

The quality of support provided to men and women who leave the British Armed Forces as they and their families transition to civilian life is extremely important. With thousands leaving the Forces in coming years and doing so in tough economic conditions, resettlement is an issue of growing importance and concern. Shadow Defence Minister Gemma Doyle MP describes a consultation exercise on the matter

Those who give so much to our country should get the service they deserve, with the advice, support and training that will enable them to start a new chapter in their lives. Most recognise that the service was improved by the previous Labour government, but issues remain and provision can always be improved. We want to see a personalised system where health, injury, housing, skills, family location and personal ambition are all taken into consideration to support the adjustment to life outside the Services.

Last year 800 people leaving the forces did not find work which lasted longer than six months, so we need to do better. Everyone has access to a career consultant, but too many people still say that the work which is offered to them does not take into account their personal skills or experiences and people are often presented with options that do not meet their personal ambitions. One veteran has told me, "I was an infantry Warrant Officer. When I left and as far as my adviser was concerned that meant I could be a warehouse manager". Equally, too many say that they do not have sufficient choice over where in the country they can relocate to.

As more and more individuals are going through the system who will have been made compulsorily redundant, Labour Friends of the Forces has launched a consultation on the issue [<http://labourfriendsoftheforces.org.uk/resettlement-consultation/>]. We want to hear what works, what doesn't and what changes can be made now which will benefit service leavers. There is a questionnaire which will take a minute to complete and space to leave more detailed thoughts on how the service can be reformed and improved. Importantly, we want to hear from those who are preparing to go through the system, those who have direct experience of it, or those whose loved ones have gone through it. We want our policy ideas to be based on the experiences of service personnel and their families and where it is clear that improvements can be made, we will campaign for those changes. Any findings will be considered by the Shadow Defence Team's policy review on the Future of the Military Covenant. As a party developing our policy platform, the insights of those on the frontline are a vital guide.

It is vital that resettlement takes into account the long-term impact of conflict on service personnel. That is why the Labour Party has called for a £1m fund to be established for charities to do long-term research into health and wellbeing

legacy issues from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan

[<http://labourfriendsoftheforces.org.uk/2012/02/06/labour-calls-for-1m-research-fund-to-tackle-veterans-mental-health%E2%80%A8%E2%80%A8/>].

When we consider Forces' welfare we shouldn't just think of immediate or in-service issues, crucial as they are, but also the issues which can reveal themselves years after service or a traumatic event. Establishing systems to identify and track these issues, including mental injury, should be considered within the resettlement process.

There are a number of charities doing excellent work in this area and for some service leavers it is a case of luck whether or not they stumble on it. There is certainly scope for businesses to be more involved with the resettlement process so that they can benefit from the service leavers' skills. Ex-Service personnel bring significant qualities to the civilian workforce yet this is not always easily communicated, which can prevent veterans from being offered jobs they are qualified for. An improved resettlement programme could give service leavers a 'foot in the door' to the labour market by establishing closer links to major employers, particularly in regions with large military communities.

The question of how we all as a nation support those who have given so much in Service is one we should consistently ask and test ourselves against. The transition to civilian life can be tough and should be a priority for policy makers - now more so than ever. The challenge is brought into sharp focus by the numbers leaving the Services and doing so in a deeply challenging economic climate. By participating in this consultation we hope you will share your ideas for how to improve the resettlement process and in turn the lives of thousands.