if they meet a set of published criteria, submit them to the MOD for consideration without the need for a Community Covenant to be signed.

**Comments:** No further action required. The Covenant Measure now extends to Northern Ireland by allowing applications to be submitted to the grant scheme through HQ 38 Bde without the need for the relevant local authority to have signed a Community Covenant.

**Northern Ireland Office**

**June 2014**