

News story: Universities urged to boost support for armed forces

Universities should do more to support ex-service personnel and the children of servicemen and women who have lost their lives during duty, the UK Government has urged today (18 April).

In a joint letter to all UK universities, the Universities Minister and Defence Minister have called on institutions to step up and support those that have sacrificed the most, by signing up to the Armed Forces Covenant.

The [Armed Forces Covenant](#) aims to remove barriers faced by members of the armed forces community in accessing public services, including education. Only 57 of 136 UK universities have signed up to the Covenant to date, with just 3 of the 24 Russell Group universities pledging their support.

Universities can support the Covenant in a number of ways including ensuring admissions policies reflect the needs of the armed forces community, benchmarking military experience and qualifications against course entry requirements or having a presence at local careers fairs for those leaving the services.

The Ministers are also calling on universities to establish armed forces champions within each institution, which would be empowered to uphold the commitments of the Covenant, and to act as a first point of contact for the military community, service charities, and local businesses.

The call comes as the Department for Education confirms £5 million in continued funding for higher education schemes in England for the armed forces. The Service Leavers Scheme pays the tuition fees for ex-service personnel who have not studied higher education before, and the Armed Forces Bereavement Scheme provides university scholarships for children of those killed in the line of duty.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

We want everyone with the talent and potential, no matter their circumstances or background, to go on to university and thrive.

The scholarships offered by these two crucial higher education schemes empower those who have fought for our country, or whose parents have paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Nearly 60 of our universities have signed up to delivering the Armed Forces Covenant, which provides rights for veterans and their families to access education, and I know universities such as Winchester have long had outreach programmes with their local armed forces communities. I'm sure all universities will wish to consider the benefits of being a civic university that supports armed forces

families in their communities, which is why I have written urging them all to actively consider signing up to the Covenant.

Minister for Defence People and Veterans Tobias Ellwood said:

Signing the Armed Forces Covenant is a fantastic way to show support for our former and current service men and women, as well as their families. Thousands of businesses and organisations have already pledged to make a difference, and I'm pleased that so many of this country's universities have already followed in their footsteps – with the Universities of South Wales and Lincolnshire and London South Bank University receiving awards last year for their work supporting the military community.

Today, I want to make sure that all universities understand the value of supporting our armed forces and their families, and I encourage them to step up and sign our pledge.

The participation rate for young people from military service families in higher education is 24 per cent, according to research by the University of Winchester. This compares with a rate of approximately 43% for the overall population.

Universities which have already signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant are leading the way with support for military personnel and their families, pledging to support those who wish to serve in the armed forces as Reservists, and offering flexible leave before or after deployment to personnel and their partners.

Some universities have also included Service children as a target group in their Access and Participation Plans, which all English universities will be drawing up this year for implementation in 2020/21.

The University of Winchester leads a number of [initiatives](#) to support children from military families to progress in education, including developing resources for higher education providers to use in outreach activities.

Speech: Standing by the people of Sudan

Thank you, Mr President. We all know this meeting takes place amidst uncertain times in Sudan.

The African Union's Peace and Security Committee issued a clear statement two days ago. Recent developments and what happens over the coming days have an impact on Darfur and potentially the wider region. The Council has to consider the implications of these important political developments. I will therefore divide my intervention into two: firstly, on the wider situation in Sudan and secondly, the impact of that wider situation on Darfur and UNAMID.

Mr President, on the 11th of April, we witnessed the climax of four months of peaceful protests demanding change and a better future for Sudan. Let us admire the bravery and determination of the Sudanese people, which saw the removal of a president who had headed a brutal regime for 30 years. However, the legitimate change that the Sudanese people are demanding has not yet been achieved. The Transitional Military council must listen to the people who continue to protest.

And first and foremost, Mr President, the authorities must protect the ongoing peaceful protests and continue to exercise restraint. The Sudanese authorities have a responsibility to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to peaceful assembly. There must be no violence, no forced removal of protesters.

We are at a moment when the Sudanese authorities have an opportunity to build trust with their people and the international community. They should seize this opportunity and demonstrate that they are genuinely committed to ending Sudan's history of violent repression. The people are saying that Sudan needs a political system which is inclusive, respectful of human rights and the rule of law and properly constitutionally rooted. The United Kingdom stands with the Sudanese people and supports the African Union's call for Sudan to return swiftly to civilian rule.

All need to work together in an inclusive political transition. And in particular, women have played a critical role in the protest movement. Their contributions will be vital in the political transition process and the subsequent civilian government.

Mr President, the protesters have, from the beginning, demanded accountability. The United Kingdom supports that call. We believe there must be justice for the crimes committed by individuals within the former government of Sudan. It is right that the Sudanese people should hold those individuals accountable. Of course, we fully support the International Criminal Court and expect full cooperation by all States with the Court and its Prosecutor.

Mr President, the latest political developments have a direct impact on Darfur. We, like others, are concerned by reports of violent clashes in several locations in recent days, which have resulted in civilian death and injury. In particular, on 15 April, as reported by UNAMID, in Kalma internally displaced persons camp, 16 IDPs were killed. I have a question for the Joint Special Representative: what was the response of the two UNAMID-formed police units stationed in Kalma to this incident?

We have also seen the negative impact of recent political turmoil on the door

for peace process, which is currently stalled. It is vital for the future stability of Darfur, but also wider Sudan and the region, that we, as a Council, maintain our expectation that progress is made in finding a peaceful solution to the root causes of the conflict.

Mr President, throughout UNAMID's drawdown, the United Kingdom has consistently called for a gradual and sensible approach, guided by the situation on the ground. And we share the Secretary-General's assessment that ongoing political and economic uncertainty pose a number of challenges for a responsible exit of UNAMID and the transition to peace building. The international community must not abandon its responsibility to ensure that a handover of UNAMID responsibilities and assets is done appropriately and to those with capacity to manage the ongoing tasks. There remains a high level of need in Darfur and the root causes of conflict have not yet been resolved. An immediate step the Transitional Military Council could take to build confidence and alleviate need would be to abolish the burdensome system of approvals and permits which hinders delivery of humanitarian assistance.

We need to think carefully about how best we tackle these issues after UNAMID's eventual departure and, in particular, what sort of AU and UN presence on the ground is needed to provide the expertise and programmatic ability and to ensure a proper flow of financial support to address ongoing challenges. We therefore encourage the African Union and the United Nations to make recommendations to the Council on what those future arrangements should be.

Mr President, Sudan is at a crossroads. The Transitional Military Council faces a choice. It should listen to the Sudanese people, respect their legitimate demand for civilian rule and enable the transition to a system which respects human rights, democracy and fundamental freedoms and delivers accountability. Making that choice would mean a new Sudan. It would be a Sudan respected in the international community of nations. It would bring support and resources from across the globe, both to underpin the resolution of longstanding peace processes including Darfur and also to support Sudan's own economic and social development. It would herald a new chapter in Sudan's relations with its region and with the world.

The people of Sudan have shown incredible bravery and perseverance in their dignified demands for an end to a brutal, unaccountable regime, which has impoverished its own people through decades of economic mismanagement. The Sudanese people have forced change in their country. I salute them. Let us stand by them.

Thank you, Mr President.

Press release: Polperro tidal gate repairs to start next week

The Environment Agency is about to start work on a £2 million refurbishment of Polperro tidal gate.

Press release: Polperro tidal gate repairs to start next week

The improvements will ensure the continued protection of the popular Cornish village from flooding and coastal erosion.

The tidal gate shelters the inner harbour from waves during storms, helps preserve historic listed quays and reduces flood risk to commercial and residential properties. It also helps provide safe moorings for the fishing fleet and pleasure craft.

The gate was seriously damaged in 2009 and underwent major repairs. Further damage occurred in 2014 affecting the supporting structure. A temporary repair was made that enabled the gate to operate, but further work is needed.

The Environment Agency has appointed NMCN Sustainable Solutions Ltd as principal contractor. The work will be carried out in partnership with Polperro Harbour Trust and South West Water and will continue throughout the summer.

The first phase will be the removal of the tidal gate using a floating crane on a barge. The gate will be taken to Par to be dismantled and any equipment that can be reused will be removed. Contractors will then repair the supports and running equipment and reinforce the hinge before reinstalling the replacement gate.

South West Water will also be working at the harbour carrying out improvements to the sewerage system. By working together and carrying out repairs at the same time the Environment Agency and water company will minimise any disruption. Where possible, equipment will be brought in via barge rather than road to minimise disturbance to the local community.

Sam Armstrong, for the Environment Agency, said:

There will be an increased risk of high water within Polperro harbour while these critical refurbishment works are carried out.

We will review our current flood warning service to see if any short term changes are necessary to help warn and inform the local community for the duration of this project. When completed the tidal gate will be fit for a further 30 years.

News story: Scottish Secretary welcomes Labour Market Statistics

Latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that Scotland's unemployment rate at 3.3% is the lowest on record. Furthermore, the number of people employed in Scotland is close to the recent record high at 2,688,000. Scotland's employment rate however, at 75.6%, remains below the UK's rate at 76.1%.

Responding to the figures the Scottish Secretary said:

It is great news that unemployment in Scotland is at a record low, coupled with the rise in employment, there is a lot to be positive about.

Scotland's two governments are working together to strengthen our economy and create jobs, with our growth deal programme reaping rewards across the nation. The UK Government's investment in growth deals is now more than £1.35 billion, demonstrating our huge commitment to growing Scotland's job sector and economy.

For the three months to February, Scotland's overall labour market provides a strong and positive picture: employment increased robustly (+17,000); unemployment fell moderately (-8,000) and activity has increased too (+8,000). However, monthly claimant count numbers are worsening over the month of March, as there are 104,900 people in Scotland claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and out-of-work Universal Credit (seasonally adjusted); this is up 2,300 on the month of February (provisional) and 19,900 up on the year before.