

Armed Forces Covenant - Community Conference 2022

The Armed Forces Covenant Community Conference 2022 took place on 18 May at the King's House Conference Centre in Manchester. The event brought together those working on delivering the Covenant locally across the UK. [You can watch the Conference back here \(from a personal device\).](#)

The Conference heard from a range of speakers, from MinDPV to **Lt Col Gordon** and **Phil Deakin** of Warwickshire Council.

Below, Brian and Phil share their reflections on the day.

What an amazing event to celebrate (if slightly belatedly!) the 10th anniversary of the Armed Forces Covenant. Invested in by all and opened in person by the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Leo Docherty MP, the Armed Forces Covenant Conference took place in Manchester on 18 May.



As a serving person I wasn't sure what to expect. The audience ranged from ministers and council leaders from across the UK, to local authorities, Government departments and charities, as well as MOD policymakers. Common to all was a thread of communication and networked support. Evident through the range of workshops was an amazingly open and frank culture of supporting our people. Sharing good practice and openly exploring learning from failures was refreshing.

I was particularly impressed by the delivery of the Covenant in Wales as a devolved administration, with dedicated full time Armed Forces Liaison Officers supporting the Local Authorities in navigating us as a tribe, as much as supporting us in navigating the real world. I also never thought I would be playing buzz-word bingo in a Veterans workshop with a team from the Department of Work and Pensions. I thought I was competitive...

One of my key takeaways from the day was that the Covenant is always developing, and the team in Whitehall want the feedback to keep it polished. Other presentations, for example the one from Stoll discussing homelessness among veterans, demonstrated how we can all do more in service to support and look after our people before they transition back to civilian life. I was also interested to learn about the e-learning modules on the Armed Forces created by Warwickshire Council and given out for free across any and all organisations. The newest modules even feature our very own CDP talking about the importance of the Covenant!

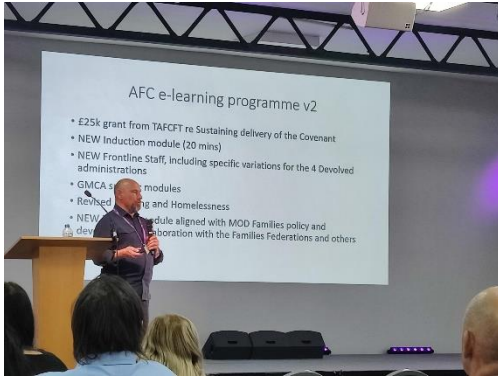
Finally, what also struck me was the importance of raising even greater awareness of the Covenant among Service people and their families. At present, the Covenant is maybe something seen as 'behind the glass' to be broken out in an emergency, or perhaps just heard about during transition and resettlement. It 100% is not. It is entwined in the requirement to support the people who deliver the amazing effect they do, every day across the whole of defence.

Lt Col Gordon RAMC is the Commanding Officer of 225 (Scottish) Medical Regiment and more importantly, the father of Harry who has complex additional needs. He attended the conference to deliver a presentation on the lived experience of a carer in defence and the realities of policy in action.

When I left the Army, I didn't have a 'home' to go to because I didn't have a 'family' to go back to. I'd escaped that situation when I joined, and I wasn't going back there. I had, however, in my last year made some civvy friends and learnt about this thing called 'renting'. So, I rented. I couldn't afford to rent a place on my own, so I found a friend of a friend of a friend to share it with.

Another thing I couldn't afford was the extortionate amount of money BT wanted to restore the phone line in the flat. (This is pre-mobile phones of any description!)

I remember calling BT from a red phone box and asking for the phone to be re-connected (i.e. BT flip a switch) and being completely shocked at how much BT wanted because I was a 'new customer'. As a single soldier I had always lived on camp (and abroad) so had no 'address history'. Explaining I had just left the Armed Forces and had always lived on camp didn't seem to get me anywhere. I argued my case and left it to hear back from BT. I didn't. Weeks later the phone rang in the flat! The moral of this part of the story is to argue your case, politely, but firmly!



Fast forward decades of public service and I've been working on the Armed Forces Covenant since 2015. I have seen it improve year on year from an extremely low baseline of no one knowing what it is to one where some people know what it is, some have a mis-understanding of what it is and still many have never heard of it.

I've had to argue against plenty of accusations that it's 'useless' and 'not worth the paper it's written on'. It is. Anyone nowadays in the situation I was in should just have to mention the Covenant to get the problem resolved. There is also a myriad of ways in which public and private organisations are reducing the disadvantage that Service personnel and their families experience.

It's not perfect and more needs to be done; by everyone. It's growing and will probably take another decade to mature and be part of national and organisational consciousness.

I've been doing my bit. I developed a [range of e-learning modules](#) for frontline staff in public organisations, those working in housing and homelessness, serving personnel, families of serving personnel and those leaving the Armed Forces.

I was at the conference because I'm now doing Round 2 and this time it's better! I absolutely want this information and support to reach into the dark corners where the light of the Covenant hasn't yet reached – which could be you! We need to use this opportunity to reach more organisations and more people to raise the baseline understanding that such a thing as the Armed Forces Covenant exists, that it's there to reduce disadvantage for the whole of the Armed Forces community and to connect with staff in such a way that they want to support the Armed Forces community.

I've trained over 1000 staff/volunteers from public and charitable organisations and that's what they are left with. I get an hour and they want to do their best for you at the end of it.

There are, however, limitations and capacity issues. Whether organisations like to admit it or not there are 'post code lottery' issues. Each locality is different and different ranges of services exist. What exists in one place doesn't mean it will exist in the next place you are posted to.

Just because there is the Covenant, it doesn't mean you get an advantage. The Covenant is there to reduce disadvantage, which means, if the service you are after isn't that good for civilians, then it won't be that good for you either. It's not the fault of the Covenant, it's just how things are!

The positive note is that the Covenant is improving year on year and will continue to do so. Committed, passionate people are flying that flag and proud to do so!

Phil Deakin is a former member of the British Army, now putting his experience in the Armed Forces into action, as an Armed Forces Covenant Project Worker at Warwickshire Council.