Introduction by Party Leader

The Armed Forces Covenant was published five years ago. It is a statement of the moral obligation you and I owe the people who put themselves in danger to protect us and our way of life. The Ulster Unionist Party wishes to make it possible for that obligation to be discharged in Northern Ireland as fully as it is in England, Scotland and Wales. As the Covenant and its suite of companion policies is refreshed and renewed by the Ministry of Defence, we believe it is timely to review the Covenant’s impact in Northern Ireland.

As the Covenant was made public, Captain Doug Beattie, awarded a Military Cross for his service in the Afghanistan campaign, challenged delegates at the Ulster Unionist Annual Conference. He wanted to know what we did to support our soldiers, sailors and airmen, beyond buying a poppy every November. The answer was: not enough. The same answer applies to every local political party.

Doug Beattie is now an Ulster Unionist Councillor in Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, and we hope soon to be a MLA for Upper Bann. Already, he has done much to dispel the myth that political sensitivities make it impossible to implement the Covenant in Northern Ireland.

Our Armed Forces do not ask for special treatment. This is about an end to disadvantage. There is no good reason why those who put themselves in harm’s way to protect our country, its citizens and its values should not be given equal treatment.

That is why we support the Military Covenant being rolled out in its entirety, including the Community Covenant, which is an expression of that moral obligation at a more local level, and the Corporate Covenant, which encourages the private and third sectors to engage.

We understand Northern Ireland is governed differently from the rest of the UK and that impacts on how the Covenant is rolled out. That should not be a barrier to delivering appropriate and timely support for our Armed Forces and Veterans.

On the question of Northern Ireland’s unique legislative framework, it is worth dismissing from the beginning the notion that “Section 75” protections for minorities mean the Covenant cannot be applied in Northern Ireland. As the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs concluded:

“We have been reassured that the Northern Ireland equality framework does not create a greater barrier to the implementation of the Covenant in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. It is important this is understood by those involved in the delivery of services to the Armed Forces community” (NI Affairs Committee, 2013).

This is about two issues. One is ensuring no disadvantage to accessing services. The other is making sure our Armed Forces and Veterans do not feel like second class citizens because they happen to come from, or live in, this part of the United Kingdom.

What follows is our analysis of the current landscape, followed by a comparison of service provision here, in Scotland and Wales. Finally, we provide a 16-point action plan of practical measures that will significantly enhance the delivery of our moral obligation. For me, the highlight is the creation of an Armed Forces Champion, a fulltime advocate promoting the interests of our Service community.

Mike Nesbitt
Leader, Ulster Unionist Party
The Armed Forces Covenant was published by the Coalition Government in May 2011, and enshrines the moral obligation of the UK Government to members of the Armed Services and their families. The Covenant was updated by the Ministry of Defence in September 2015, but remains "... an agreement between the Armed Forces community, the nation and the government. It encapsulates the moral obligation to those who serve, have served, their families and the bereaved."

The Covenant is complemented by the Community Covenant and a Corporate Covenant, all of which have been subject to review by the Ministry of Defence in recent months.

**Armed Forces Covenant**
The Covenant’s Twin underlying principles are that members of the Armed Forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured or the bereaved.

Further, it identifies health, housing and education as key areas of support.

The Ulster Unionist Party do not believe enough is being done, overtly, to ensure our Service personnel and Veterans are neither disadvantaged nor left feeling disadvantaged.

**Community Covenant**
The Community Covenant complements the Armed Forces Covenant by encouraging local communities to support the Armed Forces in their area. Refreshed by the Ministry of Defence in February 2016, the Community Covenant aims to:

- Encourage local authorities and the Armed Forces community to work together to establish a Community Covenant in their area;
- Encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces community, nurturing public understanding and awareness among the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces community;

The MoD make clear that Community Covenants may look quite different from one location to another. This is, in part, a recognition that public services are delivered by different bodies in the various nations that compose the United Kingdom, e.g. English Councils have a role in the delivery of education and housing not replicated in Northern Ireland.

It is a matter of fact that every local council in Great Britain has signed the Community Covenant, whereas uptake in Northern Ireland was non-existent until a lead was taken by Councillor Doug Beattie MC, who managed to facilitate its introduction in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council area, in a manner that addressed the sensitivities of those whose political instincts would not be supportive of the Armed Forces. To date five of Northern Ireland’s eleven councils have agreed to sign the Community Covenant.

**Corporate Covenant**
This affords an opportunity for business organisations, charitable bodies and others to demonstrate, voluntarily, their public support, evidenced through support for this Pledge:

“We, the undersigned, commit to honour the Armed Forces Covenant and support the Armed Forces community. We recognise the value Serving personnel, both Regular and Reservists, Veterans and military families contribute to our business and our country.”
The Corporate Covenant sits alongside the Community Covenant and was also refreshed by the MoD in February 2016. Together with the Pledge, there is a Defence Employer Recognition Scheme, operating at Bronze, Silver and Gold levels, affording employers the opportunity to demonstrate their support for the Armed Forces and their values.

The Ulster Unionist Party is not aware of any local engagement with the Corporate Covenant. This does not appear to be the case in any other devolved administration’s jurisdiction, nor any other MoD region. That is a matter of deep regret for the Ulster Unionist Party. While we understand the environment in Northern Ireland poses unique challenges, we have demonstrated how results can be achieved through sensitive, non-aggressive promotion of the rights of the Service community. More clearly needs to be done, as the evidence indicates that Northern Ireland is still a “cold house” for those who appear to have no difficulty supporting the Corporate Covenant elsewhere.

Covenant Fund
In June 2013, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a Covenant Fund, valued at £10 million per annum in perpetuity, with four primary policy intentions:

- Removing barriers to family life;
- Extra support after service for those that need help;
- Measures to integrate military and civilian communities and allow the Armed Forces community to participate as citizens;
- Non-core healthcare services for Veterans.

For 2015/16 the Fund sought projects that support:

- Local Armed Forces community integration projects;
- The coordination and delivery of support to the Armed Forces community;
- Veterans in the criminal justice system.

The Ulster Unionist Party calls for direct input from the Northern Ireland Executive into the Covenant Reference Group, which decides the fate of those applying for grants that ranged from £20,000 for community integration projects to large grants of up to £500,000 in the last funding round. The Northern Ireland Office represents NI on the Reference Group. This is clearly only because of the fact that political ideology has been allowed to be an obstacle.

The 2015 Report to Parliament also recognised particular “sensitivities” regarding the Armed Forces and the community in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party is aware of a tension arising directly as a result of the Troubles, but is equally clear that tensions between the community and the Armed Forces are not unique to Northern Ireland.

What is unique is the fact that Veterans live cheek by jowl with those who sought to harm them. It is normal for a soldier to serve and fight abroad, returning home from Iraq, Afghanistan, or Sierra Leone, never again to see those who fought them. In Northern Ireland, Veterans are likely to see perpetrators and paramilitaries on a daily basis. This raises particular issues for those who served in Northern Ireland in either the Ulster Defence Regiment or the Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service) who feel disadvantaged by matters relating to their security. Many suffer disadvantage and many feel unable to take advantage of their entitlements because they do not want it to be known they served in either regiment - for their own personal safety. This gives rise to complex and widespread mental health and wellbeing issues, an area covered in some detail in a previous policy paper.

The Ulster Unionist Party believe more can and should be done to compile a comprehensive needs assessment of Veterans and therefore we welcome the research being undertaken by Ulster University. We acknowledge the positive work of the UDR & R IRISH (HS) Aftercare Service, a unique provision in terms of support for British Veterans. We also acknowledge the work of the many Armed Forces charities, but our analysis is that more can, should and must be done, not least in ensuring the Service community is made aware of the range of support and services currently on offer.

Finally, the Ulster Unionist Party is particularly concerned that when it comes to looking after the mental health and well-being of Veterans in Northern Ireland, the resources simply aren’t there. It is not acceptable to send Service personnel overseas into conflict zones and not provide adequate aftercare once they return home or are de-mobilised.

This problem exists beneath the surface in Northern Ireland. Many do not come forward with mental health problems because of concerns that revealing their Service background may put them in immediate danger. Many are not treated correctly and many do not know where to turn to.

This is simply not acceptable and it is time for change.
Parliament receives an annual report on the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant. The Covenant Report 2015 identified a significant gap between Scotland and Wales on the one hand and Northern Ireland in terms of health provision for Service members and Veterans.

Wales was found to be particularly strong in providing fast-tracked access to NHS services to Service personnel and Veterans, while the Scottish Government was reported as being very effective at providing government funding for Veterans Services. Northern Ireland lags behind in both these areas. It is also evident that more could be done across the UK in terms of the specific needs of children from Service families. The Welsh Government is starting to address this issue.

The Northern Ireland Executive has chosen not to be represented on the Covenant Reference Group, which oversees the implementation of the Covenant Fund and will be responsible for distributing £10 million per annum. The Northern Ireland Office currently fills the vacancy created by the Executive’s lack of engagement.

While arguing for more and better, we also wish to acknowledge the work being undertaken by statutory and voluntary bodies. For example:

- Over 12,000 Veterans in Northern Ireland are in receipt of a MoD disability pension designed to pay for private health treatment;
- Over 28,000 personnel have been treated by the UDR & R IRISH (HS) Aftercare Service since 2007;
- One charity, Combat Stress, is currently ensuring treatment is being received by over 850 Veterans.

WHAT IS AND IS NOT HAPPENING

The most recent Armed Forces Covenant Report, which examines the implementation of the Covenant around the UK, looked at the Veterans services which exist in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The services on offer demonstrate the differing levels of engagement with the Armed Forces Covenant in the three devolved administrations.
## Health Services

### Scotland
- Funding of £1.2 million annually for three years for specialist Mental Health services, based in a specialist facility in Ayr.
- Specialist mental health services are provided in partnership with NHS Scotland and Combat Stress. The Scottish Government recently renewed funding for the provision of specialist mental health services for Veterans resident in Scotland at the Combat Stress facility, Hollybush House, in Ayr. Funding of £1.2 million per year over three years to 2018 will fund a range of specialist clinical, rehabilitation, social and welfare support at the facility.
- Scotland provides a State of the art National Specialist Prosthetics (SOTA) service. This is well established, offering a single multi-disciplinary team approach across two specialist centres (Edinburgh and Glasgow) with links to all other limb fitting centres in the country.

### Wales
- Champions for Veterans and Armed Forces have been established on every Local Health Board in Wales.
- Champions for Veterans and Armed Forces have been established on every Local Health Board in Wales.
- Developed the Veterans Hearing Fund, open to all Veterans resident in Wales.
- Welsh Government has been involved with the strategic development of the Veterans Hearing Fund. This ensures that Veterans resident in Wales have the opportunity to access the fund.
- The MOD Fast-track process for Wales, is an all-Wales service, which prioritises access to treatments

### Northern Ireland
- Delivering Healthcare to the Armed Forces protocol aims to provide equitable health and social care services for Armed Forces members and their families.
- UDR & R IRISH (HS) Aftercare Service continues to offer UDR & R IRISH (HS) personnel and Veterans access to psychological therapy services.
- Veterans NHS Wales Service provides dedicated Veteran therapists in each Health Board. Veterans suffering from PTSD can refer themselves to access this Service.
for Armed Service personnel who are actively serving but are currently graded as medically non-deployable (MND).

- Veterans can access the Veterans NHS Wales service. Those Veterans who think they may be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can refer themselves to the service or can access it through other organisations such as The Royal British Legion (TRBL), Soldiers Sailors Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA) and the Veterans Welfare Service (VWS). This Service provides dedicated Veteran therapists in each Health Board area and additional local access to specialist outpatient care for Veterans with mental health problems, such as PTSD.

Northern Ireland

- The key document here is “Delivering Healthcare to the Armed Forces - A Protocol for Ensuring Equitable Access to Health and Social Care Services.” This established a ‘framework of assurance’ which is intended to ensure that serving members of the Armed Forces, their families and Veterans, suffer no disadvantage in accessing health and social care services and have equality of access to these services in common with everyone living in Northern Ireland. This was an initiative promoted by the then Ulster Unionist Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey MLA. Secondary Healthcare of Service personnel is provided under contract and allows for those entitled, to access a fast track diagnosis and treatment pathway of 10 and 18 weeks respectively. This has the additional benefit of aiding the maintenance of personal security whilst accessing NHS facilities.

- The UDR & R IRISH (HS) Aftercare Service continues to offer UDR & R IRISH (HS) personnel and Veterans access to psychological therapy services provided through a local voluntary sector provider. Dedicated Physiotherapy services are additionally provided through contract services.

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## Education Services

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<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Northern Ireland</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Systems are in place where local authorities are aware that a child is from a service background</td>
<td>• A toolkit has been developed to help schools support service children and overcome any challenges they may face</td>
<td>• The Enhanced Learning Credit scheme provides the opportunity for Service members to gain financial assistance towards the cost of a third level education</td>
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<td>• Students who are family Members of Service personnel who wish to study elsewhere in the UK are able to access the standard package of tuition fee loans and student support</td>
<td>• The School Admission Code allows provision for children of Armed Forces personnel to be admitted to an infant class school mid-term, even if it will breach the class limit</td>
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<td>• Established an initiative to support Service Children in Education, including careers guidance, and dealing with issues related to deployment</td>
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Scotland

- Systems have been put in place where local authorities are aware that a child is from a Services family, and to ensure schools are made aware of and are sensitive to this.
- All students who are family members of Service personnel who were ordinarily resident in Scotland when they were recruited but who wish to study elsewhere in the UK, are able to access the standard package of tuition fee loans to cover higher rate fees up to £9,000 and student support from the Students Award Agency Scotland (SAAS).

Wales

- In 2015, the Welsh Local Government Association working with the Welsh Government’s Standing Committee developed a toolkit and guidance to help schools support Service children and overcome any challenges they may face.
- In 2014/15 the Welsh Government introduced the School Admission Code. It makes provision for the children of Armed Forces personnel to be admitted to an infant class school mid-term even if it means the class will breach the infant class size limit. This means the child will retain this excepted status for the duration of the Foundation Phase in school.
- Ex-Service personnel wishing to pursue another career have the opportunity to do so via the Further and Higher Education Commitment Scheme.

Northern Ireland

- The Enhanced Learning Credit scheme provides the opportunity for Service members to gain financial assistance towards the cost of a third level education.

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### Veterans Services

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<tr>
<td>• Has put in place a Veterans Commissioner</td>
<td>• £2 million funding provided for new housing for Armed Services and their families</td>
<td>• Free public transport for those in receipt of a War Disablement Pension or Guaranteed Income Payment.</td>
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<td>• Scottish Veterans Fund has made almost £700k available since 2008</td>
<td>• 8 bed high support unit for Veterans established. Veterans have also been gifted land to build their own homes</td>
<td>• UDR and R IRISH (HS) Aftercare Service for Veterans will continue onto 2020</td>
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<td>• Scottish Government support for the fund has increased to £120 k per annum</td>
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<td>• Elected Veterans Champion on all eleven local councils</td>
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<td>• Scottish Government has provided £200k of funding for capacity building for three years</td>
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Armed Forces and Veterans | The Ulster Unionist Party
Scotland

- Has put in place a Veterans Commissioner.
- The Scottish Veterans Fund has made almost £700,000 available to 87 projects since 2008.
- Scottish Government support for the fund has increased to £120,000 per annum from 2013-14, also provided £200,000 worth of capacity building funding over three years.

Wales

- The Welsh Local Government Association established an initiative to support Service Children in Education, including careers guidance and dealing with issues related to mobility and deployment. This was funded through the Community Covenant Grant.
- £2 million funding was made available to provide housing for Armed Services and their families. 9 families so far have benefited from this scheme with more new-builds currently being constructed.
- An 8 bed high support unit for Veterans was established in Wrexham, where the local authority has also gifted land for a community self-build agency, which will give Veterans the opportunity to build their own houses.

Northern Ireland

- The concessionary fares scheme entitles those in receipt of a regular War Disablement Pension or Guaranteed Income Payment, to travel free on public transport.
- The UDR & R IRISH (HS) Aftercare Service for Veterans of Operation Banner will continue to 2020 and support up to 63,000 Veterans and their dependents.
- There is an elected Veterans Champion on all eleven local councils.
- Five of the 11 local councils have signed the Community Covenant, following an initiative from the Ulster Unionist Party.

Clearly, the extent to which Veterans are supported in Northern Ireland fails to reach the standards of the other devolved administrations, in terms of healthcare, education or advocacy. This is a failure in its own right, but also fuels the perception among Armed Forces and Veterans living in Northern Ireland that they are second-class citizens, despite having offered first-class service. Services or ex-Service personnel should not be disadvantaged because they reside in Northern Ireland. While we acknowledge the positive work of the UDR & R IRISH (HS) Aftercare service, and its unique provision within the United Kingdom, it is currently funded only to 2020; the needs of Veterans will continue – welfare lasts a lifetime.
WHAT WE WILL DO

The policy intention is clear: No disadvantage to any Armed Forces personnel, Veterans or their families in accessing goods, facilities or services.

Actions include:

1. Better co-ordination among, and awareness of, the support currently available. We will do this by continuing the Veterans support roadshows and workshops already piloted by Andy Allen MLA, a veteran of the Afghanistan campaign. This will complement work currently undertaken by the NI Veterans Support Committee, CoBSEO (Confederation of Service Charities) Northern Ireland and the co-ordinating role played by the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association, who are currently refreshing their support document: http://www.aftercareservice.org/downloads/NI_Vets_handbook_Ver_2.pdf

2. A continued political campaign at all levels (community, council, NI Assembly, Westminster) to press for the full implementation of the Military Covenant, Community Covenant and Corporate Covenant in Northern Ireland.

3. Direct input from the Northern Ireland Executive into the Covenant Reference Group.

4. The creation of an Armed Forces and Veterans Champion in Northern Ireland. This individual will be the primary advocate for Veterans and their families. Duties will include:
   - Promoting awareness of the issues;
   - Assessing the impact of legislation, policies and practices on the Service community;
   - Encouraging a co-ordinated approach across Government, public services and charitable organisations;
   - Making arrangements to ensure the voice of the Service community is heard;
   - Lobbying the NI Executive and local Councils concerning the interests of the Service community;

5. A Veterans and Reserves Mental Health Programme will be set up and resourced in Thiepval Barracks Lisburn, replicating the provision currently in place in Chetwynd Barracks Nottingham. Leaving ones support network is difficult for those with mental health issues, combined with anxiety about travel. The unique nature of Northern Ireland, including security issues, religious and cultural matters and the importance of safe places means that Veterans will be more comfortable being treated as close to home as possible and that in turn will maximise the positive impact of treatment. Travel to England often yields the most superficial benefits.

6. A new eligibility for access to social housing. When a Serviceman or woman puts in their notice to leave the Armed Forces (1 year’s notice) they will be immediately eligible to put their name on the social housing list in Northern Ireland if they wish to resettle here.

7. When a member of the Armed Forces is made redundant with less than 6 months’ notice their service will entitle them to housing points to go towards their social housing application and a place on the social housing list at the relevant position. We propose consultation on the award of 40 points through a new sub-category.

8. Because there is NO temporary housing for homeless Veterans in Northern Ireland, we propose that a small number of temporary beds are made available. Given the announcement on 4 February by Mark Lancaster MP (Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Defence) that the MoD is to gift 59 former Service personnel homes to the NI Executive, this is a no-capital cost initiative.

• Ensuring Parliament is properly informed by providing feedback for the annual Covenant Report.
9. We will request an audit of all surplus married quarters, with surplus stock made available to transitional Service personnel. Additionally, we believe retiring personnel with school age children should be permitted to retain their married quarters for a transitional period, demand permitting.

10. All medical documentation, which is currently being digitised, will be made available to the nearest NHS Trust, allowing individuals leaving the military and returning to Northern Ireland to have their health needs tracked, with a reminder sent to register with a GP, and guaranteed access to 38 (Irish) Brigade who will provide practical information on the NHS provision in the area in which they settle.

11. Service personnel who are on an NHS waiting list in Great Britain when they relocate to Northern Ireland should retain their position on the local NHS waiting list.

12. Serving soldiers in receipt of prescription drugs funded in the area in which they are serving will be allowed to be prescribed the same drugs on relocation, even if they are not regularly funded in Northern Ireland. This will last for a minimum of one year, while an alternative treatment regime is proscribed, or longer if a mutually agreed alternative cannot be reached.

13. Military personnel and Veterans will have enhanced access to In vitro fertilisation (IVF). In England and Scotland, there is an entitlement to 3 sessions of IVF. In Wales it is 2, but in Northern Ireland only 1. We will double that entitlement.

14. We will engage with the MOD to find a different way to pay the enhanced learning credit other than a credit note. On leaving the military, soldiers may well be entitled to £3,000 enhanced learning credits paid over 3 years, designed to help with education, learning and new skills for employment. Options other than a credit note include paying it directly into the individual’s bank account for them to pay it themselves and produce receipts; or by paying it via a non-MOD linked agent. We believe this would ensure greater uptake in Northern Ireland.

15. We will develop a bespoke Armed Forces Loyalty card scheme. The current scheme is available to Armed Forces personnel, Veterans and their families, but the uptake in Northern Ireland is low due to potential security implications. That needs addressed.

16. All civilians who served on OP BANNER or in support of OP BANNER should receive recognition in the form of a medal. Either the GSM(NI) or a bespoke meaningful medal.
The great majority of the above proposals are cost-free, administrative or de minimis. Point 12 will have costs, which can be funded through the more general mental health initiative we have called for, to be resourced by HM Government. Point 13 has a cost of approximately £5,000 per IVF treatment; demand is likely to be very limited.
CONCLUSION

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. No member of their Service community, or a family member, should be disadvantaged because they happen to be from here, or living here. All should have the benefit of the moral obligation from the nation that is enshrined in the Armed Forces Covenant, albeit it the delivery should take into account the delivery mechanisms for public services operated by our devolved government and the particular sensitivities that pertain in Northern Ireland.