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Sarah Atherton MP  
Defence Select Committee  
House of Commons  
London SW1A 0AA

24 October 2023

Dear Mrs Atherton

**Women in the Armed Forces: Submission from Forces in Mind Trust to Defence Committee's Call for evidence**

**About Forces in Mind Trust**

Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) was established in 2011 by a £35 million endowment from the Big Lottery Fund (now The National Lottery Community Fund). Our vision is for all ex-Service personnel and their families to lead fulfilled civilian lives, and our mission is to enable successful sustainable transition by funding evidence generation and influence activities that help to further our mission, and by strengthening the capability of the Armed Forces charities sector.

**Introduction**

We welcome the Committee's call for evidence on progress made since the Inquiry reported in 2021. As with the original Inquiry, we are responding to it because there is evidence, some of which has emerged in the intervening two years, to show that female Service leavers face greater challenges in comparison both to their male counterparts and to civilians. This presents a 'double whammy' when it comes to transitioning to civilian life and which requires changes to policy and practice. The focus of our response is on those aspects of women's service in the Armed Forces that impact on their experience of transition from military service.

Our specific comments are submitted as answers to the four consultation questions posed.

**Q1. How much change has there been in the past two years, when it comes to improving the experiences of female Service personnel and/or female veterans?**

Although it has not yet delivered tangible improvements, we welcome the Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA) commitment to publishing a Women Veterans' Strategy to look at experiences of former female Service personnel. We also noted the announcement earlier this month of a new fund to improve access to improved clinical support for female veterans who suffered sexual trauma while serving. These do not address the Committee's Inquiry recommendations for women who are currently serving but we welcome them as indicators of a commitment to ensuring that improvements are made.

At present, it is not easy to evidence or measure the extent to which the experiences of the female Service community have improved. We anticipate this changing over time. One of the potential drivers for change is a two-year research project commissioned by FiMT in 2022, which is due to report in November 2024. The focus of this research is on identifying and examining the barriers to female veterans making a successful and sustainable transition to civilian life in the UK. It will provide an overview of the support specifically available for female veterans, identify the potential barriers and facilitators to successful transition for female veterans, and identify the additional or unique disadvantages faced by female veterans compared to male veterans and female civilians. We are funding this large-scale research project in order to strengthen the evidence and understanding of the nature of changes required to improve policy development and service provision.

In terms of areas where specific progress is being made, and which FiMT is pleased to have contributed to through our funding and influence activities, we would like to highlight the continued roll out of the Veteran Friendly GP initiative and increase in the number of practices that have signed up to it. In 2022, we published [Where Are All The Veterans? Increasing veteran registration in primary healthcare](#), by Chester University which highlighted how researchers identified low-cost, easily implemented initiatives to significantly improve veteran registration in primary healthcare. This was aimed at all veterans with emphasis on the importance of opening up a dialogue with a veteran once they had declared their status. Improved identification of female Service leavers in primary healthcare is one of the key steps towards ensuring their healthcare needs are better met.

## **Q2. What specific changes are you aware of against the Committee's initial recommendations?**

With regard to the six recommendations on transition and resettlement, we welcome the work of the OVA which is being carried out in collaboration with the ONS to analyse the 2021 Census findings, and the publication of new veteran specific data, alongside the publication of their Data and Research Strategy earlier this year. The need for further evidence and understanding of female specific disadvantage and barriers faced in transition nonetheless remains, and it is for this reason that we commissioned our own research, referred to at paragraph 4 above.

When it comes to 'including additional measures within the Annual Report on the Armed Forces Covenant on the experiences of veterans by sex or gender in every chapter' (Recommendation 49), our research published in 2022, *A Decade of the Covenant*<sup>1</sup>, highlighted:

- the limited evidence and challenges involved in evaluation of the impact of the Covenant in reducing disadvantage, in particular among cohorts that may be at greater risk of disadvantage such as female veterans, and LGBTQ+ veterans
- barriers to identification of female veterans as frontline staff may be influenced by their perceptions of what constitutes a veteran; for example concerns about not asking female housing applicants if they had served.

## **Q3. Are there areas where you hope to see more change?**

**Employment.** In our 2021 submission to the Committee's Inquiry, we drew attention to our research report on Female Service leavers and Employment<sup>2</sup> which sets out clear recommendations for the MOD and for employers that include: better support for women with caring responsibilities while serving; the availability of advice and support from MOD that is female specific, with a focus on ensuring that female Service leavers better understand their skills and experience and how to

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<sup>1</sup> [A Decade of the Covenant](#): Shared Intelligence, 2022

<sup>2</sup> [Female Service leavers and Employment](#), Cranfield University, Institute for Employment Studies, 2019

translate these into those required by civilian employers, and better understanding amongst employers of the skills and experience that female Service leavers bring. Further change continues to be required if these recommendations are to be met.

**Health.** Our [FiMT Policy Statement on Health](#) sets out the changes that are needed to ensure that all ex-Service personnel and the families have access to good quality health services when and where they need them. We believe that if the factors affecting access to health services are addressed, it will help to resolve some of the issues that are unique to female Service leavers.

**Families.** MOD's 2023 [annual survey of Armed Forces families](#) reported that, 'The proportion of UK females scoring aspects of their wellbeing as 'very high' (a score of 9-10) ranges between 24-35%. These are considerably higher than corresponding results for female Service partners (12-22%)' (page 14). We therefore currently assess that female Service partners are less likely to score their well-being 'very high' than females in the whole population. This is just one example of the wider impact of Service life on families. A full analysis of the issues faced, and the changes and recommendations that we support, can be found in the Living in Our Shoes report published in 2020. The majority of the report's recommendations remain unmet and the pace of change is disappointingly slow, despite the publication by the Government of the Families Strategy and accompanying Action Plan.

**Housing.** This presents particular challenges for female Service leavers:

- The shortage of one-bed social housing units creates particular disadvantage for single women when leaving service as many single social housing accommodation units are for men<sup>1</sup>.
- Research by The Riverside Group, funded by FiMT, which is due to be published in January 2024, has shown that women's in-service experiences are generating housing-related vulnerability on discharge.

#### **Q4. Do you see 'easy wins' for the Services/MOD?**

We do not see any especially easy wins for the Services or MOD. Much of the change required includes cultural change which takes sustained and continued effort. However, we welcome the publication of the the Haythornthwaite Review of Armed Forces Incentivisation, and The Independent Review of UK Government Welfare Services for Veterans. We are looking forward to the Government's responses on both reports and hope these present the opportunity to improve women's experiences that both reviews represent. If implemented, this will help Service personnel feel valued and empower leaders at all levels, in conjunction with ensuring that welfare services are easier to understand and access.

#### **Q5. What has helped or hindered change?**

There are changes in the wider landscape that are helping to shine a light on the issues that must be addressed if improvements to be made.

Forthcoming FiMT research on Insights into the Armed Forces Charity Sector, conducted by the Directory of Social Change (DSC) and due for publication in the first quarter of 2024, highlights the work of the Cobseo Female Veterans Cluster which has been able to ensure charities think about the design and delivery of their services and ask themselves, "are these services right for women as well as men?", as well as the development of a female veterans toolkit which will be aimed at communicating best practice to the charitable sector. DSC's research attributes these achievements to good collaboration between armed forces and other charities which has enabled them to identify, progress and raise awareness of issues that are specific to female veterans and to improve the

current levels of support for female veterans. Based on evidence from the full range of research that FiMT has funded since it was first established, we suggest that further collaboration and partnership working across all sectors engaged in identifying and meeting need is one of the most powerful tools for change.

Alongside collaborative activity, the ongoing increase in awareness, understanding and evidence generation of the experiences of women in the Armed Forces both now and in the past, is a positive force for change. The establishment of the Centre for Military Women's Research, Anglia Ruskin University a welcome development in this respect.

FiMT very much welcomes the Committee's willingness to support the Inquiry and to confront the difficult issues presented in its first two reports and believes that this in itself has the potential to help deliver positive change.

### **Final Comments**

I hope that this submission is useful. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely



Michelle Alston  
Chief Executive

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<sup>i</sup> A Decade of the Covenant, Shared Intelligence, 2022