

REPORT TO: POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE - 14TH FEBRUARY, 2011

REPORT ON: SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CROSS PARTY GROUP ON SUPPORTING VETERANS

REPORT BY: DEPUTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE (SUPPORT SERVICES)

REPORT NO: 95-2011

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider a formal Veterans' Charter

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked to adopt the Scottish Veterans' Charter appended hereto.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None.

4.0 MAIN TEXT

It is reported that a letter dated 8th December, 2010 has been received from Jeremy Purvis MSP which is self-explanatory, together with a formal Scottish Veterans' Charter and text of the debate in Parliament for reference. (Copies appended).

5.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This Report has been screened for any policy implications in respect of Sustainability, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Anti-Poverty, Equality Impact Assessment and Risk Management.

There are no major issues.

6.0 CONSULTATIONS

The Chief Executive, Depute Chief Executive (Support Services), and Director of Finance have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

7.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

Patricia McIlquham
Depute Chief Executive (Support Services)

DATE: 3 February 2011

SCOTTISH
PARLIAMENT
CROSS PARTY
GROUP ON
SUPPORTING
VETERANS

8 December 2010

Councillor Ken Guild
Council Leader
Dundee Council
City Chambers
Dundee
DD1 3BY

JP/DR



Scottish Veterans Charter

I am writing regarding the campaign that I launched in the Scottish Parliament on 24 November for the Scottish Government and local public bodies to adopt a formal Veterans Charter.

This proposal has received wide support in both the Parliamentary Chamber and in the Veterans Community. I have enclosed the Charter that I have circulated to all MSPs as well as the text of the debate in the Parliament for reference.

I very much hope that Dundee Council will consider adopting the Charter and look forward to hearing from you in due course.



Jeremy Purvis MSP
Member of the Scottish Parliament for Tweeddale, Ettrick & Lauderdale

The Scottish Parliament Edinburgh EH99 1SP
Tel 0131 348 5801 Fax 0131 348 6488

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SCOTTISH VETERANS CHARTER

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE CHARTER

This Charter recognises that the men and women of the Scottish Veterans Community have served our nation and our nation's interests through dedicated service. They may have been called on to serve in circumstances that has led to physical and mental damage. As such this Charter establishes the principles upon which public bodies in Scotland should recognise the unique characteristics of service in delivering public services and which affords all members of the Veterans Community, and their family the dignity, respect and level of service that corresponds to their needs.

WHO THIS CHARTER APPLIES TO

This Charter applies to all publicly funded bodies in Scotland and all bodies delivering services paid by the public purse. The Charter supports all Veterans, war widows and widowers; families and dependents of Veterans and carers of Veterans.

WAYS IN WHICH VETERANS ARE SUPPORTED

Providing housing advice and support, recognising particular circumstances where housing needs are unique.

Providing health and social care services, recognising that those veterans that have received physical or mental affects from their service should receive priority treatment.

Providing training, education and skills support, recognising that veterans may need additional support to find sustainable employment after service.

THE COMMITMENT ON PROVIDING SERVICES TO A VETERAN

The commitment by public bodies in Scotland is to provide quality service and it will:

- ensure that it incorporates all relevant legislation and best practice guidance on support Veterans into its procedures, policies and practices;
- be courteous, considerate and respectful;
- listen to the needs of Veterans, their families and carers;
- respect privacy;
- outline the benefits, services and priority support entitled to by Veterans clearly and in plain language;
- be fair and ethical in its dealings with Veterans;
- deliver services in an efficient, timely and prompt manner;
- inform Veterans of any delays in delivering any services;
- resolve any concerns, problems, enquiries and complaints quickly;
- provide accurate, clear and consistent information relating to Veterans' needs;
- keep Veterans fully informed of their rights and entitlements including how to complain if they are not satisfied with the service;
- recognise that Veterans have varying and changing needs;
- train and equip public service staff so they can provide Veterans with quality service; and
- increase awareness within the public services of the wider needs and unique nature of support for Veterans, their families and carers.

THE STANDARDS THE PUBLIC BODY SHOULD MEET

If you are a Veteran, family member or carer of a Veteran the public body should:

- respond appropriately if you inform them of your status when you first make contact;
 - make sure you are aware of the rights and support available to you when you first make contact;
 - ensure that you receive advice and support from someone who has been trained or can access trained support;
 - maintain information recognising your status if you wish them to do so, and pass that to other bodies automatically if you wish them to do so;
 - respond timeously and appropriately after you make initial contact with clear information about how they will process the issue; and
 - answer your query or concern within a time frame outlined to you.
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YOUR RIGHTS IN DEALING WITH A PUBLIC BODY IN SCOTLAND

If you are a Veteran, family member or carer of a Veteran and are dealing with a public body, you have a right to:

- expect they are aware of all relevant legislation and guidance that affords you rights or priority treatments;
- fair and unbiased assistance and decision-making;
- be treated with courtesy, consideration and respect;
- a clear explanation of the reasons for the decisions that have been made;
- nominate someone to act on your behalf;
- use an advocate to represent you when dealing with public bodies;
- lodge a complaint; and
- have decisions reviewed or reconsidered.

YOUR RIGHT TO HAVE AN ISSUE REVIEWED

Depending on the type of decision you want reviewed, you can:

- contact the decision-maker to discuss the reason(s) for the decision;
- contact your representative or advocate and ask them to make representations on your behalf; or
- receive information from the public body information to complain to the appropriate independent body, such as the Public Services Ombudsman

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES IN DEALING WITH A PUBLIC BODY

You can assist the public service in Scotland by:

- providing accurate, comprehensive and current information when you make contact;
- notifying the body promptly of any significant changes in your circumstances, e.g. change of address, marital status etc or other information relevant to the support you are receiving;
- if dealing through an advocate, keeping the advocate informed of any changes in your circumstances,
- responding to requests for information in a timely manner and letting the body know if you are unable to reply on time;
- treating staff with courtesy and respect; and
- understanding that our decisions are made within the legislation and guidelines that are relevant at the time.

Meeting of the Scottish Parliament

24 November 2010

A Scottish Veterans Charter

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-7415, in the name of Jeremy Purvis, on a Scottish veterans charter. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament appreciates the service that the men and women of the armed forces veterans community in the South of Scotland and beyond have made to the nation; values the breadth of commitment made by veterans, including carrying out what it regards as uniquely dangerous and challenging conditions of service; appreciates that, as a result of the particular characteristics of armed forces service, many veterans might need to call on support for physical and mental health problems, employment advice and social care; believes that there should be sensitivity with regards to the unique nature of military service when designing and delivering such services, and would welcome a Scottish veterans charter that would allow all public bodies to be able to recognise their duties and responsibilities in providing support to veterans and that would ensure that all veterans and their families are reintegrated, without disadvantage, to civilian life.

18:05

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I thank the members who have stayed for the debate and those who have supported the motion in my name.

Members from all parts of Scotland will have represented their constituents at armistice day commemorations two weeks ago. In Peebles, I saw colleagues, families and friends of a young man who has recently given his life in the service of his nation. In Galashiels, I saw veterans of the combined services who have served their country. One of the proudest but most solemn duties that I perform in my role of MSP is to lay a wreath on behalf of constituents.

Supporting former members of our armed services should not be for one day a year alone, no matter how significant that day is. The recognition that the Parliament's powers over devolved matters touch the lives of every veteran and their families, carers and loved ones in Scotland led to the formation of the cross-party group on supporting veterans in Scotland, the next meeting of which is in mid-December. All members are welcome to attend.

The recognition during the time in which the group has met that we need to do more for veterans, and to do it better, led me to propose the establishment of a network of local authority veterans champions. I thank all of them for their commitment, time and work. They met Veterans Scotland in Stirling yesterday. I felt that it was

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appropriate to seek time in Parliament for a debate on the next steps.

The cross-party group has discussed and taken up issues of mental and physical health and wellbeing; the training—and lack of it—of social work staff in relation to veterans' needs; and housing policy and housing allocation practice. We have considered the sensitive issue of drugs and alcohol misuse among veterans, and have discussed with members and veterans their concerns about criminal justice and the veterans community in prisons. We have discussed how priority treatment in health services is not being delivered on the ground to the standard that all of us would like.


In all those areas, we have discovered that, regrettably, delivery is patchy and inconsistent and that staff have various levels of awareness of veterans' needs. Most alarmingly, we have found repeated cases of a lack of awareness among public bodies of the guidance, prioritisation policies and best practice that are expected of them. That is not meant to be a criticism of public bodies or the Scottish Government: individuals within public bodies are dedicated staff, many of whom have known veterans and have them in their families. Although the minister and I have had differences during today's proceedings, I know of his enthusiasm and dedication in this area.

However, the services are not of the standard that I believe is appropriate. That has led me to propose that there should be a charter for veterans in Scotland. I am aware of the work of the United Kingdom Government in the area, which is currently with ministers for consideration. I am also aware that some public bodies in Scotland, such as Stirling Council, already have corporate policies. The Parliament should commend that council on taking a lead. I propose that public bodies should adopt such a charter, which would establish the principles to which they should adhere when they provide services to veterans. The charter need not rely on UK Government actions, as it relates to the functions of devolved bodies here in Scotland.

I propose that the principles of the charter should be broadly straightforward. The charter would recognise that the men and women of the Scottish veterans community have served our nation and our nation's interests through dedicated service. They may have been called on to serve in circumstances that have led to physical and mental damage. The charter should establish principles according to which public bodies in Scotland recognise the unique characteristics of service in how they deliver public services, in order to afford all members of the veterans community and their families the dignity, respect and level of service that correspond to their needs.

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Tomorrow I will be e-mailing all colleagues in the Parliament with more information regarding the charter, and I will be writing to all public bodies in Scotland, including local authorities and health boards, with the draft of the charter, asking them not only to adopt it but to adopt the principles within it.



All too often I have seen in my area casework in which guidance has not been adopted because the legislation is not so strict. Practice on the ground is not the same as a board's policies or an organisation's corporate approach.

It is appropriate to take the next step forward. We owe those who have served our country not just our thanks and commemoration on one day each year; we owe them a guarantee that the services for which we are ultimately responsible in the Parliament are the best that can be provided, and that due recognition will be provided of the commitment and service that veterans have given. In doing that, we should respect the particular circumstances of their needs.

I hope that the campaign that I am starting this evening for a veterans charter will be successful. I hope that it will be backed enthusiastically not only by the Government but by public bodies throughout Scotland. We should take this step forward to provide the services that we all believe should be provided to veterans. A charter will allow veterans, their families and carers a document through which they can hold public bodies to account, and which they can say is theirs and theirs alone.

I hope that the document is adopted in Scotland, and I have pleasure in speaking to the motion.

18:12

Angela Constance (Livingston) (SNP): I add my congratulations to Mr Purvis on securing tonight's members' business debate. He has worked hard with colleagues such as Keith Brown to establish the cross-party group on supporting veterans in Scotland, which does a good job.

I very much like the idea of a veterans charter, particularly as it could encapsulate all that we should be doing at a strategic level for our veterans. Having a charter that plainly states what all public bodies should be striving to do and what their duties are could go some way towards tackling the often inevitable problems that are faced by people who have seen active service, whether those are physical health problems, a disability, mental health problems or associated social issues.

Charters are all very well, but actions speak better and louder than words. I very much hope that we succeed in securing a charter. Public

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agencies must be persuaded to be willing signatories, and they must then actually do what they have signed up to do. After all, our servicemen and servicewomen do without question what they have signed up to do on behalf of their country. As individuals, as citizens, as a Parliament and as a Government, we should ensure that there is a social contract for veterans, in recognition of what they do for us.

I have a particular interest in veterans who end up in the criminal justice system. Colleagues will recall a members' business debate earlier this year on that issue. I hope that a veterans charter would reflect on how the criminal justice system, at every stage from arrest to the worst-case

scenario of sentencing and post-release supervision, could be better tailored to support veterans. For instance, community justice authorities could have a veterans champion.

With more alert services, we could be doing much more to prevent veterans from becoming involved in the criminal justice system. In that respect, a veterans charter could be a valuable tool. No one is above the law, but we cannot escape the significant mental health issues that are faced by many veterans who end up incarcerated. There is much more to be done in that respect.

I take the opportunity to ask the minister what progress has been made on having more reliable data on the number of veterans in Scotland's prisons. In the debate earlier this year, he said that he would pursue the issue at UK level with the new Secretary of State for Defence and the minister with responsibility for veterans, to build on the assurances that the Scottish Prison Service and the Ministry of Defence have given to work together on the matter. We do not want numbers for numbers' sake; we need better information about the profile of veteran offenders, because that will enable us to build up a better picture and have a better chance of rehabilitating veterans who end up on the wrong side of the law.

I draw members' attention to a recent report by the Howard League for Penal Reform, "Leave No Veteran Behind: The Inquiry into Former Armed Service Personnel in Prison visits the United States of America", which notes interesting parallels and differences between the UK and the USA in relation to veteran offenders. I should say that on both sides of the Atlantic veterans are far less likely to offend than are the general population, but when veterans offend the offence is more likely to be serious and to involve violence. Veterans tend to serve longer sentences. They also tend to be older: 30 per cent of veteran offenders—a significant proportion—are over 55. Of course, that figure is based on data on the

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prison population in England and Wales. We need more information on Scotland.

The Howard League for Penal Reform's report floats the idea of a veterans court, a good example of which is in Buffalo in the USA. I am not instinctively drawn to specialist courts, because I think that our courts system should be able to deal day to day with the special issues that are associated with women offenders, drug offenders, domestic abuse offenders and veteran offenders. However, the approach is worthy of consideration, given its success across the Atlantic. I ask the minister to discuss the report with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice.

18:17

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): I congratulate Jeremy Purvis on securing the debate. I was pleased to sign his motion and to support the charter.

In the motion, Jeremy Purvis alluded to veterans who live throughout Scotland. He was right to do so. All members have veterans of all ages among their constituents, from very young men to people who served in the 1939 to 1945 world war and the Korean war. I am proud to be a member of the cross-party group on supporting veterans in Scotland. I am also proud to represent

Erskine home. Erskine, which has spread its protective wings over other parts of Scotland, plays an exceedingly important role in the care and rehabilitation of veterans.

It is a sad fact of life that Governments down the years have not shown enough concern for the veterans who have given loyal service in the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. That indifference has been challenged in recent times, and changes are taking place with a view to assisting veterans to adjust to civilian life. However, as Jeremy Purvis pointed out, that change is not happening fast enough.

It is politicians who send men and women to war, so it follows that politicians have a bounden duty to ensure that when veterans return—often badly wounded, not coping and suffering post-traumatic stress—they are provided with the means to engage in everyday life in their communities. Given that that is the underlying principle of Jeremy Purvis's veterans charter, I think that, although members of the Scottish Parliament do not send our men and women to war, we have a responsibility for them when they return to Scotland.

As Jeremy Purvis said, all members attended remembrance services last week. I have laid wreaths in Port Glasgow and Greenock for more than 27 years, representing the Scottish Parliament, and Westminster on behalf of my

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husband. I would have thought that after 27 years fewer people would be attending such ceremonies, but that is not the case. I am seeing much younger men and women, who have come back from Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the past, little attention was paid to the suffering of wounded veterans. For example, it took years before the Westminster Parliament followed the lead of the Administrations in New Zealand and Australia in paying compensation to the veterans who had suffered so dreadfully at the brutal hands of Japanese guards in prisoner-of-war camps in Asia.

Any country that is willing to send its young men and women to engage in military combat bears a heavy responsibility for ensuring that they are treated compassionately on their return. Much has been done in recent times, but we must remain vigilant. Many of the world war two veterans were more or less told to get on with it when they returned to civvy street. There was little or no understanding of the physical, mental and social problems that many experienced when they returned to these shores. We have a better understanding now but, as I said, it is still a sad state of affairs that, in many cases, those who return from Iraq and Afghanistan face the same difficulties in adjusting to civilian life and find that services to support them do not exist.

I said that I am pleased to take part in the debate, but I am angry that we have to have it. Help and support should be automatic to those who lay down their lives on our behalf. We have an important debt to pay those who are engaged in the dreadful business of killing and dying on our behalf, and for far too long this country of ours has ignored their needs and concerns. We face many challenges in this place, and we have difficulty in resolving many of them, but this one

should not be difficult. We know what the services should be, as Jeremy Purvis and Angela Constance have said, and we know that they should be available, but they are not.

At the very least, as the motion states, we should ensure that

"all public bodies ... recognise their duties and responsibilities in providing support to veterans"

and ensure that they and their families are appropriately supported and that they are reintegrated into civilian life. I thank Jeremy Purvis again for securing this debate.

18:21

John Lamont (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I begin by congratulating Jeremy Purvis on securing the debate.

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We hold many members' business debates in this Parliament on a variety of interesting subjects, but our topic today must surely be one of the most important: how we best look after those who have chosen to protect our country by serving in our armed forces.

The issue is of particular importance as our armed forces continue to be engaged in combat operations overseas. When we hear the word "veterans", the common image is of those who have fought in the world wars and are now rather elderly, but in recent years the realities of our involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan have meant that the image is changing. Indeed, many of those who are recovering in veterans respite homes across the country are in their early 20s.

Scotland has a proud military tradition. It is right that we collectively underline our appreciation and admiration for the bravery of our armed forces as a whole.

It is interesting to hear from other members about their experiences of veterans and veterans groups in different parts of Scotland. As a Borders MSP, I am particularly proud of the contribution that borderers have made, not only to our armed forces but to the cause of veterans. The strength of our armed forces is a result of the bravery of thousands of individuals, and I am proud that hundreds of those brave men and women have come from communities throughout the Borders. Among some of the better-known names from the Borders is the Earl Haig, who dedicated his later life to the welfare of ex-servicemen, travelling extensively throughout the world to promote their interests and to argue for improvements to their welfare. As the founder of the Earl Haig Fund, which is also known as Poppyscotland, he helped to start the tradition that, perhaps more than anything else in the past century, has focused attention on the issue.

It is clear that, even when not in combat, the military lifestyle is unique in the demands that it places on the lives of service personnel and their families. Whether because of the long periods of deployment, the unusual stresses of the environment in which they work or the risks involved, our service personnel have a unique occupation. Although many manage the transition smoothly, moving from that environment into regular civilian life undoubtedly presents real challenges for

many others. That is why it is so important that adequate support is in place to help ex-servicemen and women to integrate back into normal civilian life. As we have heard, the issues affecting ex-servicemen and women are varied.

I commend Veterans Scotland for its work to promote issues regarding Scotland's veterans. It acts as a co-ordinating voice for the benefit of the ex-service community in Scotland, and it has been

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instrumental in making the Scottish Government listen and learn about the fate of our veterans. It is important to recognise the role of the many local and voluntary organisations that provide daily support to veterans who need or ask for assistance. It is right that those services are provided by a mix of public bodies and charities. The Government cannot and should not try to do everything, and the charities and voluntary groups bring to the table expertise and experience that are invaluable in supporting veterans and their families.

Assisting those who return from active service has been a challenge to our society for centuries. We should recognise that not enough has been done to support such people in the past. I am pleased that that seems to be changing, perhaps as a result of the current realities of war and the tangible reminder of the debt that we owe to those brave men and women. However, we must not make that a reason for complacency. That is why the debate is important, as it keeps the issue in the public eye.

People who have put and continue to put their lives on the line for their country should expect the full support of members of the Parliament and our wider society. I hope that the debate has demonstrated that we give that support.

18:25

Hugh Henry (Paisley South) (Lab): I thank Jeremy Purvis for giving us the debate and allowing Parliament to record its thanks for and appreciation of those who have served us well. He is right to focus in his motion on what we should do as part of our responsibility to those people.

I grew up in the grounds of what was known as Erskine hospital in Trish Godman's constituency—it is now the Erskine home, as she said. My father was a prisoner in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp for nearly four years. The fathers of all my friends suffered in one way or another—at the hands of the Japanese or in the theatre of war in Europe. When I was young, it was not unusual for me to mix with men who had lost limbs, suffered terribly in explosions or suffered—as my father did—privation in prisoner-of-war camps.

In the interests of consensus, I will not introduce disagreement into the debate. However, suffice it to say that, when I was a boy, the veterans from the first world war who lived in Erskine hospital had a very different view of Earl Haig from the benign view that John Lamont presented. They still had bitter memories of what they thought that Earl Haig had done.

I grew up in what I now know was a wonderful, caring and supportive environment. The people who were privileged to be there received huge

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support not just from the staff but from the local community, because everyone was in it together. However, although that environment was as good as it was and was much better than the circumstances in which my father's comrades often had to live outwith it, I reflect that the veterans still received little counselling for the horrors and little direct medical support, although Erskine tried to do its best. That was because we as a society had not learned how to cope with people who came back from war.

We are in a much better place now than we were then. We have learned about the psychological and physical consequences of war, but we still make mistakes and we still fail. Undoubtedly, for those who are worst affected, the services—imperfect as they are—are probably much better than the services for those who are less severely affected but who are still traumatised and suffering as a result of their active service. Far too many servicemen are addicted to alcohol or drugs, too many are in prison and too many are suffering homelessness. As long as that remains the case, we as a society are failing.

It is therefore right that we exhort and encourage people to work together better and specify how we want that to be done. That is not just because society must pay a terrible price when we fail in our endeavours but because it is a disgrace that we allow individuals who are suffering because of what they have gone through to have to bear the consequences of that turmoil.

Jeremy Purvis is to be congratulated. It is right for the Parliament to put on the record the fact that we can and should do better. More power to his elbow.

18:29

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): I, too, congratulate Jeremy Purvis on securing a debate on an issue on which there is widespread consensus in the Parliament, even if attendance is depleted because of the late finishing of the main business. Across the Parliament, members are determined to do what we can, within the powers and resources that are available to us, to help veterans and the wider veteran community.

Before I deal with the idea of a charter, I will take the opportunity to update Angela Constance on the point that she raised, given that I gave an undertaking in a previous members' business debate to pursue the issue of veterans in prison. Discussions are well under way with the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice to progress the matching of the Scottish Prison Service prisoner database with the MOD database of known service leavers. A number of detailed

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protocols require to be agreed between the SPS and the MOD's Defence Analytical Services and Advice, and the SPS is working towards securing them. However, it has proved impossible simply to transfer the SPS database, as that would breach data protection legislation. Other steps to circumvent that problem are being investigated.

In addition, a targeted survey of self-reported veterans in custody is being developed to explore post-service issues and offending behaviour with a view to getting a better understanding of veterans' characteristics and precipitating factors that lead to imprisonment. The survey questionnaire is being designed and content will cover: demographic characteristics; service and post-service history; offending behaviour and criminal history; substance misuse issues; mental health functioning; employment status; accommodation and homelessness; access to services in the SPS; access to services that are provided by specialist veterans associations; and other ancillary topics. In October, the process began of distributing it to those ex-service personnel who can be identified through the prisoner record system. Responses will be anonymised and confidential, and a report will be available in December, so I hope that Angela Constance will accept that we have pursued that issue vigorously.

Jeremy Purvis makes a strong case for a veterans charter. As he makes clear in his motion, a charter would ensure that public bodies recognised their duties and responsibilities in providing support to veterans. It would be a tangible commitment to veterans that I have no doubt would be well received.

As members will be aware and as Jeremy Purvis mentioned, the UK Government has reached a fairly advanced stage in the development of an armed forces covenant, which will provide a framework for communication with military personnel and veterans, as well as the public and service providers. It is expected to be ready early in the new year.

The aim, direction and even the wording of the armed forces covenant will be informed by a report by a task force chaired by a Scot—Professor Hew Strachan of the University of Oxford. That report will be published later this month, and the UK Government will make a formal response to it early next year, in advance of the issuing of the covenant. Naturally, the Scottish Government has been and will continue to be fully involved in the process of bringing the covenant into the public domain.

Indeed, we have already had a significant input into the work of the task force. In October, I met Professor Strachan to discuss his work and to give a Scottish Government perspective. The professor also met Dr Kevin Woods, our lead civil servant at

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the time and the Scottish Government's armed forces and veterans champion, and policy officials have fed into the consultation process around the report. I can reveal that, in his discussions with us, the professor made it clear that the Scottish Government had made significant progress in tailoring public services for the armed forces community and that Scotland was in a much stronger position than other parts of the UK in that regard.

Although the task force report is not yet in the public domain, I can say that it will make a range of recommendations in respect of veterans, many of which will coincide with the motion's proposals on a veterans charter. At this stage, it would not be appropriate for me to go into further detail on a report that has not yet been published, but I can assure members that the call for a charter sits well with what the report is likely to say.

My only cautionary note is that it is important to develop work on that front in a way that is predicated on the removal of disadvantage from, not the provision of advantage for the veterans community in accessing public services. That is also the view of Veterans Scotland. I give an undertaking today that we will consider the scope of the veterans charter as part of our implementation of the armed forces covenant as it applies to Scotland, although it will obviously take time to put that in place. We will also consult on it.

There will be many issues to consider, but I can tell members that we will wish to draw into that work the views and ideas of all interested parties, and we will do that on a cross-party basis. This is not a party political issue; we want to maximise consensus in all aspects of the covenant and in relation to a possible charter.

In the meantime, we cannot sit back and wait for the covenant. We must continue to develop our work in meeting the needs of veterans and influencing policy and the delivery of services by public bodies. As the minister responsible for housing, I am pleased to say that the Housing (Scotland) Bill will receive royal assent by Christmas, and it contains the specific commitment to remove the disadvantage faced by veterans who are trying to get on to waiting lists for council and housing association houses in Scotland.

We as a Parliament, not just as a Government, are committed to those who have fought for our country and offered to make the ultimate sacrifice. A great deal of detail has to be worked out on all aspects of the issue, including housing, education and health, and in a range of other services. I can also confirm that we will be able to implement our policy of extending the concessionary bus fare scheme to disabled veterans from 1 April next year. We will continue to work with our colleagues

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and the various agencies in London, as well as with all the relevant organisations in Scotland to progress with the work. When the armed forces covenant and the task force report are published, we will act with speed to examine the recommendations and take them on with a view to action, not words.