



Report on the Provision of Information on Housing for Service Leavers and Veterans in Scotland

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Introduction

Service personnel – no matter how long they have been in uniform – undergo a fundamental change in their circumstances when they leave the Army, Navy or Air Force. In a very short period they have to give up their jobs; an established and predictable way of life; their friends; and, in many cases, their homes and neighbourhoods. This can be an extremely stressful and uncertain time that has far-reaching impact, especially on Service families and those younger leavers who have had relatively short military careers. Several recent reports, including my first report on *Transition in Scotland*¹, commented on this aspect of Service life and, without exception, all reinforce the importance of finding meaningful **employment** and appropriate **housing** as key elements in ensuring a successful transition and long-term integration into wider society. This report focuses on the latter with particular emphasis on the provision of information from the public sector, intended to help those seeking suitable accommodation in Scotland.

AIM AND SCOPE

Throughout my engagement, the issue of inconsistent, confusing and often inaccessible information on housing has been a recurring theme raised by Service Leavers, veterans and Third Sector organisations alike. It has also been the topic of discussion at the Cross-Party Group on Armed Forces Veterans and featured in my meetings with Keith Brown, Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for veterans. Such conversations reinforce the observation made in my *2015 Strategy and Workplan*² that information on housing was “not always well signposted and the quality ... could be variable”. This report attempts to add some substance to these comments, articulate concerns from the wider veterans’ community and make recommendations that will help address the most obvious shortcomings. It also fulfils the commitment in my Workplan to undertake a report into the quality and availability of the information on housing options for ex-Service personnel in Scotland.

Ultimately, I believe the aim must be to ensure all Service Leavers and veterans – and their families – have access to **accurate, relevant** and **understandable** information such that they are aware of their entitlements in Scotland and can find the type of housing most relevant to their requirements. This is neither contentious nor different from the needs of everyone else who lives in Scotland. However, Service personnel come with particular challenges brought about by their military service and often need additional information (and support) to help them make the transition, and then adjust to many of

¹ Scottish Veterans Commissioner – Transition in Scotland – March 2015
(<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00474235.pdf>)

² <http://www.gov.scot/About/public-bodies/veterans-commissioner/Publications/ScottishVeteransCommissionerStrategyandWorkPlan201>

the challenges in civilian life. In this report, I set out those areas where there are deficiencies, suggesting where priorities should lie and highlighting examples of good practice which could be shared across Scotland.

THE SCOTTISH CONTEXT

As I set out in my first report, the political, legislative and societal context differs significantly in Scotland from the rest of the UK with a range of responsibilities, including that of housing policy, devolved to the Scottish Parliament. In many cases this presents an entirely different set of rules, regulations and procedures for Service personnel thinking of settling in Scotland which, in turn, adds further complication to those offering advice or information for Service Leavers across the UK.

In terms of housing, the distinctive legislative and policy frameworks have led to differences in approach and entitlement of which many leaving the Services are often uninformed. From the 2012 reform that abolished the 'priority need' categories for homelessness assessments to the different system of buying and selling houses in Scotland, many Service personnel may not be familiar with the alternative rules and forms of support north of the border. A particular example of the latter is the Scottish Government's shared equity scheme called LIFT (Low-cost Initiative for First Time Buyers) which gives priority access to many including members of the Armed Forces and recent Service Leavers.

At a local level, the landscape is also quite different, with responsibility for shaping services and decision-making devolved to Local Authorities to deliver outcomes tailored to local needs. The result has been a wide range of different approaches across Scotland, especially in relation to the allocation of social housing. Whilst this is seen to have numerous advantages, it has the unintended consequence of complicating the housing scene in Scotland, generating a need for much more information and causing further confusion for those seeking civilian housing, perhaps for the first time.

METHODOLOGY

In preparing this report, my team tested the quality, utility and accessibility of the various online resources offering information on housing in Scotland and analysed evidence on the provision of housing information from recent reports. These provided a broad perspective but it soon became apparent that the unique – and very local – approach taken in Scotland demanded more detailed data from the 32 Local Authorities to whom responsibility for delivering and implementing housing policy is devolved. Subsequently, we conducted a survey to determine the levels of support provided to the ex-Service community in each area, which elicited an impressive response (from 30 of the 32 authorities) and led to a series of conversations with local officials and representatives. These highlighted the

individual approaches taken by many Local Authorities, the challenges they face and some of the innovative ideas that have been developed to satisfy local needs. This information, together with significant support from the Scottish Government, forms the basis for much of this report.

However, in addition to this aspect of the research I wanted to ensure that the views and ideas of the wider veterans' community were considered. Through a series of focus group discussions, I was able to hear directly from veterans, family members and those charities which offer support to those seeking housing in Scotland. These focus groups provided compelling evidence of how Service Leavers, veterans and their families coped with the process of finding accommodation, navigating the large amount of information on offer and dealing with the complex difficulties many have to overcome. Each had their own unique story but their contributions helped enormously in identifying the issues, challenges and frustrations – this deserves particular mention and our sincere thanks.

In assessing the effectiveness of information for Service personnel, veterans and their families, this report looks at the primary sources to which individuals turn as they start looking for somewhere to live on leaving the military or, indeed, as their circumstances change later in life. Approaching this as a housing 'journey', it focuses on each of the information suppliers they will encounter along the way, starting with the In-Service support offered whilst still in uniform and then progressing to the information provided by the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and Third Sector organisations. The aim has not been to conduct a comprehensive mapping exercise but to identify those areas where there are shortcomings or barriers to understanding, highlight good practice and suggest changes to smooth the pathway for ex-Service personnel who want to settle in Scotland.

In-Service Support

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) is responsible for supporting Service Leavers through the transition process from military to civilian life. Its Joint Service Housing Advice Office (JSHAO) provides housing information and advice to Service personnel to assist them in this transition process.

The first source of information on housing that serving personnel are likely to encounter when they start their transition process to civilian life is through the Joint Service Housing Advice Office (JSHAO), part of the MoD. This organisation provides a range of resettlement advice - including housing briefings - at bases across the UK, in Germany and Cyprus, in leaflets, a web-page and a monthly "Housing Matters" magazine which focuses on a particular part of the UK each month. It offers an important service but appears to struggle on occasions to attract audiences or achieve the profile it deserves. This is particularly evident in Scotland where few Service leavers – and even fewer spouses or partners – seem to attend the small number of briefings or access the information on offer.

However, we understand an improved package of briefings is now being developed for Service personnel currently based in Scotland. This involves Military Matters - a specialist project within Housing Options Scotland that has provided the Scottish dimension of JSHAO housing briefings in the past - and personnel from 51st Infantry Brigade. Together, they have the potential of delivering housing briefs with a far more distinctive Scottish dimension to explain the differences in housing policy, provision and house-buying found in Scotland.

Such local initiatives are very welcome and should offer a more relevant source of information for Service Leavers. However, it will be interesting to see whether this package can reach the entire military footprint in Scotland and succeed in attracting greater interest amongst those about to transition to civilian life. Much of this will depend on assigning sufficient priority to the briefings but it would also be useful if efforts could be directed into welcoming a larger number of partners, choosing times and venues that suit family members most readily and even providing childcare facilities where necessary. Given that decisions on housing affect the whole family, I believe that anything that can be done to include them at every stage of the process of finding appropriate housing should be encouraged. This is something that can only be done by local military units but I am hopeful that the renewed emphasis on transition generated over the past year will encourage a more inclusive approach.

Although these briefs are essential, the extent to which this information is available to those serving outwith Scotland remains unclear and this is a concern. A large proportion of the approximately 1800 Service Leavers who settle in Scotland each year will have been based elsewhere prior to transition. Whether these individuals and families are able to access information relevant to their future aspirations is far from certain and needs careful review. My view is that advice, especially from JSHAO, must reflect the different legislation and procedures in Scotland, and include subjects such as housing need, house purchase, affordable Home Ownership Schemes, private rental and social housing; and be readily accessible to all. The Scottish Government has a role to play, with MoD, in ensuring this is available wherever required.

Recommendation 1: the Scottish Government should continue to work with the UK Government to ensure that advice and MoD briefings reflect housing policy and provision in Scotland, so Service Leavers choosing to settle in Scotland are not disadvantaged (also recommended in my *Transition in Scotland* report)

Scottish Government Information

The Scottish Government is responsible for developing housing policy and legislation, which are devolved in Scotland. This includes regulation of the house purchase system, private rented accommodation, social housing and homelessness.

As the owner of policy and legislation on housing and one of the primary sources of information on housing options in Scotland, the Scottish Government has a key responsibility for ensuring that Service Leavers and veterans are provided with clear and accurate details of their entitlements, the range of options available to them and the systems in place for buying, renting and accessing social housing. This section reviews the housing information Service Leavers and veterans should be able to access from the Scottish Government, either through websites or its dedicated housing guide. In doing so, it focusses predominantly on social housing and how accessible, accurate and relevant these official information sources are to the serving and ex-Service communities.

BACKGROUND

Amongst many serving personnel and those going through transition, there is a misplaced expectation that the Armed Forces Covenant guarantees them social housing - regardless of where they are based when they leave the Services. Whilst the Scottish Government and many Local Authorities in Scotland have put in place specific measures to support those leaving the Armed Forces - with guidance to support this ambition - rules on entitlements, eligibility criteria and allocation policies are far from straightforward, leading to frustration and misunderstanding amongst many in the serving and ex-Service communities. This requires attention in the form of clearer information on housing options and a degree more transparency when trying to explain entitlements and eligibility. Fundamentally, there is a need to manage expectations more effectively, offer a more realistic view of the housing situation in Scotland and provide better information for those trying to find their way in a civilian world.

POLICY INFORMATION

In trying to assess and understand the information provided by the Scottish Government, one of the biggest challenges for my team has been in getting a clear grasp of the underlying policy. From my conversations with veterans and support organisations, it is evident that the complexity of this framework does little to help those who may be entering the housing system for the first time. Indeed,

the relationship between statutory requirements, guidance and the implementation of policy is often confusing, even for those who work in this sector.

One of the most difficult aspects of this policy relates to the issue of “**local connection**”, a factor often used when determining allocation priorities for social housing and which Local Authorities can consider during the homelessness assessment process. The Scottish Government’s stated policy intention is that the need to demonstrate this link should not be a barrier to those leaving the Armed Forces and looking to settle in Scotland. This is very welcome but I have a concern that there remains a mismatch between this intent and the actual experiences of some Service personnel and veterans who have made such a choice. This is in part due to the discretion afforded to Local Authorities and Social Landlords and, whilst I recognise the Scottish Government’s desire to allow for local flexibility, information on “local connection” can, as a consequence, appear muddled and at times contradictory for both practitioners and applicants.

My team and I have grappled extensively with this issue over recent weeks and often received conflicting reports and advice from a range of sources. Information on **homelessness** is a case in point where recent changes to legislation, including the ending of “priority need”, have led some Service Leavers and their advisors to assume “local connection” is no longer relevant in homelessness assessments. However, what has also become clear is that Local Authorities still have the discretion to use this factor as part of their homelessness assessment process.

Notwithstanding the positive changes made to ensure Service personnel who have been living and working in a particular area because of their military service are granted a “local connection”, challenges are still faced by members of the Armed Forces who have been based elsewhere in the UK or abroad immediately prior to their discharge. I have heard from Service Leavers who are very keen to settle in Scotland but have struggled to demonstrate the “local connection” which some Local Authorities opt to use in their homelessness assessment process. This is particularly apparent amongst younger, single Service personnel.

Information on **social housing allocation** can also be very difficult to navigate due, in large part, to the multiplicity of approaches and policies across Scotland. In this case, conversations with housing professionals suggest that the application and relevance of the “local connection” criterion varies significantly from one council to another. Once again the Scottish Government’s policy intention is clearly set out in its *Social Housing Allocations: A Practice Guide*³ which places an expectation on providers that “local connection” should not be applied in any way that would place Service Leavers at

³ Scottish Government - Social Housing Allocations: A Practice Guide – March 2011
(<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/49296/0121720.pdf>)

a disadvantage. However, despite the Practice Guide suggesting they should be considered favourably when assessing “local connection”, ultimately this is left to the discretion of social landlords.

I remain convinced that the overall policy intention is good but the issue has become entangled in layers of guidance and interpretation which obfuscate the policy and lead to unnecessary barriers for veterans seeking housing after a career in the military. This is an aspect that needs far better explanation in MoD briefings, Scottish Government websites and leaflets, and by housing officials.

Recommendation 2: The requirement to prove a “local connection” needs far better explanation in MoD, Scottish Government and Local Authority publications, including leaflets and websites, targeted at housing providers, veterans and Service personnel.

After wrestling with this issue for some considerable time, I have reached the conclusion that the main reason why information on “local connection” is so problematic is because the policies themselves are extremely complicated.

In my Transition in Scotland report I set out my ambition, one shared by Scottish Ministers, to see Scotland become a destination of choice for Service Leavers and a country that makes the most of their strengths, skills and attributes. For this to become a reality, there has to be a smooth process that allows these individuals and families find housing that is appropriate to their needs. One possible means of achieving this would be to revisit the concept of “local connection” as it is applied to those who have left military service, thereby removing potential disadvantage and simplifying a difficult, confusing policy area. It would also ensure the process in Scotland is in keeping with the spirit of the *Armed Forces Covenant*⁴ and the Scottish Government’s *Our Commitments*⁵. Rather than delving into the various rules, exceptions and variations, I would suggest serious consideration be given to creating a very clear dispensation for Service Leavers (up to 2 years after transition), irrespective of where they are based, that gives them “local connection” across Scotland wherever they apply for housing.

I recognise that this could be challenging to implement but believe this would level the playing field for Service Leavers and their families and is a change worth pursuing.

⁴ Ministry of Defence – The Armed Forces Covenant – May 2011
(https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49469/the_armed_forces_covenant.pdf)

⁵ Scottish Government – Our Commitments Scottish Government Support for the Armed Forces Community in Scotland – September 2012 (<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0040/00401317.pdf>)

Recommendation 3: If Scotland is to become the destination of choice for Service Leavers, then the Scottish Government and housing providers should give consideration to smoothing their route into social housing. Particular attention should be given to removing any potential disadvantage caused by a lack of “local connection” brought about by military Service, both for those serving in Scotland and elsewhere.

HOUSING GUIDE FOR SERVICE LEAVERS

To ensure that Service Leavers were made aware of housing options available in Scotland, the Scottish Government produced a tailored advice leaflet in 2011 (updated in 2013) giving an overview of the housing situation in Scotland for those completing military careers and details of where to go for further advice. This was intended to consolidate the information already issued about housing in Scotland and provide a definitive guide to entitlements.

Accessible on the Scottish Government and Veterans Assist websites, the *Scottish Housing Guide for People Leaving the Armed Forces and Ex-Service Personnel*⁶ was distributed through advice and support agencies, social housing providers and bases in the UK and abroad. The aim was to ensure military personnel interested in settling in Scotland received a copy before they completed their service. However, reports from several individuals who have transitioned in the past two years and not received a copy – and my own experience when leaving the Royal Navy in 2014 – cause me to doubt whether this document consistently reaches its intended audience. The guide is a very worthy initiative but I believe the Scottish Government now needs to review plans for its **distribution** as a first step in improving its overall utility and reputation.

When surveying Scotland’s Local Authorities it was also surprising to note that nine of the councils surveyed did not publicise the guide and, of those, four were not even aware of its existence. In addition, we were unable to find any clear link to the guide from any of the MoD’s housing web pages, including the JSHAO and Veterans UK sites. Work therefore needs to be done to raise the profile of the document amongst Local Authorities and to ensure it is far more **visible** and **accessible** on relevant Scottish and UK websites.

⁶ Scottish Government - A Scottish Housing Guide for People Leaving the Armed Forces and Ex-Service Personnel – 2013 – (<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0041/00418039.pdf>)

Recommendation 4: the Scottish Government should consider wider distribution of the *Scottish Housing Guide for People Leaving the Armed Forces* and work with MoD, public sector organisations and charities in Scotland to raise its profile, ensuring it appears on all Scottish Local Authority websites and on relevant UK Government websites.

When leaving the Armed Forces, Service personnel are looking for details about their housing options and entitlements that are written in a plain, understandable but engaging style – whether intending to settle in Scotland or elsewhere. It is commendable that the needs of this group have been considered by the Scottish Government and there is no doubt that the concept of a housing guide is very good. However, the document, in its current form, lacks impact and struggles to connect with its intended readership. As mentioned earlier, it is a very useful initiative that has the potential to be a vital source of information but changes are required.

In considering ways to improve the impact and effectiveness of the guide, the Scottish Government, in the first instance, should seek the views of its likely audience – either directly with the Service community or through organisations like Veterans Scotland. In the meantime, the following should be considered when reviewing its content and style:

- Above all, the guide should offer a **clearer statement on entitlement** and housing options in Scotland.
- It should have greater **visual impact** and be a more interesting document to read.
- Although approved by the Plain English Campaign, more could be done to ensure the guide **engages** with its target audience, especially younger Service personnel and their families.
- Consideration should be given to formatting the guide as an **online document**, especially given the evolving nature of legislation, policy and contacts and the need to keep the guide updated.

Recommendation 5: the Scottish Government should review its *Scottish Housing Guide for People Leaving the Armed Forces* with the aim of improving content, visual impact and accessibility.

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT WEB-BASED INFORMATION

Although the Scottish Housing Guide is a very useful resource, a large proportion of the Service and ex-Service communities will use official websites as their primary source of information on issues like housing. This puts a further onus on the Scottish Government, and others, to ensure sites are kept up-

to-date and relevant. Unfortunately, my experience over the past few months confirms that this cannot always be guaranteed with some information, particularly that in relation to complex issues like “local connection”, often being difficult to locate and decipher.

Another example arises from the recent changes to homelessness legislation, referred to above, which saw the historic enactment of the Scottish Government’s commitment that all those assessed as unintentionally homeless by local authorities were to be entitled to settled accommodation as a legal right from the end of 2012. This marked a fundamental shift in policy approach that removed the “priority need” test and made the situation regarding housing in Scotland quite distinct from that elsewhere in the UK. In theory, this should have made situation more straightforward, particularly for single Service Leavers, but it seems the accuracy of online information often struggles to keep pace with reforms, with references to “priority need” still peppered across Scottish Government Housing web pages.

As well as updating content, I believe there would also be significant benefits if those sections of the Scottish Government website covering housing for Service Leavers and veterans were easier to find amongst the plethora of other official housing information available online. The challenges faced by a soldier, sailor or airman looking for information on social housing can be illustrated by the tortuous route he or she is required to take to locate the online versions of the *Scottish Housing Guide* and *Our Commitments* paper. At present these are only accessible via the website’s search function with no direct link from the Housing pages. Similarly, the relevant section of the Practice Guide relating to housing for those leaving the Armed Forces, while available on the Housing pages, requires the reader to navigate through 7 distinct levels of the website before they find the relevant document - this is time-consuming and far from intuitive. In contrast, the [Armed Forces & Veterans Healthcare](#) pages on the Health section of the Scottish Government website are far easier to find, navigate and understand, and may provide a better format to follow.

Recommendation 6: the Scottish Government should review the information provided on its website relating to housing targeted at Service Leavers, veterans and their families in order to improve accessibility and currency.

Indeed, it would make sense to me if all policy relating specifically to the ex-Service community were accessible in a dedicated section of the main Scottish Government website, set out clearly and consistently. In addition, the new **mygov.scot** website, which puts the user at the heart of online information services, may soon provide an alternative portal for Service Leavers, veterans and their families. The new site is currently under development but it has the stated aim of ensuring that everyone in Scotland can access the services they need in the clearest and most accessible way. This

presents a timely opportunity to make significant improvements in the provision of Scottish Government housing information for the Service and ex-Service communities in Scotland and is something I strongly encourage. By combining this initiative with efforts to provide greater clarity on housing policy within the Scottish Government's own website, many of the difficulties experienced by officials, housing providers and veterans will be overcome.

Recommendation 7: the Scottish Government should consider placing all information for veterans and Service Leavers (not just information on housing) in one area like the mygov.scot website.

Information from Scottish Local Authorities

Under a concordat between the Scottish Government and the 32 Local Authorities, each Council has responsibility and significant flexibility for implementing policy, service design, resourcing and delivery. This allows for locally tailored solutions designed to meet local need but has resulted in considerable differences in allocation policies and prioritisation of social housing across Local Authority areas. Many Local Authorities own and manage the allocation of their own housing stock but others, such as Glasgow, have transferred all of their housing to associations or Registered Social Landlords (RSLs).

The variation in housing policy across the 32 Local Authorities in Scotland results in a degree of complexity that presents significant challenges to those providing information and also to anyone in need of advice or support. This section looks at a number of areas including an assessment of the housing information available for veterans on Local Authority websites together with examples and suggestions on how improvements might be made. It also highlights the benefits of information guides provided by some Local Authorities and the support that can be offered by frontline Council staff to the veterans' community.

SURVEY RESULTS

To get a clearer picture of the housing information and support Local Authorities provide to Service Leavers, my team surveyed all 32 Local Authorities earlier this year, receiving replies from the majority. It must be stressed the survey was not intended to map the range of policies and systems across Scotland but rather to determine the level of housing support provided to the ex-Service community living in their areas and to invite Councils to share details of their approach to providing information and assistance.

Some of these broad statistical findings from the 30 Councils which responded are as follows:

- 53% (16) provided **additional support** to Service Leavers;
- 34% (10) had **plans to develop their housing policy** for Service Leavers/veterans;
- 60% (18) said they had a **dedicated webpage** for ex-Service personnel (although the team were unable to locate them in every case);
- 60% (18) had **mechanisms to measure veterans** resettling in their area;

- 30% (9) **did not publicise** or make available the Scottish Government housing guide for Service Leavers (4 of which were not aware of it); and
- 27% (8) felt there were **barriers preventing support** to veterans.

INFORMATION AVAILABLE ON LOCAL AUTHORITY WEBSITES

In keeping with the rest of society, Service Leavers and veterans increasingly rely on council websites to get information on local policies, services and procedures. For those moving into an area after being based elsewhere, this may be the only option and their experience (and eventual success) will depend heavily on the quality of the Local Authority's online resources. Our survey demonstrated that Councils are increasingly aware of this with several making significant progress in ensuring their sites are as clear, accurate and easily accessible as possible.

Of the 30 Local Authorities who responded to the survey, it was encouraging that 18 indicated they already had a dedicated section on their site for veterans. Several of these were well-constructed, sensibly linked to other sections and very informative on housing issues. The website published by Angus Council was seen as a particularly good example. However, it was disappointing that several Councils had yet to acknowledge the specific needs of the ex-Service (and serving) communities or to develop plans for similar types of support. This may be an area where Veterans Champions can use their influence.

Finding 1: There are a number of effective online tools to help specific groups access relevant information on Local Authority websites which might be extended to the serving and ex-Service communities.

At a more technical level, it was noticeable that a number of Local Authorities use internal links and 'adverts' to steer groups with specific needs to those areas of their websites of most interest and utility. This approach, which improves accessibility enormously, is one that could easily be adopted for the Service and ex-Service communities who have unique requirements and can face a number of challenges when it comes to housing. This is an avenue worth exploring further, especially as it would help Councils conform more readily to the broader aims of the Community Covenant and be a relatively low-cost means of supporting the wider Service community.

Recommendation 8: All Scottish Local Authorities should consider offering housing information for Service Leavers, veterans and their families on their websites with direct links from Housing home pages to improve accessibility.

INFORMATION GUIDES FOR VETERANS

A number of Local Authorities have gone the extra mile in pulling together information of most relevance for Service Leavers, in a dedicated guide. Good examples can be seen in those guides produced by [Perth and Kinross](#) and [Scottish Borders](#) Councils, as well as the version produced by [Veterans First Point Ayrshire](#) which is available on the South Ayrshire Council website. All of these provide useful assistance to Service leavers and veterans alike in a format that others could do well to emulate.

Other Local Authorities have already expressed an intention to develop similar guides and there is no doubt this model can be very effective in explaining local policy and connections, sharing information and offering a useful means of promoting local communities in the eyes of the military families. Again, it is imperative that these guides are easy to find – both on the Council website and through distribution across the Local Authority area – and that they are regularly checked to ensure the information they contain is up-to-date. It would also be helpful if they were hosted or had links on websites such as [Veterans Assist Scotland](#), [Scottish Government](#), [mygov.scot](#) and UK Government websites, such as the Ministry of Defence pages on the [Joint Service Housing Advice Office](#) and [Veterans UK](#). Simple measures such as these could, in my opinion lead to significant improvements in the provision of information for a modest outlay of time and funding.

Finding 2: Local Authorities might wish to consider producing guides specifically for veterans and Service Leavers, which set out practical information for those in transition, and making them accessible via Scotland and UK-wide websites.

FRONTLINE INFORMATION PROVISION

During my conversations with veterans there has been plenty of anecdotal evidence of occasions where frontline Council staff were unaware of the [Community Covenant](#) and its aims. This lack of understanding on the part of those meant to be providing support can be a major source of frustration amongst Service Leavers and veterans.

Given the public commitments made by Local Authorities in signing the Community Covenant, I find it unfortunate that staff in some areas have not yet received guidance on what the Covenant means in practical terms for their role. There is an onus on Local Authorities, under the leadership of their Armed Forces and Veterans Champions, to ensure that Council staff have accurate information and appropriate training in order to meet the housing needs of veterans and their families. Further efforts in this area are required.

However, it is also important to recognise the good examples where Local Authorities train frontline staff to better understand and support the particular needs of Service Leavers and families. Of note is the Veterans' Support Adviser, who works across Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire and Inverclyde to improve customer support for veterans.

Other Local Authorities might wish to draw on the Armed Services Advice Project (ASAP) e-learning module "Understanding the Armed Forces community", which offers support to help frontline staff understand the issues facing Service personnel and the challenges that may surface as they adapt to civilian life.

Recommendation 9: Local Authorities should consider providing additional guidance to their frontline staff on the principles of the Covenant and the Council's policy on housing support for veterans.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

A number of Local Authorities have put in place a range of practical measures to support Service Leavers, veterans and their families, some of which are set out as examples of good practice in the Scottish Government's Social Housing Practice Guide for social landlords and listed below.

- Armed Forces and priority for housing, Dundee City Council (March 2011).
- Additional points award for time spent in the Armed Forces, City of Edinburgh Council (March 2013)
- Quota of annual lets for ex-Service personnel, Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership (March 2013)
- Armed Forces and Veterans Housing Options Service, Glasgow City Council (March 2013)
- Ex-Armed Forces personnel placed in highest housing need category, South Lanarkshire Council (March 2013)

These are welcome initiatives but the question remains whether the serving and ex-Service communities are aware of these initiatives and are in a position to take advantage of the opportunities.

As highlighted here, several Local Authorities (Dumfries and Galloway, but also Scottish Borders and Fife) keep a small allocation of their social housing for applicants from the Service community who meet their criteria, which can include length of time from discharge or "local connection". It is especially encouraging that in some areas, allocation policies have been established following consultation with existing tenants and Housing Association boards, meeting with widespread support from local communities.

Some Local Authorities want to use this type of allocation policy to promote their areas as preferred settlement destinations for Service Leavers, recognising them as potential assets who can bring many skills, strengths and attributes to a community. Ensuring these individuals and their families receive information about these initiatives should be a priority, not just for the Local Authorities themselves but all those supporting this cohort - for the MoD, specifically JSHAO, the Scottish Government and wider support organisations.

Finding 3: The survey of Local Authorities found good examples of support for ex-Service personnel. Opportunities could be sought to publicise these initiatives and disseminate information further.

Many Local Authorities have found a solution which caters for local needs and satisfies the wishes of the local community, some through the Firm Base network working with partners supporting serving personnel and veterans, others with a more bespoke approach. Examples include Glasgow Helping Heroes, which offers a one-stop shop for a Local Authority covering a densely populated but smaller geographical area or the Armed Services Advice Project (ASAP) a home referral service which is an alternative option for Authorities such as Stirling Council which has a wider geographical spread. Dumfries and Galloway's "one stop" support service, aims to identify veterans and provide a joined-up approach between partners in a range of areas including housing and education, both to those already living there and promoting the benefits – including employment opportunities – to the wider ex-Service community who might be interested in settling in their area.

Again, ensuring information about the Local Authority's "offer" to Service Leavers and veterans reaches its target audience will be the key to effective delivery. Social media is becoming a more important tool in this area but word of mouth still appears to be one of main routes by which users access these services. A more systematic approach to information dissemination is needed if they are to have the optimum impact.

Finding 4: The "one stop" support provision where assistance in a range of areas is offered to those thinking of moving to the area is an example of good practice, but Local Authorities might wish to consider how best to publicise their "offer" to the broader ex-Service community.

BARRIERS TO PROVIDING INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

From our survey responses, one of the main issues identified by Local Authorities preventing them providing more targeted information and support to veterans is the lack of advance notice of Service Leavers moving into their area.

Several Councils have made pleas to receive details about those who have expressed an interest in settling in their area as soon as this information is available on the MoD's personnel IT system. This, they believe, would allow them to provide better support and services at a much earlier stage of the transition process; allow them to tailor information about health, education, employment opportunities and housing; and, make it as easy as possible for Service Leavers, partners and families to settle in their area. Such an approach would also allow them to attract veterans to their communities, reinforcing the message that Scotland welcomes these men and women (and their families) and sees them as assets that are ideally placed to make a positive contribution to the local economy and community.

Recommendation 10: The Scottish Government should work with Local Authorities and MoD to improve information-sharing to ensure those leaving the Services are aware of the opportunities available in Scotland and Local Authorities are given advance notice of those expressing a wish to live in their area (also highlighted in recommendation 2 of my *Transition in Scotland* report).

Third Sector Information

Information on housing options for those leaving the Services to settle in Scotland is available from a range of Third sector organisations, including those with specific housing and military links. There are also a number of veterans' charities that provide housing and accommodation to ex-Service personnel which come together under Veterans Scotland's Housing Pillar.

The primary focus of this report so far has been on the provision of information on housing options for Service Leavers, veterans and their families by the **public sector** but it is also important to recognise the role played by the **Third sector** in Scotland. For those seeking social housing or facing the prospect of homelessness, it is clear that these organisations offer a vital resource, which should never be underestimated or taken for granted.

During the past few months I have heard from many veterans who have benefitted from the information made available by the likes of Veterans Scotland, Scottish Veterans Residences (SVR), Shelter Scotland, Housing Options Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland/Armed Services Advice Project and have been consistently impressed by the quality and extent of the support these organisations provide. This section highlights some of this valuable work, the challenges, good practice and the welcome effect of greater collaboration between organisations (and sectors).

WEB-BASED INFORMATION

When researching information for this report, my team found the [Shelter Scotland](#) website to be one of the clearest, most comprehensive and accessible sources of information on housing options in Scotland. The information is up-to-date, tailored for varied audiences, easy to follow and set out in an entirely logical fashion. It offers an excellent first point of contact for those members of the serving and ex-Service communities looking for local housing advice and an impressive template for other information providers who may be updating their webpages and online presence. As such it deserves to be widely advertised by the MoD, Scottish Government, Local Authorities and other housing or Service charities – particularly those with a pan-UK reach.

Whilst the Shelter Scotland site provides an broad range of generic information, the [Citizens Advice Scotland \(CAS\)](#) website takes a more tailored approach and has a number of dedicated webpages for both the serving and ex-Service communities in Scotland. Its section for those in transition and looking for housing in Scotland provides a particularly useful guide with links to several other support organisations. Once again, this site deserves to be better known.

Recommendation 11: The Scottish Government and other housing information providers should consider taking a lead from Shelter Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland when looking to upgrade their websites and generate a more extensive online presence, and should consider promoting these organisations' websites more extensively.

Another important strand of work in this area is that being led by the Housing Pillar of Veterans Scotland. This is seeking to collate data on housing options for the ex-Service community across Scotland from a wide variety of sources, in order to provide a one-stop information hub on their Veterans Assist Scotland website. This is a major task but one that is warmly welcomed, especially as it has the potential to complement and link with existing threads, joining up information provision to present a much fuller picture of housing entitlement for veterans and their families. The output will take the form of a flow diagram, which aims to provide this community with details on the best solutions for their individual needs, and a facility to simplify onward signposting for those who require further help.

Although still at an early stage, this initiative shows considerable promise but, like similar projects, it will need to be promoted widely and made accessible. In order to achieve this, there will be benefits in generating effective links from a range of other government and Third sector sites, including those of pan-UK organisations like Veterans UK and JSHAO. This is particularly important if Service Leavers from outside Scotland are thinking of settling north of the border and who may otherwise struggle to find the information needed to help them meet their housing requirements.

Recommendation 12: The Scottish Government and Veterans Scotland should work together with partners, including the UK Government and other parts of the Third sector, to ensure that housing information is easily visible on the Veterans UK and other pan-UK websites in order to reach a wider audience.

Finally in this section, it is important to recognise the difficulties all organisations, including those in the Third sector, face in keeping their online housing information current and accessible across the UK. This demands constant attention and is one that may well be best addressed as part of a collaborative venture that includes charities, public sector organisations and housing providers. The challenge in Scotland will be to ensure that all websites keep pace with the regular changes in housing policy and legislation, provide consistent information and include effective links to other sites that add value whenever activated. At present there is no obvious mechanism that achieves this but a regular forum to share pertinent information, discuss changes and keep housing information sources updated would be a major step-forward. The Scottish Government is probably best placed to provide a lead for such an initiative.

Finding 5: Work is required to identify and introduce a structure involving the Third and public sectors to help ensure housing information for serving and ex-Service personnel is kept up-to-date and accessible.

DIRECT ADVICE AND INFORMATION

Earlier in this report I highlighted the work being done by Housing Options Scotland (HoS) in contributing a specifically Scottish dimension to JSHAO housing briefs. This organisation has also sought other avenues to engage with Service Leavers and has been successful in teaming up with the Careers Transition Partnership (CTP), providing a regular presence at their Employment Fairs and offering individual interviews where necessary. This collaborative measure has helped inform a much broader cohort of Service personnel and reduced the number of leavers who make the transition with little or no advice on housing matters outwith the military. It has also shown the benefits of a shared approach and teamwork, and is to be commended.

A further example of this sort of close working relationship is provided by the efforts of Citizens Advice Scotland's ASAP, also highlighted earlier in the report, which offers a more direct and personal advice route for veterans seeking information on housing. This project provides telephone or face-to-face support from trained counsellors to serving and ex-Service personnel and their families on a range of subjects. They work in partnership with a range of public sector organisations to identify and support veterans who may be in need of help with housing and other issues, often conducting home visits to those who may struggle with mental health issues or have restricted mobility. In several cases, the ASAP team have become closely involved with their local Firm Base group to identify opportunities to reinforce the efforts of the wider support network in the local area. Once again, this must be seen as an excellent example of collaborative working that can be adapted in many different areas across all parts of the country.

During the past few months I have also become aware of how fortunate we are in Scotland in being able to offer a wide range of housing support to the ex-Service community through veterans' housing charities. The University of York's report on Meeting the Housing and Support Needs of Single Veterans in Great Britain⁷ notes that, after London, Scotland has the greatest number of beds available for homeless veterans – much of this being provided by Scottish Veterans' Residences through its operational arm called Scottish Veterans Housing Association (SVHA). The SVHA provides high quality, supported accommodation for veterans who are homeless or in need of residences in the

⁷ Forces in Mind Trust/University of York - Meeting the Housing and Support Needs of Single Veterans in Great Britain – 2014 (<http://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Stollveteransreportweb.pdf>)

Edinburgh and Dundee areas. More recently, its new Bellrock Close development has provided a similar facility in Glasgow which, like its east coast counterparts, works closely with statutory and other Third Sector organisations to offer holistic help to those it accommodates. Information on these housing opportunities for homeless and vulnerable veterans is well-known and clearly signposted on a range of different websites; this is very welcome.

Finally, looking across the piece, I have to conclude that the public sector in Scotland can learn from some of the innovative approaches developed by Third Sector organisations in providing clear, accessible information on housing options, sharing good practice, working with like-minded organisations and building links with other information and housing providers. I believe there is a willingness to exploit this opportunity across all sectors and would strongly encourage any form of collaboration, sustained pooling of ideas and sharing of information resources. All of this will help improve the quality and availability of housing information for serving and ex-Service personnel, remove some of the hurdles they face in finding suitable accommodation and simplify a process that can, at times, seem long and difficult.

Conclusion

Information on housing options for those who are planning to settle in Scotland after a career in the military, and those veterans who already live here, can be very confusing and, at times, inaccessible and worryingly inaccurate. Through the course of my engagement and the team's research, it has become apparent that these groups - and their families – often struggle to access information that will explain their housing options in a language and format that is readily understood by all. There is also evidence of 'circular reporting' where a number of information providers simply provide links to other information sources which then re-refer them to other websites, adding little value and leaving users in a perpetual loop that leaves them frustrated and unable to find the answers they really need.

However, during this study I was also struck by the almost universal desire – whether within the Scottish Government, Local Authorities, charities and other organisations – to see the military community receive the levels of support they need and deserve. This includes areas such as housing.

As a result of efforts over the past few years, there are now many options open to those who are transitioning to civilian life and looking for accommodation in Scotland – whether they decide to buy their own property, rent privately or seek social housing through a Local Authority. There have also been a number of ground-breaking improvements in housing legislation and policy that should ensure this group are never disadvantaged because of their previous military service. Unfortunately, much of the information supporting these initiatives, and providing general information about housing options in Scotland, simply fails to reach veterans and Service Leavers, more often because it is poorly presented, managed and disseminated.

Having studied these issues for several months I have come to the conclusion that significant improvements are entirely achievable and that the onus for instigating change lies with the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and their respective housing providers. In making some fairly straightforward and cost-effective improvements to websites, leaflets and the training of staff in the public sector, much can be done to help provide a better understanding of entitlements and an easier route to appropriate housing for veterans and their families. Some of this can be learned from the Third Sector and I am particularly keen to see greater collaboration and sharing of good practice between the sectors. The recommendations included in this report, and listed at Annex A should, in part, provide a basis for further discussions and a starting point for sustained improvements.

Annex A – Recommendations and Findings

Recommendation 1: The Scottish Government should continue to work with the UK Government to ensure that advice and MoD briefings reflect housing policy and provision in Scotland, so Service Leavers choosing to settle in Scotland are not disadvantaged (also recommended in my *Transition in Scotland* report).

Recommendation 2: The requirement to prove a “local connection” needs far better explanation in MoD, Scottish Government and Local Authority publications, including leaflets and websites, targeted at housing providers, veterans and Service personnel.

Recommendation 3: If Scotland is to become the destination of choice for Service Leavers, then the Scottish Government and housing providers should give consideration to smoothing their route into social housing. Particular attention should be given to and removing any potential impediment disadvantage caused by a lack of “local connection” brought about by military Service, both for those serving in Scotland and elsewhere.

Recommendation 4: The Scottish Government should consider wider distribution of the Scottish Housing Guide for People Leaving the Armed Forces and work with MoD, public sector organisations and charities in Scotland to raise its profile, ensuring it appears on all Scottish Local Authority websites and on relevant UK Government websites.

Recommendation 5: The Scottish Government should review its Scottish Housing Guide for People Leaving the Armed Forces with the aim of improving content, visual impact and accessibility.

Recommendation 6: The Scottish Government should review the information provided on its website relating to housing targeted at Service Leavers, veterans and their families in order to improve accessibility and currency.

Recommendation 7: The Scottish Government should consider placing all information for veterans and Service Leavers (not just information on housing) in one area like the mygov.scot website.

Recommendation 8: All Scottish Local Authorities should consider offering housing information for Service Leavers, veterans and their families on their websites with direct links from Housing home pages to improve accessibility.

Recommendation 9: Local Authorities should consider providing additional guidance to their frontline staff on the principles of the Covenant and the council's policy on housing support for veterans.

Recommendation 10: The Scottish Government should work with Local Authorities and MoD to improve information-sharing in order those leaving the Services are aware of the opportunities available in Scotland and Local Authorities are given advance notice of those expressing a wish to live in their area (also recommended in my *Transition in Scotland* report).

Recommendation 11: The Scottish Government and other housing information providers should consider taking a lead from Shelter Scotland and ASAP Citizens Advice Scotland when looking to upgrade their websites and generate a more extensive online presence, and should consider promoting these organisations' websites more extensively.

Recommendation 12: The Scottish Government and Veterans Scotland should work together with partners, including the UK Government and other parts of the Third sector, to ensure that housing information is easily visible on the Veterans UK and other pan-UK websites in order to reach a wider audience.

Finding 1: There are a number of effective online tools to help specific groups access relevant information on Local Authority websites which might be extended to the serving and ex-Service communities.

Finding 2: Local Authorities might wish to consider producing guides specifically for veterans and Service Leavers, which set out practical information for those in transition, and making them accessible via Scotland and UK-wide websites.

Finding 3: The survey of Local Authorities found good examples of support for ex-Service personnel. Opportunities could be sought to publicise these initiatives and disseminate information further.

Finding 4: The "one stop" support provision where assistance in a range of areas is offered to those thinking of moving to the area is an example of good practice, but Local Authorities might wish to consider how best to publicise their "offer" to the broader ex-Service community.

Finding 5: Work is required to identify and introduce a structure involving the Third and public sectors to help ensure housing information for serving and ex-Service personnel is kept up-to-date and accessible.



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