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Our Community, Our Covenant and beyond

Examining local realities and progress achieved in Armed Forces Covenant delivery

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This research was funded by the Forces in Mind Trust, an independent UK Trust supported by the National Lottery Community Fund.

For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/RRA4068-1

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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif., and Cambridge, UK

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Preface

This is the fourth in a series of studies funded by Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) examining the local implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant (hereafter, 'the Covenant'). Building on the previous studies, which addressed the core aspects of Covenant delivery and its impact, this research delves into the local realities of the Covenant's implementation, including different local and regional delivery models, partnerships, and structures. An accompanying report describes findings from five in-depth case studies of distinct local Covenant delivery models.

This study involved a large number of stakeholders from local authorities, the Armed Forces charity sector, the Ministry of Defence and other government agencies, as well as additional local public service providers. We would like to thank everyone who participated in the project's interviews and survey, along with members of the Armed Forces Community who took part in the study's focus groups. Thanks are also due to members of our Advisory Group, the FiMT team, and our Quality Assurance reviewers (Mary Keeling and Ruth Harris) for their insightful feedback on the research findings and this report. Despite these contributions, the authors remain solely responsible for the content of this report.

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Meri Mayhew Consulting Ltd provides a range of support and services to charitable and public sector organisations across multiple areas and functions, focusing particularly on the United Kingdom Armed Forces Community and the Armed Forces charity sector.

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Forewords



Louise Sandher-Jones MP, Minister for Veterans and People

As the new Minister for Veterans and People, and indeed as a veteran myself,

I am immensely honoured to introduce the latest edition of *Our Community, Our Covenant*. Since the first report in 2016, these insights have shaped how we support the Armed Forces Community, not just through policy, but through partnership. This report continues that tradition, reflecting the dedication of those across the UK who honour the Covenant and reminding us why we do this: because when one person serves, their loved ones serve alongside them, often at great personal cost. And when their service ends, our duty does not. They deserve more than thanks; they deserve understanding and unwavering support.

This fourth edition comes at a pivotal moment. It offers a clear view of how the Covenant is being delivered across England, Scotland, and Wales and recognises the distinct context in Northern Ireland, where delivery continues to evolve. Drawing on nearly a decade of research, it explores the partnerships, governance, and local models that bring the Covenant to life, set against a backdrop of public sector reform, economic pressures, and shifting public perceptions.

I am proud to reaffirm this Government's manifesto commitment to fully enshrine the Covenant in law. The Prime Minister himself made the announcement, on Armed Forces

Day this year, of the new policy areas of this full, legal duty extension.

We know that legislation alone is not enough. Full implementation of the Covenant is not only a commitment in its own right, it also underpins the whole-of-society approach required by the Strategic Defence Review. Renewing the nation's contract with those who serve means embedding support across all sectors, expanding research into delivery in devolved and combined authority settings, and engaging public bodies beyond local government. Independent insights will be key to driving improvement.

The Armed Forces Covenant is more than a document, it's a promise. A promise that no member of the Armed Forces Community should face disadvantage due to their service, and that in certain circumstances, special consideration is not just warranted but is the right thing to do. Since its establishment in 2011, the Covenant has evolved from a moral commitment into a legal obligation, with the Covenant Duty introduced in 2022 marking a major step forward. As we look ahead, there is an opportunity to build on this foundation and explore where the Duty could go further to ensure consistent, meaningful delivery across society.

The Duty has brought renewed purpose and accountability, driving real progress in health, education, and housing. Local leaders such as Armed Forces Champions, Lead Officers, and strategic forums continue to play a vital role in ensuring services meet the needs of those who serve, have served, and their families.

While challenges remain, the Covenant's flexibility allows communities to tailor delivery to local needs. By learning from what works, strengthening partnerships, and building the evidence base, we can ensure the Covenant delivers lasting impact. The report highlights key enablers of success, including skilled personnel, strong collaboration, and the ability to build on years of experience. We must amplify and replicate this good practice across the UK.

This report is both a reflection of progress and a call to action. A call to work together. It reminds us that the Covenant is not just a promise made, it is a promise we must keep. I look forward to working to deliver these further benefits from the Covenant extension in my new role.



Michelle Alston,
Chief Executive of
Forces in Mind Trust

Since the introduction of the Armed Forces Covenant in 2011, local authorities across the UK have

played a critical role in upholding the nation's promise to ensure that members of the Armed Forces Community are not disadvantaged by Service. Much of this work has been captured in Forces in Mind Trust's *Our Community, Our Covenant* series of reports that, over the last ten years, have highlighted the progress made in reducing disadvantage, showcasing examples of good practice that have often been driven by committed and passionate individuals working within local councils.

Yet delivery of the Covenant is not a commitment for which local government is solely responsible. As highlighted in our previous *A Decade of the Covenant* report, it is the shared responsibility of national, regional, and local

government, and one that is often bolstered by the work of charities, businesses, and community partnerships. It is this ecosystem of support that we sought to examine in the *Our Community, Our Covenant and Beyond* project, looking deeper than ever before at the collaborative activities that take place and drive effective delivery of the Covenant.

I am incredibly grateful to all those who took part in the research and particularly to the local authorities whose insights have informed both this report and the updated Armed Forces Covenant Toolkit, which offers a resource for those looking to review or enhance their Covenant delivery, whatever stage they may be in the process.

This research comes at a time when there is significant change and challenge for both local government and military communities – including local government reorganisation in England, the expansion of the Covenant Duty, and the increasing focus on readiness for conflict. Therefore, understanding what works to support the Armed Forces community is arguably more important than ever before.

Despite progress, Covenant delivery remains inconsistent across the UK and, whilst efforts are underway to address this issue, we must continue to push for improvement. This report offers valuable insights on how we can achieve this goal, providing details on the realities of delivering the Covenant across England, Scotland, and Wales, as well the mechanisms used by local authorities and partners to uphold their Covenant commitments and support their local Armed Forces Community. By using this evidence and working collaboratively, we can work to ensure that no member of the Armed Forces Community is disadvantaged by Service.



Executive summary

Headline findings



The external environment for Covenant implementation is highly dynamic, presenting various challenges and opportunities.



Covenant delivery is fundamentally shaped by local government structures, including whether local authorities are single-level (unitary), two-tier, combined (including county combined and strategic authority combined), or function as clusters with cross-authority collaboration. However, a range of influences affect how these structures operate in practice.



There are various models and approaches for implementing the local building blocks of Covenant delivery embedded in the 'core infrastructure'.



Covenant delivery has seen marked advancements in some areas but continues to be hindered by various challenges in others. Further progress is needed particularly with regard to awareness of the AFC and the Covenant among front-line service providers, identification of AFC members at first point of access to public services, understanding of the characteristics of the local AFC and potential areas of disadvantage, communication and signposting to AFC services, and strategic planning.



Partnership working is a fundamental enabler of Covenant delivery, with local and national partners performing a range of roles. While there are examples of strong partnerships in some local areas, there are opportunities for further strengthening of local partnerships in others.



Emerging evidence of good practice could help further promote and facilitate effective Covenant delivery. This includes Covenant delivery models such as regional Covenant coordinators, military champions, Covenant delivery centres, local Covenant funds, gateway organisations, and Armed Forces Community hubs. However, tailored and context-aware adoption of these models and other good practices is essential.

Research objectives

Since 2011, all local authorities in mainland Great Britain and four Northern Ireland councils have pledged to uphold the Armed Forces Covenant (hereafter, 'the Covenant') and continue to play a pivotal role in advancing its aim of ensuring that the Armed Forces Community (AFC) is treated fairly and faces no disadvantage compared to other citizens when accessing public and commercial services.

This study is the fourth iteration of the 'Our Community, Our Covenant' (OCOC) research series that examines local Covenant delivery and offers guidance as to how it may be improved.¹ Building on findings from the previous studies, it sheds light on the practices and realities of how the Covenant and wider support for the AFC is being delivered.

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The OCOC research series is commissioned by Forces in Mind Trust.

The research had four key objectives:

- Characterise the evolving environment for delivery of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC.
- Examine how local and national partners work with statutory authorities to support delivery of the Covenant and wider collective effect for the AFC.
- Improve understanding of how the Covenant is delivered at a regional level to mitigate disadvantage among the AFC.
- Characterise how different local delivery models shape the implementation of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC, including what constitutes good practice.

This study only examined the Covenant's implementation in England, Scotland, and Wales. The context for Covenant delivery in Northern Ireland is highly distinct from the devolved nations of Great Britain, and including Northern Ireland within the project's scope therefore risked masking findings relating to this unique setting. Additionally, while the study acknowledges the role of local bodies other than local authorities (e.g. NHS bodies, state-funded schools and colleges) in local Covenant delivery, it did not collect data from those service providers.

Research approach

The project employed a mixed-methods approach that was guided by the principles of theory-based and realist evaluation. Theory-based evaluations examine the delivery or impact of a programme based on a Theory of Change (ToC), which articulates how and why

a programme is expected to lead to desired outcomes. Realist evaluation, by contrast, focuses on investigating 'what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and how'. The study was conducted in three phases:



The **exploration phase** included a literature review, regional engagement with nine local authorities,² 17 interviews with national statutory and non-statutory partner organisations, and desk research to map different local Covenant delivery models and understand the external environment for Covenant implementation. These tasks also helped to refine a ToC for local Covenant delivery that guided subsequent analysis.



The **evaluation phase** focused on examining progress in the Covenant's implementation, analysing how different delivery models shape implementation of the Covenant, and identifying examples of good practice in local Covenant delivery. This included: (i) five in-depth case studies of local delivery models (Oxfordshire, Greater Manchester, the East Riding of Yorkshire, Glasgow, and Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan) and (ii) a survey of English, Welsh, and Scottish local authorities.³



The **data analysis and synthesis phase** consolidated the study's findings and developed corresponding recommendations via cross-cutting analysis, a stakeholder workshop, and a consultation with the project's advisory group.⁴

2 Milton Keynes, Greater Manchester, the East Riding of Yorkshire, East Sussex, Warwickshire, Cardiff & the Vale of Glamorgan, Flintshire, Glasgow, and Moray.

3 The survey was distributed by the Local Government Association, Welsh Local Government Association, Confederation of Scottish Local Authorities, and London Councils, as well as shared directly with 354 local authorities across England, Scotland, and Wales. A total of 54 useable responses were returned.

4 A project advisory group was convened by the research team to validate the project's design, help to identify and engage key stakeholders, and offer feedback on emerging themes and findings.



Although the study provided insight on progress towards achieving the Covenant’s objectives as well as mechanisms for improving its delivery, it was not conducted as a formal evaluation of the Covenant. Alongside challenges relating to data availability, this is because the Covenant is inherently non-prescriptive in nature and delivery therefore varies across local authorities. As such, the Covenant does not represent a nationally uniform and coherent programme of work that can be easily evaluated.

The study was conducted between August 2023 and May 2025 and therefore precedes the expansion of the Covenant Duty announced in June 2025.

Key findings

The external environment for Covenant implementation is highly dynamic, presenting various challenges and opportunities.

- The introduction of the Covenant Duty is a defining feature of the external environment for local Covenant delivery. The Duty was seen by the vast majority of participants as having had a beneficial

impact by giving new momentum to the Covenant and increasing awareness of available support among the AFC. This stems from the practical steps taken by many local authorities and other public service providers to incorporate the Duty into their ways of working, ranging from the revision of existing policies and procedures to the delivery of dedicated training and enhanced collaboration with partners.

- The UK Governments proposed expansion of the Covenant Duty and launch of the VALOUR regional support network for veterans are contributing to a highly dynamic policy landscape. The two initiatives, while still being agreed and finalised, are anticipated to have significant impact on Covenant delivery and wider AFC support.
- The ongoing expansion of devolution across England is anticipated to change the organisation of many local authorities and their level of autonomy over service provision. This sits alongside recent declines in central government funding and corresponding reductions in local authorities’ core spending power, which

have contributed to some councils sensing that they are increasingly having to 'do more with less'.

- Although the Covenant typically enjoys broad cross-party approval, the study found that local and national elections can pause or slow down government activity during handover and review periods, with implications for Covenant delivery. Personnel changes resulting from elections can also alter the degree of priority awarded to the Covenant and bring about shifts in policy that have direct implications for its scope and administration.
- Lastly, stakeholders believe that COVID-19, the 'cost of living crisis', and shifting public awareness of the Armed Forces are all affecting both levels of AFC support (e.g. through declining financial donations and

volunteering) and the nature of service delivery (e.g. with sustained adoption of hybrid and remote working).

Covenant delivery is fundamentally shaped by local government structures, with a range of influences affecting how they operate in practice.

Local authority boundaries typically provide the basic structures for local Covenant delivery (see Table 0.1). How these structures manifest in practice, however, depends on a range of factors, including a local authority's physical geography, population characteristics, and infrastructure, alongside existing policy frameworks and partnerships. Together, these influences determine what models and mechanisms may be most suitable and effective for Covenant delivery in a local area.



Table 0.1. Overview of local government structures for Covenant delivery

Local authority structure	Covenant delivery features	Strengths	Risks/limitations
Single-level (unitary) authorities (England, Scotland and Wales)	Delivery of the Covenant is often based on the single authority area and relies heavily on the work of local partner organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for a strong focus on strategic planning Provides clear accountability and decision making mechanisms Enables easy adaptation of service delivery to local needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Single authorities may face greater challenges with conflicting resource demands, limiting the potential for economies of scale and coordinated service delivery
Two-tier authorities (England)	Often features a division of labour between the county council and constituent district councils, with the former focusing on strategic guidance and convening partners, and the latter focusing on operational delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can help to identify potential duplication of effort or inconsistencies among individual districts Can reduce burden on individual district councils and thus foster greater buy-in for Covenant delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustaining alignment between district councils can be resource-intensive Delivery may be inconsistent across districts Structure may be confusing for the AFC, potentially presenting barriers for engagement with relevant support
Clusters and cross-authority collaboration (England and Scotland)	Partnerships involving neighbouring councils aimed at coordination of Covenant-related activity at a regional level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater consistency in service provision at the regional level Improved access to Covenant stakeholders and potential delivery partners, along with an enhanced ability to share information and learn from others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustaining cluster models can be a challenge Commitment from partners may be uneven Operational or political differences may undermine collaboration
Combined, county combined, and strategic authority coordination (England)	Features a more formal collaboration arrangement and joint working between councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combined authorities can use their convening role to align Covenant delivery among partner organisations Can help mainstream support for the AFC into regional governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact on Covenant delivery is highly uncertain, as combined authority structures are subject to significant variation and highly dependent on the depth of devolution

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

There are various models and approaches for implementing the local building blocks of Covenant delivery embedded in the ‘core infrastructure’.

The project identified a suite of local, regional, and sub-regional mechanisms through which

local authorities and their partners work to uphold and deliver the Covenant. These often mirror the four building blocks of the Covenant ‘core infrastructure’ recommended in previous OCOC studies:



Collaboration mechanisms:

Collaboration in Covenant delivery and service provision takes place across multiple dimensions and performs different purposes. *Strategic and operational Covenant forums* exist in many local areas to support the coordination (strategic) and/or execution (operational) of the Covenant-related activities within a given area by drawing together relevant stakeholders. *Regional Covenant forums* operate in some areas to coordinate Covenant delivery across local authority boundaries, frequently based on the identification of common needs or requirements and a desire to achieve economies of scale. Some identified examples of good practice also feature bespoke collaboration set-ups. These include, for example, partnerships between local authorities and third-sector partners to provide 'gateway' facilities dedicated to connecting members of the AFC with relevant service providers from across the local area and beyond.



Key individuals: Many local authorities have key personnel (e.g. Armed Forces Champions and Covenant lead officers) appointed to support Covenant delivery. The nature of these roles varies significantly, depending on factors such as resource availability and the post holders' motivation and dedication, and can be uncertain in the absence of formal role descriptions. Further to personnel that operate within the local authority, some areas are also supported by regional coordinators (e.g. Armed Forces Liaison Officers in Wales).



Communication, training and upskilling:

Local authorities draw on various resources (e.g. Covenant guides, toolkits, communication materials) as well as training to further Covenant delivery, which all vary significantly in format and style. Many participating local authorities identified a need to improve the exploitation of existing training and for greater guidance from national government to reduce burden on councils.



Vision and planning: Activities relating to local needs assessments, research, and strategic planning vary significantly, particularly in terms of their formality and the nature of underlying processes. For example, while some local areas have formal annual priority-setting processes that underpin their strategic planning, others have adopted more informal and frequent (e.g. quarterly) mechanisms for reviewing and amending Covenant delivery priorities.

Covenant delivery has seen marked advancements in some areas but continues to be hindered by various challenges in others.

It remains difficult to ascertain the actual level of progress achieved in Covenant delivery across all local authorities. In this and previous OCOC studies, local authorities who are more active in Covenant delivery are more likely to participate in research. In contrast, it is often difficult to engage with local authorities for whom Covenant delivery is not as high on

the list of local government priorities (this includes local authorities with very limited AFC presence). Similar challenges exist in understanding progress in adoption of the Covenant legal duty by other local service providers subject to the duty (e.g. NHS bodies and state-funded schools and colleges).⁵

Recognising this challenge, the study found the following trends in terms of what progress is being achieved in Covenant delivery:

- Engagement with local authorities suggested that, in many areas, councils' ability to mitigate areas of disadvantage, give special consideration to the AFC where relevant, and deliver effective support to the AFC is improving. Many surveyed authorities were confident that significant progress has been achieved over the last five years, often enabled by increasing awareness of the AFC, areas of disadvantage, and the Covenant among local authority staff.
- However, limited or slow progress was indicated in relation to several key outcomes, including:
 - Awareness of the AFC and the Covenant among front-line service providers.
 - The ability of local authorities and other public service providers to identify AFC members at first point of access.

- Access to quality data on the characteristics of the AFC and potential areas of disadvantage.
- Clear/transparent communication and signposting to AFC services.
- Additionally, there appears to be significant inconsistency across local authorities in strategic planning, the setting of Covenant-related priorities, and understanding of what 'good' Covenant delivery looks like.
- Many stakeholders believe that awareness of the Covenant among AFC members remains poor, with common misconceptions about its scope creating confusion and additional burdens on front-line staff. Some AFC members are also believed to be unaware of the breadth of available local services, often seeking support only during moments of crisis. This reinforces the need for consistent and clear information-sharing and engagement with the local AFC, including through updated and accessible public-facing communications and portals (e.g. council websites).

Several cross-cutting enablers and barriers appear to be affecting these trends (see Table 0.2).

Table 0.2. Identified enablers and barriers for progress in Covenant delivery

Enablers for Covenant delivery	Barriers for Covenant delivery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to human resource and expertise, including resourcing of key Covenant-related posts • Partnership working and economies of scale • Historic funding for Covenant activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial resource constraints • Competing local authority priorities • Limited staff availability and high turnover • Constraints on data quality, accessibility and availability • Mobility of the AFC and associated monitoring difficulties

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

Partnership working is a fundamental enabler of Covenant delivery, but there are opportunities for further strengthening of local partnerships.

While the Covenant legal duty centres on local authorities and service providers, partner organisations including the third sector perform various roles in the delivery of Covenant pledges and the wider ecosystem of support for the AFC. This includes:

- Provision of specialist services
- Education of service providers and contributing expertise to Covenant implementation
- Gatekeeping and partnership coordination
- Funding provision
- Advocacy and awareness raising to address gaps in provision, and the reinforcement of accountability for furthering progress on Covenant-related outcomes.

In many cases, these roles involve work that partners have performed over significant periods of time and thus precede the Covenant and are not exclusively tied to it. However, effective Covenant partnerships often help to harness local and national partners' work

and capabilities alongside those of other organisations that were developed in response to Covenant pledges.

The study identified a mixed landscape of partnership working, with strong cases of collaboration in some locations and more mixed examples elsewhere. There is therefore opportunity to strengthen and extend collaborative working (in a manner appropriate to individual local contexts). Factors such as jurisdictional boundaries, organisational commitments, and political affiliations may hinder this in some contexts.

Emerging evidence of good practice could help further promote and facilitate effective Covenant delivery; however, tailored and context-aware adoption is essential.

Through case study engagement with local authorities, our research highlighted a selection of mechanisms that may be conducive to effective Covenant delivery in different local contexts (see Figure 0.1). Rather than providing a 'one size fits all' blueprint for mitigating or reducing disadvantage, these cases offer insight into how existing models of Covenant delivery might be amended, extended, or updated subject to their unique contexts and circumstances.

Figure 0.1. Overview of identified ‘good practice’ mechanisms for Covenant delivery

Regional Covenant Coordinators	Military Champions	Covenant delivery centres
Regional Coordinators provide a focal point for AFC support across multiple local authority areas. These individuals can help to cohere Covenant-related initiatives, identify potential inconsistencies or duplication of effort, share national-level guidance, and host Covenant forums	Military Champions provide a strategic link between a local authority and individual military establishments, including through facilitating information exchange, publicising available Covenant services, and developing an in-depth understanding of the AFC	Centralising local authority staff, services, and information dedicated to implementing the Covenant in a publicly accessible location. These facilities can enhance the accessibility of Covenant-related support to both local authority staff and members of the AFC and can aid the development of informal support networks
Local Covenant funds	Gateway organisations	Armed Forces Community Hubs
Local authority- or partner organisation-maintained funds that supplement national funding sources to support local Covenant-related projects	Local authority- or third sector-run facilities dedicated to connecting members of the AFC with relevant service providers from across the local area and beyond. These facilities are designed to be a central point of access to a pre-existing network of Covenant delivery partners	Charity- or volunteer-maintained hubs that provide community and peer-to-peer support as well as dedicated spaces for members of the AFC to socialise

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

These mechanisms are complemented by several cross-cutting good practice behaviours. These include fostering wider community engagement in, and support for, Covenant-related projects, prioritising peer-to-peer learning and delivery in Covenant

training and education programmes, the strategic selection of partner organisations, fostering cultures of continual improvement, and generating additional buy-in to the Covenant by emphasising the role and value of a thriving AFC.

Recommendations

Table 0.3 summarises the project’s recommendations for local authorities, national government and, third sector partners, as well as future research and analysis.

Table 0.3. Overview of project recommendations

	Raising awareness and improving understanding of the Covenant
Local, regional and national stakeholders should continue to actively promote and improve understanding of the Covenant among relevant service providers, the AFC, and the wider public.	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Local councils should maintain active and inclusive communication with the AFC (including through active webpages) to ensure members of the community can access up-to-date information. 2. UK and Devolved Government stakeholders should continue to work with local areas to raise awareness and improve understanding of the Covenant among the AFC. 3. Third sector partners should continue to raise awareness and educate public service providers (e.g. GPs and schools) about the unique characteristics and support needs of the AFC. 4. Third sector organisations should actively work to improve understanding of the Covenant among their beneficiaries and the public more broadly. 5. Government, local authorities and others should support sustained investment in training to improve awareness of the Covenant among council staff and other service providers. 	
	Planning, monitoring and evaluation
Covenant delivery and support for the AFC should be grounded in and evaluated against tangible and measurable outcomes.	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Local areas must ensure that their planning for Covenant delivery is embedded in clearly specified and measurable outcomes. These outcomes should be identified through robust local needs assessments and other available data sources. 7. The MoD should encourage outcomes-based planning and evaluation in local Covenant delivery, including through the integration of an outcomes perspective into existing Covenant guidance. 8. The UK and Devolved Governments (including the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Evaluation Task Force) should support the development of consistent monitoring and evaluation frameworks for local Covenant delivery. 9. To support robust planning, monitoring and evaluation, the UK and Devolved Governments should work to improve the accessibility of existing data (e.g. national datasets, Census data). This should be paired with capacity-building at the local level to ensure that local organisations have the requisite capabilities to make effective use of available data. 10. Evaluation plans should be incorporated into planning for Covenant-related activities and wider support to the AFC, to ensure that they align with agreed strategic outcomes. 	



Collaboration and engagement

All organisations supporting delivery of the Covenant and wider support for the AFC are encouraged to actively engage in partnership working.

11. Due to their convening power, councils should make a concerted effort to draw together relevant partners, resources, and infrastructure in support of the Covenant's implementation.
12. Covenant delivery structures should be grounded in both robust accountability mechanisms and cultures of collective learning.
13. The third sector should actively participate in local Covenant partnerships, assist public service providers in identifying gaps in support for the AFC, and reinforce accountability mechanisms for Covenant delivery by advocating on behalf of their beneficiaries.
14. Local authorities should pursue opportunities to engage with town/parish/community councils when developing Covenant-related services where appropriate.
15. Local organisations should adopt participatory approaches to deliver Covenant activities and support services, engaging both the AFC and the wider public in the design and delivery of services.



Mainstreaming and enabling effective Covenant delivery

There are opportunities to further strengthen and better enable Covenant delivery at the local, regional and national level.

16. UK and Devolved Government stakeholders should work together to reinforce and align Covenant delivery across the entirety of national government.
17. Councils should maximise use of existing resources (e.g. role descriptions), information-sharing structures, and data management systems to help mainstream Covenant-related activities into local authority processes and ensure the sustainability of Covenant delivery.
18. Local areas should consider how to incorporate the delivery mechanisms and good practice presented in this report.
19. The UK and Devolved Governments should work with public service providers to identify opportunities for strengthening existing Covenant guidance.
20. The MoD should actively engage with public services and their partners to identify how the regional architecture of VALOUR can further support Covenant delivery.
21. Local authorities and service providers should continue to update their processes for 'asking the question' to identify members of the AFC and ensure that this information is recorded in a structured and consistent manner.



Future research and analysis

Effective delivery of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC should be embedded in robust data, research and analysis.

22. Assess the implementation and emerging impacts of the planned extension of the Covenant legal duty.
23. Examine the impact of unfolding devolution in England on Covenant implementation in combined authority settings as well as the announced expansion of the Covenant Duty.
24. Explore Covenant implementation by bodies other than local authorities who are covered by the Covenant Duty.
25. Further refine existing Theories of Change and logic model frameworks to help guide monitoring and evaluation of Covenant and AFC support delivery at local, regional and national levels.
26. Examine Covenant delivery in Northern Ireland.



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Abbreviations

AFC	Armed Forces Community
AFCFT	Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust
AFLO	Armed Forces Liaison Officer
CMO	Context-Mechanism-Outcome
CMP	Civilian Military Partnership
Cobseo	Confederation of Service Charities
COSLA	Covenant of Scottish Local Authorities
CSP	Core Spending Power
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
FiMT	Forces in Mind Trust
GHH	Glasgow's Helping Heroes
GLA	Greater London Authority
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
JSNA	Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
LGA	Local Government Association
M.A.S.H.	Military Assistance Social Hub
MoD	Ministry of Defence
OCOC	Our Community, Our Covenant
OVA	Office for Veterans' Affairs
RBL	Royal British Legion
SSAFA	Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Families Association
SCiP Alliance	Service Children's Progression Alliance
ToC	Theory of Change
WLGA	Welsh Local Government Association



Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The Armed Forces Covenant (hereafter, ‘the Covenant’) is a pledge established in 2011 between the UK Government, the nation, and the Armed Forces. Articulating the country’s obligations to the Armed Forces Community (AFC),⁶ the Covenant acknowledges that members of this group should not face disadvantage due to their (or a family member’s) military service and that special consideration may be awarded to them in appropriate circumstances.⁷

Since 2011, all principal local authorities in mainland Great Britain as well as four Northern Ireland councils have voluntarily pledged to uphold the Covenant and work with partners to support the AFC’s integration into the wider community.⁸ The introduction of the Covenant Duty in 2022 marked a major change in this landscape, with local authorities and other select public service providers now legally obligated to pay ‘due regard’ to the Covenant’s principles, with an eye to promoting more informed decision and policy making.⁹ This development, together with a recently

6 The term ‘Armed Forces Community’ is understood by the research team to comprise serving personnel, reservists, former-Service personnel, and their families (including the bereaved).

7 Armed Forces Covenant (n.d.a.).

8 Shared Intelligence (2016); Shared Intelligence (2017); Shared Intelligence & Meri Mayhew Consulting (2022).

9 Ministry of Defence (2022).

announced extension of the Duty, raises new questions about the evolving local realities of the Covenant’s delivery,¹⁰ the progress that has been achieved in its implementation to date, and the role of the wider AFC support sector in enhancing its impact.¹¹

Alongside the Covenant Duty, local authorities and other service providers continue to navigate an evolving external environment that presents both challenges and opportunities. In recent years, the Covenant’s delivery has been shaped by a range of factors, including the re-structuring of local government in parts of England, recent fluctuations in public sector funding, the so-called ‘cost-of-living crisis’, the prolonged effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and shifting public perceptions of the AFC. To identify potential priorities and options for strengthening future Covenant delivery, it is essential to understand how local authorities and their partners have adapted to these external forces.

1.2. About ‘Our Community, Our Covenant’ research

This study is the fourth iteration of the ‘Our Community, Our Covenant’ (OCOC) research series, which examines the Covenant’s delivery at the local level and aims to offer guidance as to how it may be improved:

In 2016, the initial OCOC research explored the Covenant’s implementation by local government across England, Scotland, and Wales, with the aim of identifying inconsistencies and improving its administration.¹² This included developing a toolkit and accompanying ‘core infrastructure’ to guide Covenant delivery by local authorities, together with helping them to address misconceptions and varied awareness of the Covenant among council staff and the AFC.

In 2017, follow-on research was conducted to offer a ‘deep dive’ into local Covenant delivery practices across England, Scotland, and Wales, refine the previous report’s recommendations, update the original ‘core infrastructure’, and create a self-assessment tool for partners to review existing Covenant delivery mechanisms.¹³

In 2022, the third OCOC report explored the impact of the Covenant on reducing disadvantage among the AFC a decade after its introduction. It identified significant barriers to evaluating the effect of the Covenant, many of which persist and are included in the current report. In addition to England, Scotland, and Wales, this research also explored Covenant delivery within the Northern Ireland context.¹⁴

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In June 2025, it was announced that the Covenant Duty would be extended to encompass all UK Government departments, Devolved Governments, and the following additional policy areas: social care, childcare, employment and service in the Armed Forces, personal taxation, welfare benefits, criminal justice, immigration, citizenship, pensions, Service-related compensation, and transport. See Armed Forces Covenant (n.d.b.).

11

We define ‘Covenant delivery’ as the implementation of activities that are linked to advancing the Covenant’s core objectives. As discussed later in the report, the concept of ‘Covenant delivery’ is inherently flawed as the Covenant does not represent a clearly delineated programme of activities, and working towards its objectives involves a range of activities that cannot always be clearly distinguished from the wider support provided to the AFC.

12

Shared Intelligence (2016).

13

Shared Intelligence (2017).

14

Shared Intelligence & Meri Mayhew Consulting (2022).

While these studies documented significant progress in both mitigating disadvantage among the AFC and strengthening the ‘core infrastructure’ for local Covenant delivery, persistent challenges were also identified. Together with the various ways in which disadvantage continues to manifest among the AFC, key awareness gaps among local authority staff and other public service providers regarding the Covenant were highlighted, alongside limited progress in many councils’ adoption of associated action plans and awareness raising platforms.¹⁵ These findings emphasise the need for continued attention from government, the third sector, and research institutions on local Covenant delivery.

1.3. Research objectives and scope

This project builds on previous OCOC research by **examining the practices and realities of how the Covenant and wider support activities are being delivered at a local and regional level to mitigate the impacts of Service life and improve outcomes for the AFC.**¹⁶ The research was conducted between August 2023 and May 2025, extending the earlier studies in two key respects:

- Firstly, this study aims to provide a richer understanding of different local, regional, and sub-regional models (e.g. government

arrangements, networks, and partnerships) that have been adopted by local authorities to deliver Covenant pledges and thereby mitigate potential disadvantage stemming from Service life.

- Secondly, this research has a stronger focus on Covenant-related collaboration and partnership working in local areas. This recognises the interconnected nature of Covenant activities as well as the wider assistance provided by statutory and non-statutory actors to the AFC. Indeed, the Covenant often plays an enabling role in this ecosystem of support, and delineating between Covenant delivery and wider provision for the AFC is sometimes not possible given varying interpretations of the Covenant’s role and principles (see Box 1).

The study also aims to characterise Covenant delivery in an evolving environment to reveal how external policy opportunities and challenges continue to shape both the implementation and impact of the Covenant.

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the full research objectives and research questions that guided the study.

¹⁵ Shared Intelligence & Meri Mayhew Consulting (2022).

¹⁶ While we acknowledge the role of local bodies other than local authorities in local Covenant delivery (e.g. NHS bodies, state-funded schools and colleges), we did not collect data from those service providers.

Table 1.1. Research objectives and questions

Research objective (RO)	Research questions (RQs)
RO1: Characterise the evolving environment for delivery of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RQ1: What are the implications of the Covenant Duty for delivery of the Covenant? RQ2: How have external policy opportunities and challenges influenced delivery of the Covenant and wider support for the AFC?
RO2: Examine how local and national partners work with statutory authorities to support delivery of the Covenant and wider collective effect for the AFC 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RQ3: What are the roles of local and national partners in delivery of the Covenant? RQ4: What key areas of wider support are provided by local and national partners alongside statutory authorities to deliver collective effect for the AFC?
RO3: Improve understanding of how the Covenant is delivered at a regional level to mitigate disadvantage among the AFC 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RQ5: What local government structures exist for delivery of the Covenant across the four tiers of local government? RQ6: What local, regional, and sub-regional mechanisms exist for delivering the Covenant and wider support to the AFC? RQ7: What national and local data sources are available to local authorities to support delivery of the Covenant? RQ8: What progress has been made in delivery of the Covenant and what have been the key enablers and barriers of this progress?
RO4: Characterise how different local delivery models shape the implementation of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC, including what constitutes good practice 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RQ9: How do different local, regional, and sub-regional arrangements, networks, and partnerships shape delivery of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC? RQ10: What examples of evidence-based good practice exist among different delivery models for implementing the Covenant and wider support to the AFC? RQ11: What are the resources and costs required for implementing identified examples of good practice?

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

There are three important caveats regarding the scope of this research:

- Firstly, unlike the third iteration of the OCOC research, **this study only examines the Covenant’s implementation in England, Scotland, and Wales.** The context for Covenant delivery in Northern Ireland is highly distinct from the devolved nations of Great Britain, and hence it was felt that to include Northern Ireland within the project’s scope would risk masking findings relating to this unique setting. Further research on both the structures facilitating the Covenant’s delivery and wider support for the AFC in Northern Ireland is consequently recommended.
- Secondly, **the study’s data collection phase (August 2023–May 2025) preceded the announced extension of the Covenant Duty in June 2025,** and therefore this development is not addressed in the report.

We therefore recommend that future research examines the impact of the Duty’s expansion on progress towards achieving the Covenant objectives of reducing or mitigating disadvantage among the AFC.

- Thirdly, while the research was guided by principles and practices associated with theory-based and realist evaluation (see Chapter 2), **it was not conducted as a formal evaluation due to challenges inherent to the nature of the Covenant** (see Box 1). Although the study provides vital insight on progress towards achieving the Covenant’s outcomes as well as various mechanisms for improving its delivery, the findings should not be interpreted as the products of formal evaluation efforts. The project’s recommendations offer guidance for future evaluation of Covenant-related activities (see Chapter 9).

Box 1. Challenges in assessing and evaluating Covenant delivery



- **Interpretation of the purpose and role of the Covenant.** The role and purpose of the Covenant can be viewed differently in varying contexts, such as in local government and the third sector. In some settings, the Covenant's role is perceived as holding service providers to account, while in others it is seen to perform a convening role and as helping to drive collaboration. As a result, the Covenant can 'mean different things to different people', which makes it difficult to identify common outcomes for its delivery.
- **The Covenant's non-prescriptive nature.** The Covenant is non-prescriptive by design and provides freedom for interpretation at the local, regional, and national levels. As such, there is not a common or shared set of criteria against which Covenant delivery can be assessed, making it challenging to evaluate the Covenant as a coherent programme of work.
- **Differentiation difficulties.** There is significant variation in the scale and nature of activities associated with Covenant delivery, with stakeholders frequently choosing not to differentiate between these activities and those relating to supporting the AFC more broadly. This overlap can make it challenging to untangle whether outcomes such as a reduction in disadvantage can be attributed to the Covenant directly or to the wider ecosystem of support that is available. Furthermore, this ambiguity makes it difficult to consider the counterfactual: to what extent would recently observed reductions in disadvantage among the AFC have occurred if the Covenant were not in place?
- **Challenges with data quality and availability.** Understanding progress in Covenant delivery is hindered by a current lack of robust and consistent data on the AFC, including the levels and nature of potential disadvantage among its members. Alongside difficulties in defining 'disadvantage', there is also significant variation in data capture approaches among service providers, a lack of agreed metrics relating to the implementation of the Covenant, and outstanding gaps in knowledge in terms of AFC demographics.

Source: RAND Europe and Shared Intelligence.

1.4. Report structure

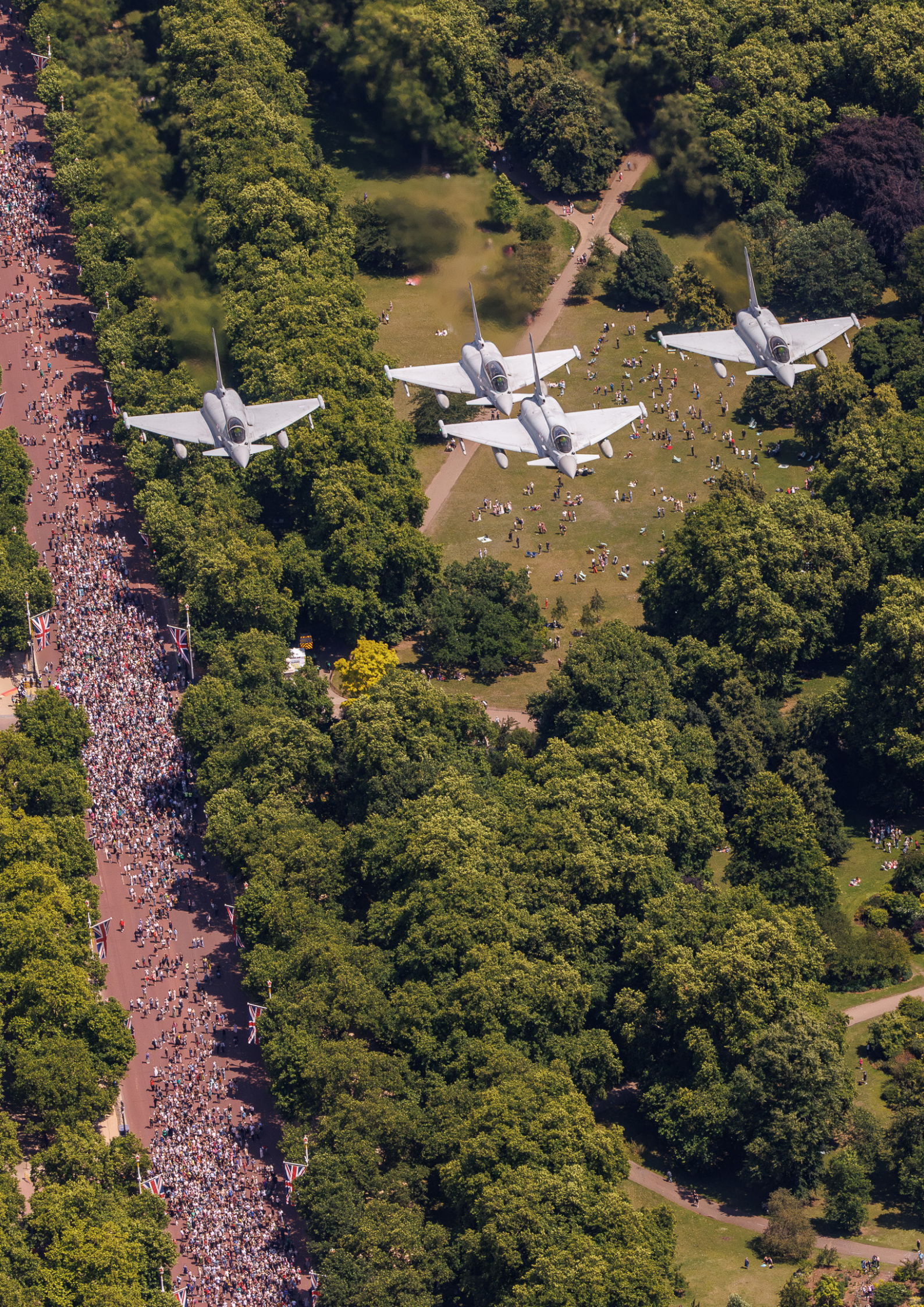
This report summarises the research's findings and its analysis of data collected through various methods, including a literature review, scoping interviews, a survey of local authorities, interviews with local councils and their partners, qualitative case studies, and a stakeholder analysis workshop.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** summarises the project's overarching research design and methodology.
- **Chapter 3** outlines the external environment for Covenant delivery and AFC support, along with the impact of the Covenant Duty.
- **Chapter 4** examines local authority structures for Covenant delivery, aligning with existing administrative arrangements and boundaries in local government across England, Scotland, and Wales.
- **Chapter 5** summarises various local, regional, and sub-regional mechanisms for Covenant delivery, as well as the roles of local and national partners in supporting its implementation.

- **Chapter 6** provides insights into the progress achieved in delivering the Covenant, including implementation challenges and key enablers.
- **Chapter 7** examines key enablers and barriers for Covenant delivery together with the role played by local and national partners in supporting its implementation.
- **Chapter 8** details cases of good practice in Covenant delivery, including formal structures, arrangements, and networks dedicated to the Covenant's implementation, as well as wider cross-cutting principles and behaviours conducive to effective service provision for the AFC.
- **Chapter 9** offers concluding thoughts based on the study findings alongside recommendations for how local authorities, national government, and the third sector can enable further progress in Covenant implementation.

Alongside the core report, **Annex A** includes the full updated local Covenant delivery Theory of Change (ToC).





Chapter 2. Research design and methodology

2.1. Overall research design

To address the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1, this project employed a mixed-methods approach that was guided by the principles of realist and theory-based evaluation.

Theory-based evaluations examine the delivery or impact of a programme based on a ToC, which helps to articulate how and why a programme is expected to lead to desired outcomes. By contrast, realist evaluation focuses on investigating ‘what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and how’.¹⁷ The key assumption embedded within the latter approach is that ‘nothing works everywhere or for everyone’ and therefore context is crucial in shaping the implementation and outcomes

of programmes or interventions.¹⁸ Adopting a realist evaluation outlook was considered to be well-suited to the project’s aim of understanding variations in local practice and how different models shape Covenant delivery.

The study was conducted between August 2023 and May 2025, spanning three main phases (see Figure 2.1):



An **exploration phase**, which examined the external environment for the Covenant’s implementation, refined the ToC as a basis for subsequent analysis, and identified different local, regional, and sub-regional Covenant delivery models.

¹⁷ See Van Belle et al. (2024).

¹⁸ Westhorp (2014).



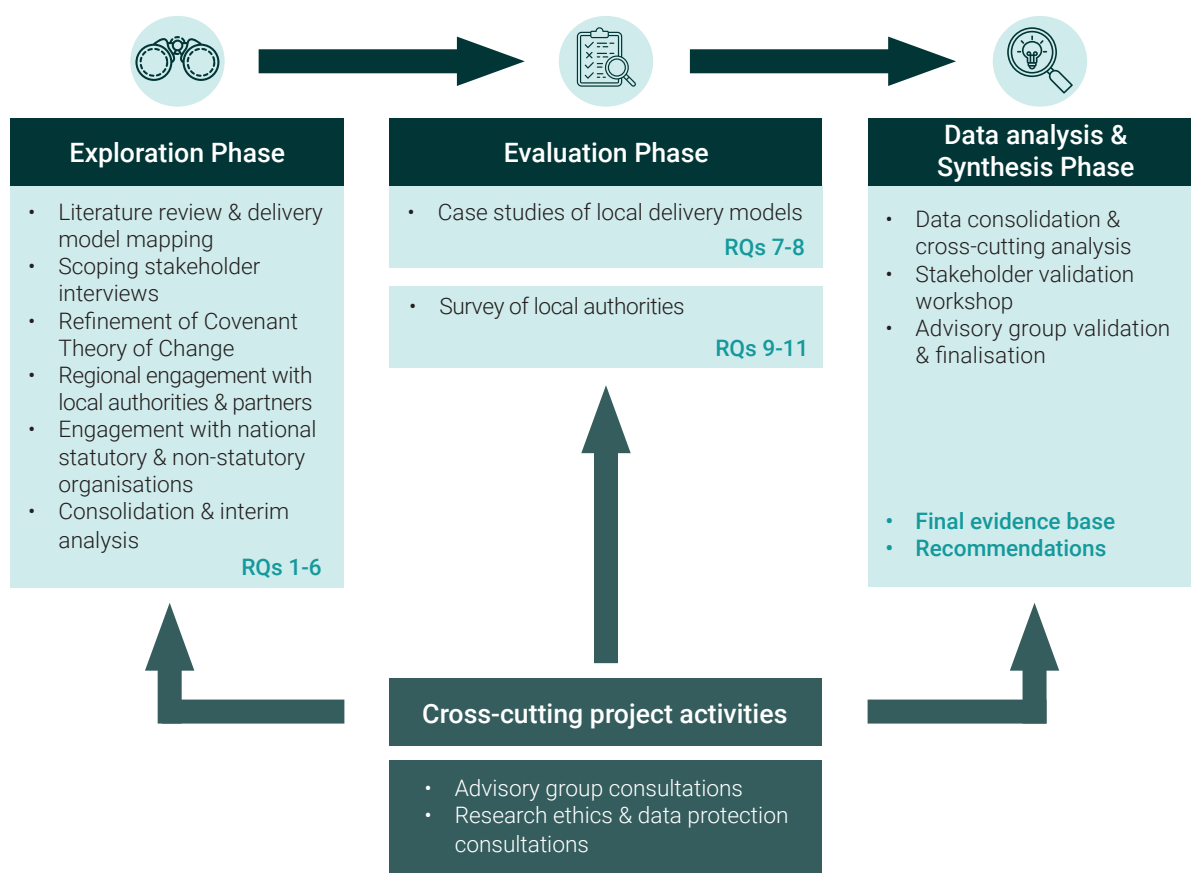
An **evaluation phase**, which focused on progress achieved in the Covenant's delivery and assessing evidence of the effectiveness of different local, regional, and sub-regional Covenant models. This phase also considered cross-cutting questions regarding the factors that inform and guide different Covenant implementation approaches (e.g. data, local and national guidance, training).



A **data analysis and synthesis phase**, which consolidated the study's findings and developed corresponding recommendations for the future delivery of the Covenant and additional assistance to the AFC.

Across the three phases, the research was supported by a project advisory group. The purpose of this group was to validate the project's design, help the research team identify and engage key stakeholders, and offer feedback on emerging themes and findings. The organisations represented in the advisory group were as follows: Cobseo (the Confederation of Service Charities); the Local Government Association (LGA); the Ministry of Defence (MoD); NHS England; the Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA); Riverside Group; the Scottish Government; the Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP Alliance); the Welsh Government; and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

Figure 2.1. Overall research design



Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.



2.2. Exploration phase

The project's exploration phase encompassed a range of complementary qualitative research activities: (i) a literature review and desk research to map Covenant delivery models; (ii) refinement of the Covenant ToC; (iii) regional engagement with local authorities and partners; and (iv) engagement with national statutory and non-statutory partner organisations. These tasks were followed by a period of data analysis and consolidation in preparation for the project's remaining phases.

2.2.1. Literature review and delivery model mapping

To map the empirical context of the study, the research team completed a targeted review of existing literature relating to the Covenant

and other service provision to the AFC. This built on the literature reviews conducted during previous OCOC studies and focused specifically on identifying new evidence relating to (i) areas of disadvantage or support needs of the AFC across different thematic areas and (ii) understanding the external environment for the delivery of the Covenant and wider assistance to the AFC.¹⁹

In addition, the research team performed desk research focused on examining publicly available information about local authority activities and partnerships relating to the Covenant. This facilitated a high-level mapping of collaboration structures designed to support the Covenant's implementation and provided an initial basis for identifying different delivery models to be examined as part of the project.

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A second literature review update was conducted in May 2025. No further materials were reviewed after this point.

2.2.2. Scoping stakeholder interviews

Alongside the literature review and delivery model mapping, the research team completed 17 scoping interviews with national and regional Covenant stakeholders from across England, Scotland, and Wales. The interviews were used to gather preliminary evidence on the impact of the Covenant Duty, develop insight on the Covenant's evolving external environment, and complement the literature review in identifying various local, regional, and sub-regional Covenant delivery models. The organisations consulted included the MoD, the OVA, the Royal British Legion (RBL), Veterans Scotland, the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT), the LGA, the WLGA, and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

2.2.3. Refinement of the Covenant Theory of Change

In line with the project's theory-based approach, the exploration phase also included updating the ToC for the Covenant (i.e. an explicit theory for how inputs and activities associated with the Covenant translate into outputs, outcomes and impact) that was developed as part of the last iteration of OCOC.²⁰ Particular attention was given to incorporating the Covenant Duty into the ToC, along with refining its

scope to focus specifically on the Covenant's implementation by local authorities.

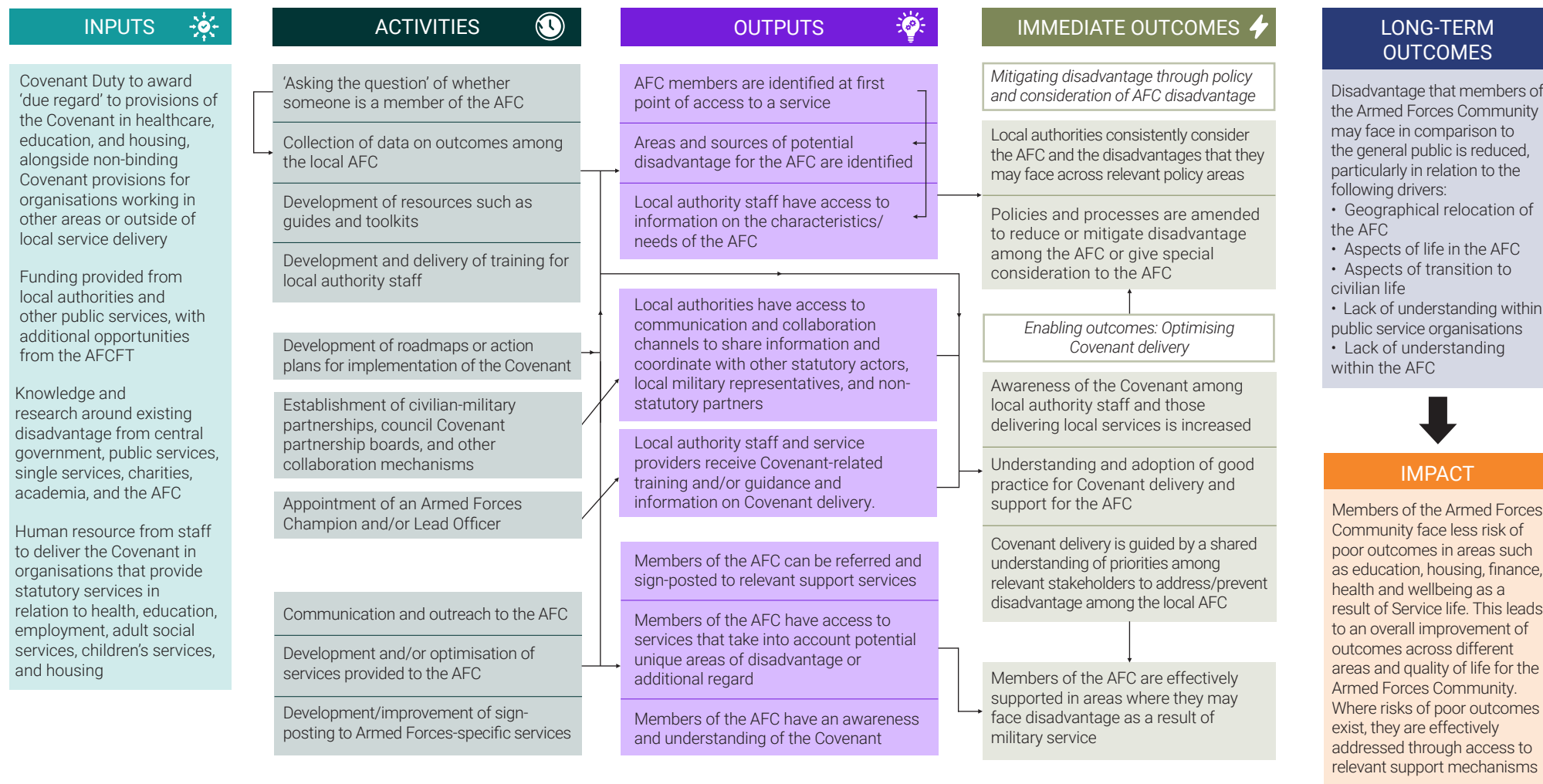
The updated ToC was validated via an internal workshop and a meeting of the project's advisory group, before being shared with FiMT for final comment. The ToC consists of multiple components, including a visual representation in the form of a logic model (see Figure 2.2) and an accompanying narrative outlining the causal pathways, assumptions, and risks relating to the Covenant's delivery (see Annex A).

The ToC served several purposes across the project:

- It provided a key input and guiding framework for the project's evaluation phase (see Section 2.3), including the methodological approach adopted and corresponding research methods.
- It established a shared understanding of the aims of the Covenant and how they are expected to be achieved from the perspective of local authorities. In this regard, the updated ToC allowed the research team to chart the contributions of, and key dependencies between, the activities of local authorities and how these are intended to facilitate desired outcomes and impacts.

20 Shared Intelligence & Meri Mayhew Consulting (2022).

Figure 2.2. Updated Covenant Theory of Change Logic Model



Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.


2.2.4. Regional engagement with local authorities and partner organisations

Following the initial scoping activities and updating of the Covenant ToC, the research team undertook regional engagement with local authority areas in England, Scotland, and Wales. The objective was to identify and map different models, structures, and practices for Covenant delivery in a range of local contexts. Areas for the engagement were identified through the research tasks described above, providing an initial longlist of candidates mapped by local authority structure, national location, AFC presence,²¹ and rural/urban geography. The research team subsequently selected a sample of areas with diverse characteristics across these criteria (see Table 2.1).

Engagement with the selected local authority areas followed a structured approach, with one to two scoping conversations held initially with council representatives to introduce the project, confirm the area's participation, and



identify relevant staff for interview. Teams of two to four researchers then visited each location, with most visits lasting two days.²² Where possible, the fieldwork was scheduled to coincide with Covenant partnership meetings. This allowed the research team to engage directly with a wider range of stakeholders, including representatives from public services, private businesses, and organisations in the voluntary and community sector. It also provided an opportunity to observe how these partnerships operate in practice. Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders who consented to participate focused on: (i) the nature of local partnerships, networks, and other mechanisms that support the Covenant's delivery; (ii) perceived progress in the Covenant's implementation over the last five years; and (iii) external opportunities and challenges impacting local Covenant delivery and wider support for the AFC.

Table 2.1. Selected regional engagement locations

Engagement locations	Rationale for inclusion	Number of stakeholders consulted			
		Local authorities	Other public services	Third sector	Other (private sector, Armed Forces, education)
England 					
Milton Keynes	Unitary authority, England (South East), urban, significant/modest AFC presence	3	2	4	

²¹ In mapping areas according to local AFC presence, we use a typology developed as part of previous OCOC research, classifying local areas as: i) major AFC presence; ii) significant AFC presence; iii) modest AFC presence; iv) significant known presence of veterans; and v) minimal known AFC presence. For a full overview of the typology see Shared Intelligence (2017).

²² An on-site visit to East Sussex was not completed, with three remote semi-structured interviews conducted as an alternative.

Greater Manchester	Combined authority, England (North West), urban, significant/modest AFC presence	4	2	2	
East Riding of Yorkshire	Unitary authority, England (Yorkshire and The Humber), rural, modest AFC presence	6	3	3	2
East Sussex	Two-tier authority, England (South East), rural, modest AFC presence	3			
Warwickshire	Two-tier authority, England (West Midlands), urban/rural, significant/modest AFC presence	8	6	3	
Wales					
Cardiff & the Vale of Glamorgan	Unitary authority, Wales (South East), urban, modest AFC presence	4	4	3	
Flintshire	Unitary authority, Wales (North East), rural, significant AFC presence	8	1	4	
Scotland					
Glasgow	Unitary authority, Scotland (West Central), urban, significant AFC presence	4	2	5	1
Moray	Unitary authority, Scotland (North East), rural, significant AFC presence	5	2	1	4

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

2.2.5. Engagement with national statutory and non-statutory organisations

In parallel with activities outlined in Section 2.2.4, the research team conducted additional interviews with statutory and non-statutory organisations, focused on characterising Covenant-related support at the national level (including at the UK level and across England, Scotland, and Wales). This aimed to provide a cross-cutting perspective on the role of organisations that partner with local authorities to support the AFC, including key government stakeholders, national statutory bodies, and third sector actors. The interviews included representatives from 22 organisations working across a range of thematic support areas (see Table 2.2).

Similarly to the regional engagement with local authorities, the interviews followed a semi-structured format to ensure consistency of data capture while allowing sufficient flexibility to interrogate different topics based on the interviewees' responses. Areas of focus included: (i) external opportunities and challenges impacting services for the AFC; (ii) forms of engagement with local authorities in implementing the Covenant; and (iii) perceived support to achieving the Covenant's outcomes. Data from these interviews was analysed thematically to draw out cross-cutting observations and trends.

2.2.6. Consolidation and interim analysis

To support subsequent analysis of how different local models shape delivery of the Covenant and identify areas of good practice, the research team synthesised evidence from the previous research tasks and developed a list of different local, regional, and sub-regional delivery models. These models represented various mechanisms, practices, structures, and ways of working through which the Covenant and support to the AFC are delivered.

For each of the identified delivery models, the research team developed 'context-mechanism-outcome' (CMO) hypotheses to anticipate how and why these structures contribute to Covenant outcomes. Each CMO was based on the following sample structure: *'In this context, that particular mechanism was adopted by these actors, generating those outcomes. In this other context, another mechanism was adopted, generating these different outcomes.'* The developed CMOs guided later engagement with local authorities to identify what were considered to be 'good' or 'effective' practices in different local and regional contexts, the underpinning rationale for adopting those practices, and evidence of how the practices help achieve Covenant outcomes.

Table 2.2. National statutory and non-statutory organisations selected for engagement

Thematic area	Organisations
Cross-cutting	MoD, RBL, Help for Heroes, RAF Families Federation, Navy Families Federation, Army Benevolent Fund, Royal Navy Association, AFCFT, RAF Benevolent Fund, Welsh Government
Housing and homelessness	Riverside Group, Housing Options Scotland
Employment	Forces Employment Charity, The Poppy Factory, Recruit for Spouses
Welfare, health and wellbeing	NHS England, Defence Medical Welfare Service, Walking with the Wounded, Blesma
Education and Service children	SCiP Alliance, Supporting Service Children in Education Cymru, Forces Children Scotland

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.



2.3. Evaluation phase

The project's evaluation phase aimed to examine progress in Covenant delivery, associated enablers and barriers, and how different local models shape the implementation of the Covenant (including what represents good practice). In line with realist evaluation principles, this phase focused on various *mechanisms of impact* and how effectively and efficiently they have been used in local contexts. The evaluation phase was composed of two research activities: (i) case studies of local delivery models and (ii) a survey of local authorities.

2.3.1. Case studies of local delivery models

Building on the mapping of different local Covenant delivery approaches, the research team conducted in-depth case studies in five local authority areas: (i) Oxfordshire; (ii) Greater Manchester; (iii) the East Riding of Yorkshire; (iv) Glasgow; and (v) Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. The case studies are fully described in an accompanying case study

report.²³ They were structured around two main lines of enquiry:

- Identifying what works for Covenant stakeholders and beneficiaries in specific local, regional, and sub-regional contexts. As mentioned above, realist evaluation approaches recognise that not all practices or interventions work equally well in a given setting. Uncovering the unique contextual dynamics that facilitate or hinder a particular delivery model thus formed the core component of each case study.
- Examining how the Covenant as an enabling resource interacts with the reasoning of the statutory and non-statutory organisations that support its delivery. In practice, this meant exploring the resources that are provided through the Covenant (e.g. training, guidance, data) as well as the responses and activities that they have facilitated.

The case studies were selected to represent a wide range of the delivery model types identified during the exploration phase, as well as diverse local contexts (e.g. rural and urban).

Table 2.3. Overview of case study area features

Case study	Region	Local government structure	Rural/urban	AFC presence	Delivery focus
Cardiff & the Vale of Glamorgan	Wales	Welsh unitary	Mixed	Significant AFC presence (serving)	Layered, public-facing, includes Armed Forces Liaison Officers (AFLOs)
East Riding of Yorkshire	England	Unitary	Rural	Modest AFC presence (serving and veteran)	Targeted support and delivery
Glasgow	Scotland	Scottish Unitary	Urban	Significant AFC presence (veteran and Reserve)	Facilitation
Greater Manchester	England	Combined Authority (constituent unitary authorities)	Urban	Modest AFC presence / significant presence of veterans in some areas (e.g., Salford, Wigan)	Regional coordination
Oxfordshire	England	Two-tier	Rural	Significant AFC presence (serving)	District coordination

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

The development of each case study drew on multiple data sources (see Table 2.4):



Document review: The research team collected and reviewed relevant materials from local authority Covenant stakeholders and their partners. This included Covenant action plans, partnership meeting records, as well as public-facing materials outlining available support for the AFC. Through examining these documents, the research team established a baseline understanding of how local Covenant delivery is coordinated and enacted.



Interviews with local authority members: 1–3 semi-structured interviews were held with local authority members. Hosted either in person or online, these conversations

were used to interrogate: (i) the local context for Covenant implementation; (ii) the reasoning and assumptions underpinning the delivery model(s) used; (iii) key enablers and barriers for supporting the AFC; (iv) identified examples of good practice; and (v) the resources required for components of the model to be applied elsewhere.



Interviews with relevant partners: Where required, the local authority interviews were paired with 1–3 semi-structured interviews with relevant partner organisations (e.g. members of a local partnership or network). The topic guide for these conversations addressed the same issues as those covered in the interviews with local authority members.



Beneficiary focus groups: To gather evidence on the efficiency and impact of the selected delivery models, the research team held 2–3 focus groups with target beneficiaries in all but one of the case study areas.²⁴ Each focus group was conducted in person, featured 8–14 participants and lasted 60–90 minutes. Participants were recruited with the support of local Armed Forces charities, who also assisted the research team in scheduling and hosting the focus groups. Those who took part in the sessions included Service leavers, ex-Service personnel, military families (including adults, children,

partners, and the bereaved), as well as local authority staff and partner organisation representatives. Focus groups were typically held at the local charities' own venues, which helped create a comfortable environment for participants. To support recruitment, those attending the focus groups in a personal capacity received a £20 voucher as a thank you for their time.

The resulting data was compiled into individual case study templates and coded to reveal context-specific Covenant delivery pathways (i.e. whether and how the selected delivery models achieved their intended outcomes in their given context).

Table 2.4. Case study areas and data sources

Case study area	Document review	Local authority member interviews*	Partner interviews*	Beneficiary focus groups
Cardiff & the Vale of Glamorgan	Yes	2	0	2
East Riding of Yorkshire	Yes	1	2	2
Glasgow	Yes	2	2	2
Greater Manchester	Yes	1	1	3
Oxfordshire	Yes	4	3	0

**For most case study areas, local authority members and partners were also interviewed during initial site visits (see Section 2.2.4). In some cases, further interviews were conducted to build on the first round of engagement or if new relevant stakeholders were identified. Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.*

²⁴ Focus groups were not conducted as part of in the Oxfordshire case study due to limited engagement from potential participants and supporting organisations.

2.3.2. Survey of local authorities

To obtain more comprehensive evidence about local forms of Covenant delivery, the research team employed an online survey that was open to all English, Scottish, and Welsh local authorities. The survey focused on issues that required a cross-cutting perspective, namely: (i) existing local authority structures, networks, and partnerships for supporting the Covenant; (ii) perceived progress in the Covenant’s delivery (including key enablers and barriers); (iii) external opportunities and challenges for the implementation of the Covenant; and (iv) other specific elements of Covenant delivery (e.g. use of data and other resources). To allow for comparison and assessment of ongoing progress in the Covenant’s implementation, a selection of questions from previous OCOC surveys was included.

The survey was disseminated with the assistance of the LGA, COSLA, WGLA, and London Councils via three successive rounds of outreach over a three-month period, as well as at the MoD’s Armed Forces Covenant Conference (October 2024). To further strengthen the potential response rate, a link to the survey was sent directly to the Armed Forces Champion and/or Armed Forces Lead Officer at 354 local authorities across England, Scotland, and Wales.²⁵ A total of 54 useable responses was received (see Table 2.5).²⁶

Survey analysis consisted of descriptive statistical analyses of the quantitative data. Responses to open-text questions were analysed thematically using an extraction template to identify key themes and how they varied among different respondents. Owing to the low response rate, sub-group analyses of the responses (e.g. by region) were not possible.

Table 2.5. Local authority survey responses (by nation)

Nation	Number of survey responses	Proportion of survey responses
England	36	67 per cent
Scotland	13	24 per cent
Wales	5	9 per cent

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

25 The 354 local authorities included those who had not submitted a response at the point of contact and for which the Armed Forces Champion and/or Lead Officer could be identified.

26 Surveys in which not all required data fields received input were excluded from the final analysis.



2.4. Data analysis and synthesis phase

The final phase of the project focused on compiling relevant data and analytical outputs from the first two phases, developing recommendations, and producing this final report. This was achieved through three tasks:

- **Data consolidation and cross-cutting analysis:** This task focused on coding and synthesising the collected research data to develop a narrative for the final report. The research team also conducted internal workshops to identify key themes in relation to each of the project's objectives and corresponding research questions, as well as to develop initial recommendations.
- **Stakeholder validation workshop:** A one-day stakeholder workshop was held to validate and refine the emerging research findings, identify key implications for policy and practice stemming from the project, and gather initial input on recommendations to improve Covenant delivery. The workshop was hosted in-person and gathered together 18 participants from the MoD and wider government (n=7), local authorities (n=4), the third sector (n=6), and other public service providers (n=1).
- **Advisory group validation and finalisation:** Building on the stakeholder workshop and previous research activities, the refined findings and recommendations were presented to the project's advisory group for further validation before being subject to final Quality Assurance checks.

In preparing this report, the research team chose not to include direct quotations from the project interviews. This decision was partly informed by the potentially sensitive nature of the topics covered, with subjects such as challenges to existing modes of Covenant

delivery presenting potential reputational and/or professional risks to participants. During the project's completion, the research team also noted significant variation in practice and perception among individuals holding the same position (e.g. Armed Forces Champion). It was therefore felt that to include quotations within the report could give the erroneous impression that the insights offered were representative of wider populations.

2.5. Research ethics, caveats, and limitations

The research team consulted the RAND Europe Research Ethics Advisory Group and RAND Europe Data Protection Office while producing data collection materials and developing the research design. Formal ethics approval was obtained from the RAND Corporation's Human Subjects Protection Committee (Ref 2023-N0586). During all participatory research tasks (e.g. interviews, case studies, focus groups), participants were provided with an information pack, privacy notice, and consent form before taking part in the data collection.

Readers of this report should consider several methodological limitations of the project:

- As raised in Chapter 1, while the project followed a theory-based approach and was informed by realist evaluation principles, the research team was unable to formally evaluate the delivery models identified or measure wider progress in the Covenant's delivery. This was due in part to the current lack of formal Covenant delivery outcomes and an associated lack of consistent data on the implementation and impact of delivery activities. As a result, the project was forced to rely overwhelmingly on qualitative indicators to discern what works 'well' in different delivery approaches as well as to assess the Covenant's ongoing implementation.

The findings presented in this report are therefore not intended to be generalised across England, Scotland, and Wales.

- Given the absence of consistent monitoring data on Covenant delivery, the research relied heavily on subjective self-assessment and self-reporting from local authorities and other stakeholders. As such, insight on progress in Covenant delivery and associated good practice relies predominantly on the perceptions of participants and what they believe constitutes effective implementation. The absence of Covenant monitoring that does not rely on self-assessment should provide impetus for further evaluation activity, particularly at the local level.
- The research team's ability to measure progress in Covenant delivery was restricted by the survey's low response rate. As mentioned, only 15 per cent of local authorities (54 out of a possible 371) submitted usable responses, which may be explained by survey fatigue and/or limited

capacity among local authority staff. The low response rate makes it challenging for the project to draw firm conclusions about the state of Covenant delivery across Great Britain and to comment on specific national or regional trends.

- Furthermore, because survey participants were recruited through open advertising (rather than via direct recruitment of a pre-defined sample), the survey findings are vulnerable to potential biases. For instance, responses might have been stronger among local authorities with an established track record of delivering the Covenant, and therefore the findings may not give an accurate indication of overall progress regarding its implementation. Analysis of the survey responses also indicated that many respondents were local authority Armed Forces Champions or Armed Forces Lead Officers, who may lean towards a positive impression of Covenant delivery due to potential vested interest in the programme's success.



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Chapter 3. External environment for Covenant delivery

Since the last iteration of OCOC research, the external environment for the Covenant's delivery has continued to evolve.²⁷ This chapter discusses this changing landscape together with its impact on how the Covenant has been implemented in practice. Specific attention is






given to the Covenant Duty, the introduction of which in 2022 has had a profound effect on the ways in which local authorities and other service providers view the Covenant and work to uphold it.

Box 2. Research questions addressed in Chapter 3

- **RQ1:** What are the implications of the Covenant Duty for delivery of the Covenant?
- **RQ2:** How have external policy opportunities and challenges influenced delivery of the Covenant and wider support for the AFC?

3.1. Evolving context of Covenant delivery and Armed Forces Community support

Participants in our research identified a range of factors that have shaped the Covenant’s implementation in recent years. Among the most cited were:

-  Local and national elections
-  Structuring and resourcing of local government
-  The ‘cost-of-living crisis’
-  The prolonged effects of COVID-19
-  Changing public perceptions of the AFC

The following sections address of each of these factors in turn, examining how they have constrained or facilitated Covenant delivery and other support for the AFC.

3.1.1. Local and national elections

Following the release of the last OCOC study, both local and national elections have been held across England, Scotland, and Wales. These include the 2024 UK parliamentary general election and 2023 by-elections, alongside local elections in May 2025. Despite these events having changed the political profile of many government authorities, participants indicated that they have nevertheless had little effect on overall

support for the Covenant among elected officials. Because the Covenant has historically received near cross-party approval, **political commitment to Covenant delivery has remained broadly consistent over successive election cycles according to stakeholders.**²⁸

However, **the personnel changes that often accompany elections can affect how Covenant activities are prioritised and implemented.**²⁹ This stems in part from the different levels of motivation and enthusiasm that individual elected officials bring to supporting the Covenant, which can accordingly affect the prioritisation of related activities.³⁰ The time and resource required to review policy and upskill newly elected staff, together with the need to develop new relationships with partner organisations, were likewise identified as having resulted in a pausing or slowing down of Covenant initiatives within local and national government.³¹

Additionally, **changes in government policy resulting from elections can have direct implications for the Covenant’s scope and delivery.**³² Of note are the range of Covenant-related initiatives announced by the UK’s Labour Government since its election in 2024. These comprise the intended waiving of visa fees for non-UK veterans with four or more years of service (and their dependents) as well as the proposed appointment of an independent Armed Forces Commissioner to represent the needs of serving personnel and their families.³³ Further proposals to enhance support for the AFC have been made as part of the government’s Plan for Change,³⁴ such

28 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

29 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

30 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

31 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

32 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

33 Allison (2025); UK Parliament (2025b).

34 UK Government (n.d.).

as the allocation of £50 million to create a VALOUR network, which will support the delivery of specialist advice and services to veterans via a UK-wide system of regional hubs.³⁵ While many of these changes are yet to be finalised, they are widely expected to have a substantial impact on statutory and non-statutory Covenant-related assistance.



3.1.2. Structuring and resourcing of local government

The structuring and resourcing of local authorities is another crucial element that affects available support for the AFC.³⁶ The 2024 English devolution white paper, *Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, is particularly significant in this respect,³⁷ setting out forthcoming steps in the UK Government's proposed 'devolution revolution' over the course of the current parliament.³⁸ This encompasses the extension of devolution to all parts of England, the granting of additional powers to mayors, the replacement of two-tier local government with unitary authorities, and other structural changes. As documented in Chapter 4, the organisation of local authorities and their level of autonomy over service provision has a crucial bearing on the Covenant's implementation, including the nature and scope of associated partnership working alongside the degree to which

supporting the AFC can be incorporated into mainstream local government processes. It will therefore be vital to monitor the devolution process and its implications for Covenant delivery in the coming years.

The 2024 devolution white paper also outlines the UK government's plans to simplify local authority funding through reduced competitive bidding and rationalisation of the number of funds available.³⁹ This sits within broader trends in the financing of local government, which has seen significant fluctuations over the last two decades. Between 2010/11 and 2015/16, the Core Spending Power (CSP) of local authorities in England decreased by 25 per cent, largely due to reductions in central government funding (see Figure 3.1).⁴⁰ This pattern was reversed between 2015/16 and 2023/24, with CSP increasing by 4 per cent in real terms.⁴¹ While by no means confined to Covenant services and projects, **these variations in spending power have prompted many local authorities to review their assistance to the AFC and, in some cases, have led to the downscaling or curtailing of related projects.**⁴² Recent resource constraints have also encouraged some local authorities to expand their partnership working with Armed Forces charities and other third sector organisations as a means of addressing resulting support gaps.⁴³

35 Ministry of Defence et al. (2025).

36 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

37 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

38 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024).

39 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024).

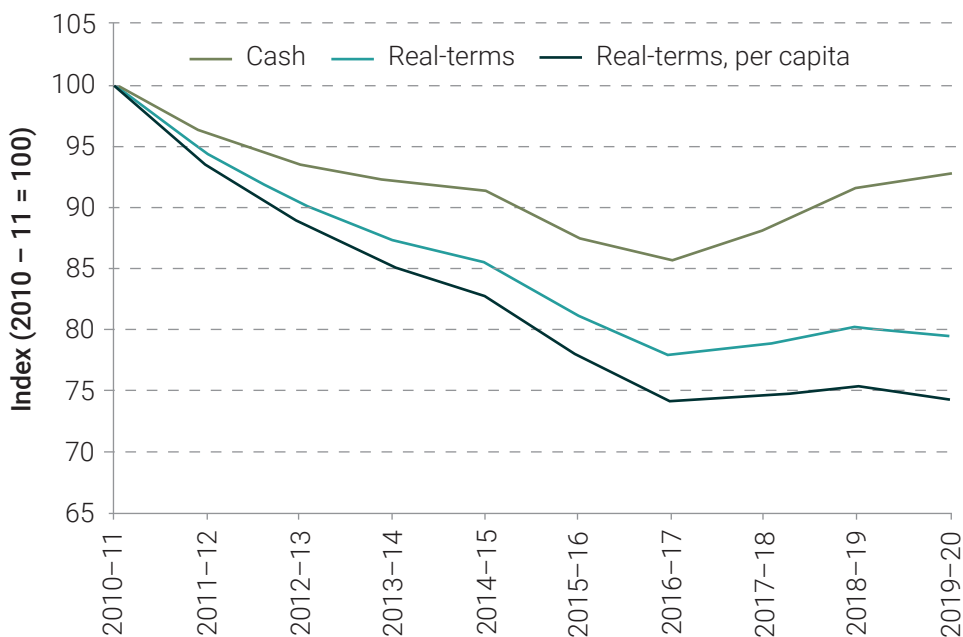
40 National Audit Office (2025). CSP is a measure of available funds via government grants, council tax, and locally retained business rates.

41 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025).

42 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

43 Research interviews: Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

Figure 3.1. English local authority cash and real-terms core funding and per capita funding



Source: Ogden & Phillips (2024).⁴⁴



3.1.3. The ‘cost-of-living crisis’

The ‘cost-of-living crisis’ is a further dynamic that has shaped the Covenant’s delivery. Driven by strong global demand for consumer goods, related supply chain disruption, and rising energy and fuel prices, the UK annual rate of inflation reached a 41-year high in October 2022, while consumer prices increased by a total of 20.8 per cent between May 2021 and May 2024.⁴⁵ Although these trends have impacted society as a whole, participants suggested that **some members of the AFC may have been more vulnerable**

to their effects due to factors associated with military service, such as prevailing psychological and cultural barriers to help-seeking embedded in Armed Forces culture and norms of self-sufficiency.⁴⁶ In response, **many organisations have sought to improve the accessibility of Covenant-related assistance alongside their procedures for identifying members of the AFC.**⁴⁷

The ‘cost-of-living crisis’ was also highlighted as having particular implications for third sector organisations assisting the AFC. Associated **reductions in public spending**

44 2010/11 = 100. Funding includes CSP, above-baseline growth in business rates, and NHS transfers for social care services. Figures adjusted using Gross Domestic Product deflators from OBR Economic and Fiscal Outlook – March 2024. Per-person figures reflect Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimates.

45 UK Parliament (2024).

46 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

47 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

power have led to a decline in financial donations, forcing some charities to reduce the scale of their operations and others to close in their entirety.⁴⁸ This was also suggested to have **increased competition and diminished partnership working among some Armed Forces charities due to a fear of losing or diluting sources of funding.**⁴⁹ A decrease in the number of charity volunteer staff has imposed further constraints, with individuals speculated to be prioritising full-time paid employment over volunteer commitments to offset rising living costs.⁵⁰



3.1.4. The prolonged effects of COVID-19

Participant testimony indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to impact Covenant delivery across multiple areas. First and foremost, participants perceived that **the pausing or termination of many Covenant initiatives during the pandemic has caused a long-term loss of momentum**, with many service providers only recently returning to pre-COVID levels of activity.⁵¹ Yet the pandemic also helped accelerate improvements in other areas. By encouraging both service providers and members of the AFC to adopt a greater range of communication technologies, for example, it was seen as having enhanced the accessibility of many services as well as

having increased the number of channels through which they can be publicised and implemented.⁵² Owing to their success, **many online support services introduced during the pandemic remain in operation.**⁵³

The **continuation of hybrid or fully remote modes of Covenant activity was not always considered to be beneficial.** Some stakeholders commented that this trend has constrained support uptake among certain members of the AFC, especially those with limited digital literacy or restricted access to communication technology.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it was suggested that an associated **decline in in-person engagements has reduced opportunities for developing new partnerships between stakeholders.** The loss of 'side-bar' discussions that previously accompanied Covenant coordination meetings and other fora was noted as being of importance in this respect, with participants observing that such conversations are often less frequent when events are hosted either partly or completely online.⁵⁵



3.1.5. Changing public perceptions of the Armed Forces Community

Public perception of the AFC is another leading variable that has shaped the Covenant's implementation.⁵⁶ In particular, participants

48 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

49 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

50 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

51 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

52 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Local authority (WP2) Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

53 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

54 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

55 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

56 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

proposed that both **the war in Ukraine and recent military operations in Gaza have increased public awareness of the AFC** by demonstrating the importance of the Armed Forces to national security. This, in turn, has reportedly led to greater awareness and more favourable attitudes towards the Covenant and wider efforts to support the AFC, helping to **secure additional buy-in from relevant stakeholders as well as bring about changes in policy and practice** at the local, regional, and national level.⁵⁷ However, other stakeholders contended that there is declining appreciation of and engagement with the AFC among the general public (e.g. due to fewer family connections with the Armed Forces). It is therefore difficult to fully discern the nature of trends in public perceptions and their impact on Covenant delivery.



3.2. The Covenant Duty

The introduction of the Covenant Duty in 2022 represents one of the most significant changes in the external environment for Covenant delivery. By legally requiring select public service providers across health, education, and housing to have 'due regard' for the Covenant, the Duty seeks to increase awareness of the unique needs of the AFC stemming from Service life.⁵⁸ In so doing, the Duty aims to promote more informed decision and policy making, such that members of the AFC are treated fairly when accessing relevant services – an outcome that the UK Government has committed to expanding via the recently announced extension of the

Duty to include all Government departments, Devolved Governments, and a range of additional policy areas.⁵⁹

This section examines the implications of the Duty's initial introduction for Covenant implementation by local authorities and other impacted service providers. It begins by outlining how different stakeholders have perceived and responded to the Duty, before summarising its perceived impact.

3.2.1. Responses to the Covenant Duty

When asked how local authorities and other service providers have reacted to the Covenant Duty's introduction, participants offered a range of responses. For most, the Duty has resulted in a series of steps to ensure that 'due regard' is maintained in practice:

- **Reviewing of existing policy and practice:**

Multiple participants noted that their organisations had reviewed existing policy and practice following the Duty's introduction. This has resulted in tangible change in some instances, including the revision of one local authority's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) to include an explicit focus on veterans and Service children as well as the incorporation of the Duty into another council's impact and equality assessment framework.⁶⁰ It was similarly observed that the Duty has helped to maintain Covenant-related projects and posts that may have otherwise been discontinued.⁶¹ For example, one NHS health board's Armed Forces Covenant and Veteran Healthcare

57 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

58 Ministry of Defence (2020)

59 Armed Forces Covenant (n.d.b.)

60 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

61 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2). Local authority survey.

Collaborative Lead position was reportedly retained with an explicit reference to the Duty in the business case.⁶²

- **Development of new policies and procedures:** The Duty has also given rise to new policies and procedures. New governance frameworks have been implemented in NHS Grampian following the Duty's introduction, for instance, with Covenant-related matters now reported to the Board's Population and Staff Governance Committees on a regular basis.⁶³ Furthermore, evidence suggests that some organisations have leveraged the Duty to extend service provision in areas currently outside its scope. Notably, members of one local authority reportedly cited the Duty when proposing that a veteran status marker be added into its adult social care data management system.⁶⁴
- **Delivery of training and guidance:** Among the most widely stated responses to the Duty has been the delivery (and, in some cases, mandating) of training to ensure that staff have 'due regard' for the Covenant.⁶⁵ This has ranged from using previously available Covenant resources (e.g. the Coventry, Solihull, and Warwickshire Armed Forces Covenant Partnership's e-learning

modules) to hosting bespoke briefings on the Duty's implications for specific departments or teams.⁶⁶

- **Coordination and partnership working:** The Duty is seen by some participants as providing a 'catalyst' for greater collaboration and information-sharing.⁶⁷ This includes intra-organisational collaboration, as relevant departments and teams have made a concerted effort to ensure that all staff have 'due regard' for the Covenant.⁶⁸ There are also indications that the Duty has prompted increased partnership working between organisations currently within its scope.⁶⁹ One local authority based in England disclosed that it joined both the LGA's Armed Forces Covenant Network and the MoD's Local Authority Partnership in direct response to the Duty, and that it is using these forums to identify and share good practice in having 'due regard' for the Covenant.⁷⁰

Despite the proactive steps outlined above, it must be acknowledged that **a small proportion of participants contended that the Duty has placed an extra burden on service providers**, many of which were already experiencing increasing pressures on their capacity due to growing user demand, high staff turnover, and diminishing financial resource.⁷¹ This

62 Research interview: Other public service provider (WP2).

63 Research interview: Other public service provider (WP2).

64 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

65 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2). Local authority survey.

66 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

67 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Private sector organisation (WP2). Local authority survey.

68 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). Local authority survey.

69 Research interviews: Other public service provider (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Private sector organisation (WP2).

70 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

71 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

has reportedly given rise to a perception that **those subject to the Duty have been asked to ‘do more with less’**, with a number of organisations speculated as giving only limited or ‘tokenistic’ regard to the Covenant’s principles as a result.⁷²

The view of the Duty as a source of strain or burden was not shared unanimously. Several participants remarked that they had been able to honour its terms without major upheaval by simply integrating ‘due regard’ into current policies and procedures.⁷³ Others, meanwhile, stated that **the Duty’s introduction had warranted little or no extra resource** because their organisation was already giving sufficient consideration to the Covenant.⁷⁴ In such instances, the Duty was seen as serving to formalise and reaffirm existing practice rather than necessitating additional effort.⁷⁵

3.2.2. Outcomes and impact of the Covenant Duty

The vast majority of participants felt that **the introduction of the Covenant Duty has had a beneficial effect on the Covenant’s implementation**. Among those local authorities who took part in the project’s survey, just under two-thirds (64 per cent) indicated that it has had a ‘positive’ or ‘very positive’ impact on their delivery of the Covenant (see Figure 3.2). This was echoed by interview participants, who identified the following impacts of the Duty:

- **Increased awareness of the Covenant:** In line with the MoD’s originally stated objectives, participants commented that the Duty has increased awareness of the Covenant across relevant health, housing, and education services.⁷⁶ In addition to facilitating more comprehensive and consistent Covenant delivery among these organisations, this growth in institutional knowledge was identified as reducing the extent to which Covenant delivery relies solely on the efforts of dedicated staff (e.g. Armed Forces Champions), as well as mitigating disruption caused by the departure of key personnel.⁷⁷
- **Renewed momentum and authority of the Covenant:** In a similar manner, several participants reported that the Duty has given renewed momentum and authority to the Covenant along with those working to uphold it, fostering greater buy-in from both senior and front-line staff and, in some instances, helping to secure additional resource and personnel.⁷⁸ The renewed momentum for Covenant delivery was also seen as enabling opportunities for new partnerships between service providers and other organisations.⁷⁹
- **Empowerment of the Armed Forces Community:** The Duty was stated to have had observable effects within the AFC itself. Some participants observed

72 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

73 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

74 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2). Local authority survey.

75 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

76 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2);. Local authority survey.

77 Research interviews: Other public service provider (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2).

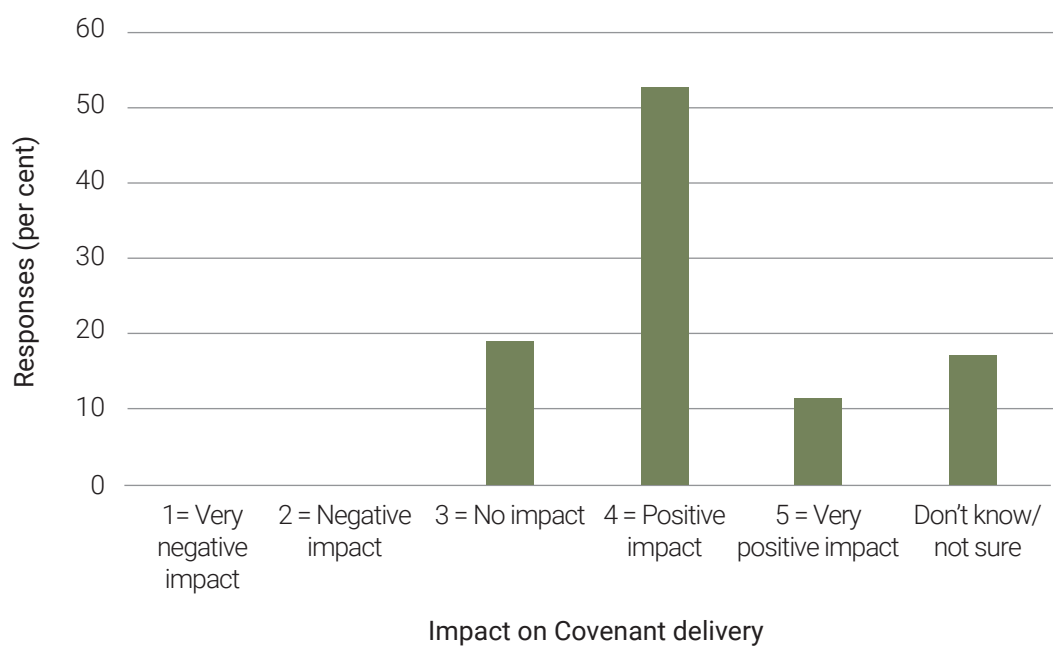
78 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2). Local authority survey.

79 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

that the Duty had increased awareness of the Covenant and associated support, encouraging many to self-identify as members of the AFC and ensuring that this status is recorded by organisations subject to the Duty.⁸⁰ The Duty’s legally binding nature was similarly reported to

have empowered certain individuals within the AFC to actively hold relevant service providers to account with respect to their Covenant commitments – an outcome that has consequently helped to promote more consistent forms of delivery.⁸¹

Figure 3.2. The perceived impact of the Covenant Duty on local authority Covenant delivery



Source: Local authority survey.

80

Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

81

Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

3.3. Chapter summary



Although local and national elections were felt to have had limited impact on support for the Covenant due to existing cross-party approval, participants nevertheless suggested that these events can impact how it is delivered in practice. In addition to a potential pausing or slow-down in government activity during handover and review periods, personnel changes resulting from elections can alter the degree of priority awarded to the Covenant. Local and national elections can also bring about policy changes that have direct implications for the Covenant's scope and administration.



Covenant delivery continues to be affected by changes in the structuring and resourcing of local government. This includes the ongoing extension of devolution across England; this process has and will continue to award many local authorities with greater control over select services and therefore provides an opportunity for the support of the AFC to be integrated into mainstream government processes.



The declining CSP of local authorities has reportedly resulted in a downscaling of many Covenant activities, as well as an increased reliance on third sector partners to address associated support gaps.



The 'cost-of-living crisis' and COVID-19 have led to a contraction of AFC support, driven in part by imposed government restrictions alongside declining availability of financial donations and volunteer staff. Persisting hybrid and remote service delivery after COVID-19 is seen to have had both positive and negative consequences: some see this move as increasing the accessibility of Covenant-related assistance, while others propose that it limits opportunities for partnership working.



The war in Ukraine and recent military operations in Gaza have reportedly increased public awareness of the AFC across England, Scotland, and Wales. This, in turn, may be leading to more favourable attitudes towards the Covenant, helping to secure additional buy-in from relevant stakeholders.



The Covenant Duty is seen as having a beneficial impact on many local authorities' delivery of the Covenant, by generating new momentum and increasing awareness of available support to the AFC. The impact of the Duty has been facilitated by numerous practical responses that range from the revision of existing policies and procedures to the delivery of dedicated training and greater partnership working.







Chapter 4. Structures for Covenant delivery

Local authority boundaries typically provide the basic structure for coordinating Covenant delivery throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. How this manifests in practice, however, can be extremely varied and reflects a number of influences. This includes a local authority area's physical geography, population characteristics, and infrastructure, as well as existing policy frameworks at the devolved nation level. Covenant delivery may be further influenced by council's partner organisations, how their operational

geographies compare, and the type of local government in the case of England.

This chapter outlines the four types of administrative structure – single/unitary authorities; two-tier authorities; clusters and cross-authority collaborations; and combined, county combined and strategic authorities – that guide Covenant delivery, covering their core features, strengths, and limitations. While this research identified consistent patterns within each structure, they reflect and are subject to context-specific factors.

Box 3. Research questions addressed in Chapter 4

- **RQ5:** What local government structures exist for delivery of the Covenant across the four tiers of local government?



4.1.1. Single authorities (England, Scotland, and Wales)

Single-tier (or unitary) forms of local government cover the whole of Scotland and Wales, as well as just over 60 per cent of England's population at the time of writing.⁸² In these contexts, **the delivery of the Covenant is often confined to the single authority area and relies heavily on the work of local partner organisations.** The local council typically convenes a partnership of public, private, and voluntary sector organisations, who work together to support the Covenant's aims. In the East Riding of Yorkshire, for example, the East Riding of Yorkshire Community Covenant Delivery Group was reported as playing a central role in coordinating local delivery efforts.⁸³ Its members include East Riding of Yorkshire Council, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the RBL, the Defence School of Transport, and the Military Assistance Social Hub (M.A.S.H.).⁸⁴ Other identified examples of Covenant delivery via single authority partnerships include Glasgow and Milton Keynes.⁸⁵

While unitary council boundaries often remain the core building blocks for AFC support in Wales, the Welsh Government additionally funds a network of seven regional **Armed Forces Liaison Officers (AFLOs)** to further support the coordination and delivery of the Covenant. Each AFLO covers an area that

corresponds to the boundaries of Wales's regional university health boards – these include varying numbers of local authorities, ranging from one in the case of Powys to six in North Wales.⁸⁶ **The provision of this extra regional architecture was seen as vital for both the sharing of good practice and the coordination of resource allocation across local authority areas.**⁸⁷ Moreover, the alignment of the AFLOs' jurisdictions with those of the Welsh university health boards was acknowledged as providing a focus for greater health board involvement in the Covenant's delivery; for instance, the Cardiff and Vale Armed Forces Partnership is chaired by the local university health board.⁸⁸

Participants emphasised that **a single local authority area approach can allow for a strong focus on strategic planning and direct service delivery within a given context**, providing a manageable geography for partnership working and identifying clear referral pathways for Covenant-related support.⁸⁹ Other reported strengths of this model were clarity of accountability and decision making, the ability to embed Covenant commitments consistently across local services, and the opportunity for more effective inter-organisation collaboration.⁹⁰ This localised and contained structure was also observed as allowing local Covenant stakeholders to respond swiftly to emerging needs or issues.⁹¹

82 Sandford (2025).

83 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Third sector organisation (WP4).

84 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

85 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2).

86 Welsh Government (2024).

87 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

88 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

89 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2).

90 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

91 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

However, it was contended that in some single-tier areas – particularly those that are rural and/or have an extensive geographical footprint – **available resources for implementing the Covenant may be stretched, limiting the potential for economies of scale and coordinated service delivery.**⁹² The East Riding of Yorkshire is a large, predominantly rural unitary authority, for example, where the wide geographic spread of communities and service providers has reportedly made it difficult to ensure consistent support is available to the AFC from delivery partners.⁹³



4.1.2. Two-tier authorities (England)

While the 2024 devolution white paper, *Power and Partnership*, proposes the replacement of existing two-tier modes of local government throughout England, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that some English local authorities and their partners have elected to coordinate the Covenant’s delivery in line with this type of structure, which consists of an overarching county council and constituent district councils. **Implementation of the Covenant in this context is often characterised by a division of responsibilities between the two tiers of authority.**⁹⁴ For example, in Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire County Council has assumed a primarily strategic role as convenor and chair of the county’s Civilian-Military Partnership (CMP), a forum that brings together leading local civilian and military

stakeholders to identify key issues and develop mutually beneficial solutions.⁹⁵ Oxfordshire’s district councils, by contrast, tend to have a more operational function in the form of direct engagement with the AFC and the enactment of policies or activities agreed by the CMP.⁹⁶ In so doing, each district council has reportedly been able to develop an in-depth understanding of their respective communities, providing vital insight that can in turn shape Covenant-related policies and procedures at the county level.⁹⁷

Aligning Covenant delivery with two-tier systems of government was seen to have several benefits. Using the county-level as a basis for coordinating Covenant activities can **help to identify and reduce potential duplication of effort or inconsistencies between individual districts**, thereby facilitating more efficient modes of delivery.⁹⁸ This approach was likewise noted as **reducing the burden on individual district councils**, helping to foster greater buy-in to the Covenant and allowing these authorities to dedicate greater resource to achieving its implementation in practice.⁹⁹

Several challenges were also associated with a two-tier Covenant delivery structure. **Sustaining alignment between individual authorities requires considerable resource, and the outcomes of county-wide initiatives for supporting the AFC can be uneven** if some district councils and their partners lack the same level of engagement or capacity

92 Research interview: Other public service provider (WP2).

93 Research interviews: Other public service provider (WP2), Third sector organisation (WP4).

94 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4). Local authority survey.

95 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

96 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

97 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

98 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

99 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

as others.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, engagement with participants in Oxfordshire indicated that the division of responsibilities between county and district councils may be confusing for members of the AFC (even if it is evident to member authorities and their partners), emphasising the need for clear communication about where the AFC can access Covenant-related assistance and raise concerns.¹⁰¹ Finally, in the context of local government reorganisation and devolution, the structure of two-tier authorities is changing, offering the opportunity for local government to adopt new working arrangements as part of unitary councils or combined authorities.



4.1.3. Clusters and cross-authority collaboration (England and Scotland)

In some areas, local authorities and partner organisations have chosen to work collaboratively across boundaries to deliver the Covenant and wider support to the AFC. Sometimes referred to as ‘clusters’, these arrangements **typically involve neighbouring local authority areas forming partnerships to coordinate Covenant-related activity at a regional level.**¹⁰² Examples of this mode of Covenant implementation include Coventry, Solihull, and Warwickshire as well as Rutland, Leicester, and Leicestershire.¹⁰³ Such partnerships are designed to enable joint working that transcends individual

administrative areas, recognising both the highly mobile nature of the AFC and the fact that many of its members access services that are distributed across multiple local authority boundaries.¹⁰⁴ The focus of cluster arrangements is therefore typically on shared Covenant projects or services that benefit the AFC, with a geographical focus beyond a single administrative area.¹⁰⁵

Mirroring the findings of other research, a range of benefits was associated with implementing the Covenant via a ‘cluster’ model.¹⁰⁶ These included **greater consistency in service provision, access to a broader range of Covenant stakeholders and potential delivery partners, along with an enhanced ability to share information and learn from others.**¹⁰⁷

Although not always strictly aligning with a typical ‘cluster’, collaboration with neighbouring local authorities can result in other beneficial arrangements such as:¹⁰⁸

- A joint Armed Forces Lead Officer (Herefordshire and Worcestershire).
- Information-sharing and sharing service costs (East Renfrewshire, Renfrewshire, and Inverclyde).
- Joint working groups on specific Covenant issues (York City and North Yorkshire).
- Joint needs assessments and associated action plans (Solent region).

100 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

101 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

102 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

103 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). Local authority survey.

104 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). See also Grand-Clement et al. (2021).

105 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

106 See Grand-Clement et al. (2021).

107 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2). Local authority survey.

108 Local authority survey.

Nevertheless, there are several challenges arising from formal ‘cluster’ arrangements.

‘Clusters’ may struggle to ensure similar levels of commitment and resource allocation among their members, with participants indicating that one council is often likely to take the lead unless an equal working relationship is established.¹⁰⁹ **Operational or political differences between members** were likewise reported to be a potential issue, impacting the ability of the ‘cluster’ to both set a shared ambition and roll out common initiatives.¹¹⁰



4.1.4. Combined, county combined, and strategic authority coordination (England)

In contrast to unitary and two-tier forms of local government, combined or county-combined authorities are formal legal entities wherein two or more local authorities work together across council boundaries. These structures emerged in the mid-2010s as part of a wider agenda for greater devolution and exist in the following areas at the time of writing: the East Midlands; York and North Yorkshire; Greater Lincolnshire; Hull and East Yorkshire; Lancashire; Devon and Torbay; the North East; Cambridgeshire and Peterborough; Greater Manchester; Liverpool City Region; South Yorkshire; Tees Valley; West of England; West Midlands; and West Yorkshire. While adhering to a similar structure, the Greater London Authority (GLA) is distinct in maintaining an additional elected assembly; although the GLA works with London boroughs, they are

not constituent parts of its decision making process.¹¹¹ As noted in Chapter 3, the UK Government’s 2024 English devolution white paper, *Power and Partnership*, sets out an ambition to establish ‘strategic authorities’ in all parts of England that do not currently have a combined or county combined authority.¹¹²

This raises the question of whether combined or strategic authorities offer an effective structure for Covenant delivery. The main example of combined authority-based Covenant implementation examined in this research was Greater Manchester. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) was the first combined authority to be established under a 2014 devolution deal, with much of its Covenant implementation centring on the work of a dedicated Armed Forces Covenant Programme Manager.¹¹³ Funded initially via a grant from the AFCFT but now financed jointly by the GMCA and Greater Manchester’s ten constituent councils, the Programme Manager is based in the GMCA’s public sector reform team and acts as a focal point for Covenant-related activity across the city region.¹¹⁴ This includes hosting meetings of the Greater Manchester Armed Forces Strategic Group, during which stakeholders from each of Greater Manchester’s individual councils are invited to coordinate their support for the Covenant and identify potential partnerships to help meet the needs of the AFC.¹¹⁵

109 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

110 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

111 Sandford (2024).

112 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2024).

113 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

114 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). Research focus group (WP4).

115 Research focus group (WP4).



As evidenced by the case of the GMCA, **combined authorities can use their convening role to align Covenant delivery among partner organisations with coterminous boundaries as well as to support the AFC in matters of regional governance.** Stakeholders similarly highlighted the value of obtaining the support of Greater Manchester’s mayor in facilitating the Covenant’s delivery and championing it more widely. Within the context of a combined authority, political leaders such as mayors can play important roles in fostering commitment to the Covenant across the whole authority area.¹¹⁶

Given the ongoing and anticipated changes in England’s devolution landscape, **it is difficult to generalise about the potential of combined authorities as structures for Covenant**

delivery. Among the longer established combined authorities, responses to our survey indicated that the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority plays a part in regional-level collaboration with the Merseyside local authorities, while we similarly found evidence of the early involvement of the East Midlands county-combined authority in Covenant delivery via the creation of a draft strategy.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the exact role of these forms of local government is subject to significant variation and highly dependent on the depth of devolution in a given area. The new county-combined authorities and future strategic authorities are also expected to give rise to further differences in practice, especially as many of these entities currently/will cover more rural areas.

116 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

117 Local authority survey.

4.2. Chapter summary



Table 4.1 presents a summary of the key features, strengths, and limitations of Covenant delivery across the four identified local authority structures.

Figure 4.1. Table of Covenant delivery features across different local government structures

Local authority structure	Covenant delivery features	Example authorities	Strengths	Risks and limitations
Single-level (unitary) authorities (England, Scotland and Wales)	Delivery of the Covenant is often based on the single authority area and relies heavily on the work of local partner organisations	East Riding of Yorkshire, Glasgow, Milton Keynes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for a strong focus on strategic planning Provides clear accountability and decision making mechanisms Enables easy adaptation of service delivery to local needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Single authorities may face greater challenges with conflicting resource demands, limiting the potential for economies of scale and coordinated service delivery
Two-tier authorities (England)	Often features a division of labour between the county council and constituent district councils, with the former focusing on strategic guidance and convening partners, and the latter focusing on operational delivery	Oxfordshire, East Sussex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can help identify potential duplication of effort or inconsistencies between individual districts Can reduce burden on individual district councils and thus foster greater buy-in for Covenant delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustaining alignment between district councils can be resource-intensive Delivery may be inconsistent across districts Structure may be confusing for the AFC, potentially presenting barriers for engagement with relevant support
Clusters and cross-authority collaboration (England and Scotland)	Partnerships involving neighbouring councils aimed at coordination of Covenant-related activity at a regional level	Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire. Rutland, Leicester and Leicestershire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater consistency in service provision at the regional level Improved access to Covenant stakeholders and potential delivery partners, along with an enhanced ability to share information and learn from others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustaining cluster models can be a challenge Commitment from partners may be uneven Operational or political differences may undermine collaboration
Combined, county combined, and strategic authority coordination (England)	Features a more formal collaboration arrangement and joint working between councils	Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, East Midlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combined authorities can use their convening role to align Covenant delivery among partner organisations Can help mainstream support for the AFC into regional governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact on Covenant delivery is highly uncertain, as combined authority structures are subject to significant variation and highly dependent on the depth of devolution

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence





Chapter 5. Covenant delivery mechanisms and partnerships

This chapter builds on the discussion of different local government structures for Covenant implementation by exploring different local, regional, and sub-regional Covenant delivery mechanisms. The mechanisms used by local authorities and their partners depend on a number of contextual factors, such as available resources, existing structures, and degrees of partnership working (see Chapter 7).

To frame the discussion, we employ here the four components of the 'core infrastructure' for Covenant delivery developed as part of previous OCOC research:



Collaboration mechanisms between local councils and relevant partners.



Key individuals, particularly Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Coordinators.



Communication and delivery of training.



Planning and development of a 'vision' for Covenant delivery.

The final section of this chapter discusses the different roles that local and national partners play in supporting Covenant delivery.

Box 4. Research questions addressed in Chapter 5

- **RQ6:** What local, regional, and sub-regional mechanisms exist for delivering the Covenant and wider support to the AFC?
- **RQ9:** How do different local, regional, and sub-regional arrangements, networks, and partnerships?



5.1. Collaboration mechanisms

5.1.1. Strategic and operational Covenant forums

A primary mechanism through which statutory and non-statutory service providers facilitate effective Covenant delivery is what can be collectively termed the ‘strategic and operational Covenant forum’. While such groups exist under a variety of different names (e.g. Covenant Delivery Groups, Covenant Partnership Boards, Firm Bases, CMP Boards), they nevertheless fulfil a common purpose: to assist the coordination (strategic) and/or execution (operational) of the Covenant-related activities within a given area by drawing together relevant stakeholders. These forums can also provide a setting in which new forms of collaboration can be established, with many participants indicating that they use such groups for networking and raising awareness about potential challenges that might be addressed through partnership working.¹¹⁸

The size and structure of these forums was found to vary significantly, often depending on the needs of the local AFC as well as the composition of their memberships.

For example, the East Riding of Yorkshire Community Covenant Delivery Group also includes multiple sub-groups oriented at addressing specific needs across the local authority area.¹¹⁹ The Armed Forces Covenant Group in Moray has adopted a comparable structure, with an evolving portfolio of sub-groups that allow their members to target priority areas based on feedback from the local AFC.¹²⁰ Moreover, it is not uncommon for strategic and operational forums to address a single or select range of Covenant-related issues. The chairing of the Cardiff and Vale Armed Forces Partnership by the local university health board, for example, allows it to focus on mitigating potential disadvantage within the field of health among other areas.¹²¹

5.1.2. Regional Covenant forums

Regional Covenant forums fulfil a similar function to strategic and operational Covenant groups but with a membership spanning an entire regional area. There are a number of reasons why such regional forums might be adopted, including the identification of common needs or requirements among multiple neighbouring local authority areas together with a desire to achieve economies of scale.¹²² An identified example is the

118 Local authority survey.

119 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

120 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

121 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

122 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

North East Armed Forces Forum, which is attended by Covenant stakeholders from 12 local authorities in the North East and some adjacent areas, as well as by representatives from local Armed Forces bases and a selection of military charities. Participants noted that this forum primarily serves as a space to share updates from across the region and discuss opportunities to collaborate.¹²³ A similar regional group, Forces Connect South West, operates in south west England and draws together council representatives from across Cornwall, Devon, Bristol, North Somerset, Plymouth, Somerset, and Wiltshire to share good practice and develop partnerships to facilitate efficient service provision to the AFC across local authority boundaries.¹²⁴

5.1.3. Collaboration with and between third sector organisations

Our research found evidence of consistent engagement by third sector organisations in local and regional collaboration forums, alongside their participation in individual or ad hoc partnerships. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, local and national Armed Forces charity representatives contribute vital expertise to the Covenant's delivery, either as partnership members or through the delivery of presentations and specialist advice.¹²⁵ These organisations also help to shape or enhance service delivery, and facilitate communication between public sector services and members of the AFC.¹²⁶ In addition, research and data

used by statutory bodies on the profile and needs of the AFC is often generated by the third sector (e.g. the OCOC series, the RBL's 'Loneliness and Social Isolation in the Armed Forces Community: Briefing for local authorities').¹²⁷ Several examples of publications as well as wider support provided by the third sector are cited in this report, with further evidence offered in the accompanying case studies document.¹²⁸

5.1.4. Town and parish council engagement

Our research found **limited evidence of town/parish/community council engagement in supporting local delivery of the Covenant.** Indeed, only 12 local authorities that responded to our survey were able to confirm that town/parish/community councils in their respective areas had signed the Covenant.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, in instances where coordination and collaboration were identified, town/parish/community councils were noted as contributing to information-sharing, networking and awareness raising.¹³⁰ Other stated examples of their assisting the Covenant's implementation included:

- Operating 'hubs' or outreach spaces for third sector organisations to provide services to the AFC.
- Undertaking joint Covenant-related initiatives with district and county councils, such as the preparation and

123 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

124 Local authority survey. See also Forces Connect South West (n.d.).

125 Research interviews: Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Private sector organisation (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

126 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

127 Royal British Legion (2018).

128 Bryan et al. (2025).

129 Local authority survey.

130 Local authority survey. Research focus group (WP4).

delivery of Christmas hampers to local Armed Forces bases.

- Providing local authorities and their partners with localised insight into AFC support needs.¹³¹

It should be noted that our research identified **concerted efforts to foster greater town/parish/community council involvement in future Covenant delivery**. A parish councillor was noted as having recently joined a local partnership board in Hertfordshire to represent town and parish councils throughout the county and advocate for others to sign the Covenant.¹³² In a similar manner, one participant disclosed that a recent meeting of their local CMP had been devoted to encouraging town and parish councils to become ‘Armed Forces Friendly’ and sign the Covenant.¹³³



5.2. Key individuals

5.2.1. Armed Forces Champions

A core component of Covenant delivery among local authorities (and, indeed, for a number of other public service providers) is the appointment of an Armed Forces Champion; 100 per cent of survey respondents stated that their local authority has at least one Armed Forces Champion in post.¹³⁴ Those assuming this role in local authority settings are elected members and frequently supported in their

duties by an Armed Forces Lead Officer (see Section 5.2.2).¹³⁵ The main responsibilities of an Armed Forces Champion can include:

- **Providing political leverage and fostering buy-in:** One of the primary roles of Armed Forces Champions is to ensure that local authority decisions, policies, and service provision honour the principles of the Covenant. Appointing an elected cabinet member as an Armed Forces Champion was noted as being particularly beneficial in this respect, given their access to other key decision makers as well as a wide range of local policy forums.¹³⁶
- **Advocating on behalf of the AFC:** The most commonly identified function of an Armed Forces Champion among survey respondents was to raise the profile of the AFC among both local authority staff and the wider community (91 per cent).¹³⁷ In addition to delivering training and circulating Covenant-related resources (see below), this can include ensuring that relevant ceremonial events (e.g. Armed Forces Day, Remembrance) are observed by staff.¹³⁸
- **Fostering communication between different bodies:** Armed Forces Champions were also recognised as providing a channel for information exchange between local (and, in some cases, regional and national) Covenant stakeholders and partner organisations.¹³⁹ In many cases, this

131 Local authority survey.

132 Local authority survey.

133 Research focus group (WP4).

134 Local authority survey.

135 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

136 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

137 Local authority survey.

138 Local authority survey.

139 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

includes attending local Covenant strategic and operational forums but may likewise assume the form of direct engagement with counterparts in other local authorities and public services.¹⁴⁰

It should be noted that while the vast majority of Armed Forces Champions are not involved in individual casework directly, they may nevertheless signpost members of the AFC to relevant council departments or delivery partners should they be made aware of a specific need.¹⁴¹ Reflecting the wide remit of the Armed Forces Champion post, our research also revealed significant variation in terms of role and duties. Crucially, there was widespread consensus among participants that holders of this position are most effective when they bring passion to Covenant delivery and can mobilise partnerships.¹⁴²

5.2.2. Armed Forces Lead Officers

In a similar manner to Armed Forces Champions, the appointment of an Armed Forces Lead Officer was found to be a fundamental mechanism through which most local authorities seek to honour their Covenant duties and deliver wider support to the AFC.¹⁴³ The responsibilities of Armed Forces Lead Officers frequently comprise:

- Acting as the first point of contact for the AFC and distributing Covenant-related casework.¹⁴⁴
- Assisting Armed Forces Champions in raising awareness of the Covenant and needs of the AFC within the local authority.¹⁴⁵
- Facilitating and/or chairing local Covenant strategic and operational forums.¹⁴⁶
- Planning Remembrance events and other awareness-raising and cultural activities.¹⁴⁷
- Supporting and coordinating with the Armed Forces Champion and/or regional coordinators (e.g. AFLOs in Wales).¹⁴⁸

The roles that Armed Forces Lead Officers perform can **vary significantly depending on the availability of resources within a local authority**. Notably, while a small number of Armed Forces Lead Officers take on the role as a dedicated and/or full-time position, most perform it alongside other responsibilities. This finding was reflected in the project survey responses, with only 6 per cent of respondents stating that their Armed Forces Lead Officer had a dedicated role. By contrast, 51 per cent stated that this was a part-time or dual-role

140 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

141 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

142 Research interviews: Other public service provider (WP4); Other public service provider (WP4).

143 Local authority survey.

144 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

145 Local authority survey.

146 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

147 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

148 Local authority survey.

position.¹⁴⁹ Both models can be effective in progressing Covenant delivery:

- Where Armed Forces Lead Officers perform Covenant-related roles alongside other duties, the division of responsibilities was often found to vary greatly.¹⁵⁰ Frequently, Covenant-related duties are added onto an existing role within a local authority and assigned additional resource.¹⁵¹ East Riding of Yorkshire Council, for example, has a Principal Policy Officer, Senior Policy Officer, and a Senior Strategic Director who are based in the corporate policy team and share responsibility for Covenant issues.¹⁵² This structure can help to embed Covenant considerations into organisation-wide policy, ensuring that key decisions across non-Covenant areas take the needs of the AFC into account.¹⁵³
- In cases where available funding and resource permit, the appointment of a dedicated Armed Forces Lead Officer can provide a focal point for the expansion of existing support for the AFC. Some local areas, for example, stated that having a dedicated Armed Forces Lead Officer can aid the development of new Covenant-related resources, the delivery of further training to local authority staff, and the broadening of engagement with potential statutory and non-statutory partners.¹⁵⁴

Our research also found that a number of local authorities have appointed designated Armed Forces 'Leads' or 'Departmental Champions' in key departments. These roles may receive additional training to serve as departmental experts, providing guidance to front-line staff about complex cases.



5.3. Communication and delivery of training

5.3.1. Staff training

The provision of Covenant-related training is another mechanism that has been leveraged by many statutory and non-statutory service providers to help raise awareness of the Covenant, the AFC, and the potential impacts of Service life. Among the local authorities that responded to our survey, 65 per cent stated that they currently deliver training to their staff on the Covenant and/or the needs of the AFC.¹⁵⁵ Such training was noted as taking a variety of different forms, **ranging from dedicated modules as part of wider induction processes to optional e-learning packages that are available for all public and third sector staff.**¹⁵⁶ Participants also stressed that Covenant-related training can be ad hoc or informal in nature (with colleagues sharing key pieces of information and lessons learned), as well as tailored to focus on specific areas of need.¹⁵⁷ Cardiff Council has developed training

149 Local authority survey. The remaining 43 per cent of survey respondents indicated some variation of the options offered. For example, maintaining a dedicated part-time Covenant Coordinator.

150 Local authority survey.

151 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

152 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

153 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP4).

154 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

155 Local authority survey.

156 Local authority survey.

157 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

that focuses specifically on the Covenant Duty, for instance, while one Scottish local authority was noted as having produced a training resource to support more accurate information gathering on the local AFC.¹⁵⁸

5.3.2. Dedicated Covenant delivery resources (e.g. Covenant guides, toolkits, etc.)

Alongside training resources, many service providers have developed **additional resources to enhance Covenant delivery and wider service provision to the AFC.**¹⁵⁹ These often take the form of publicly available information booklets, which outline relevant local authority policies and procedures along with services provided by statutory and non-statutory partners.¹⁶⁰ For example, Argyll and Bute Council has produced two 'Welcome Booklets' for members of the AFC that have recently moved to the area, signposting the local forms of assistance that are available.¹⁶¹ Circulating staff newsletters and maintaining Covenant webpages were also found to be common practice, which together serve to share information on a wealth of matters, such as relevant contacts and departments together with forms of specialist service provision.¹⁶² Alongside external resources, some local and national authorities (e.g. Milton Keynes) operate directories for Armed Forces support.¹⁶³



5.4. Planning and developing a 'vision' for Covenant delivery

5.4.1. Needs assessments and research

To support the strategic coordination and planning of Covenant-related activity, many local authorities and their partners were found to have conducted **formal needs assessments of the AFC or equivalent forms of research.**

This was evidenced in the project's survey, with approximately one-third of respondents stating that they have taken active steps towards profiling and understanding the needs of local AFC members.¹⁶⁴ **The nature, focus, and formality of these assessments can vary,** often reflecting differences in available resource alongside the availability of data and expertise.¹⁶⁵ Our research similarly identified differences in the frequency with which these activities are performed; most survey respondents noted that they conduct formal needs assessments every two to four years, although this may be less frequent across other local authority areas since the release of the England and Wales Census in 2021 and the Scotland Census in 2022.¹⁶⁶

158 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

159 Local authority survey.

160 See Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2023).

161 Local authority survey.

162 Local authority survey.

163 Surveyed local authorities mentioned making use of commissioned research papers and reports, the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, FIMT's Covenant toolkit, Census data, Service Pupil Premium data, regular e-bulletins from government departments such as the OVA, Forces News, the Integrated Care Bulletin, as well as local research and information shared at partnerships and collaboration forums.

164 Local authority survey.

165 Local authority survey.

166 Local authority survey.



5.4.2. Action plans and road maps

The use of Covenant action plans or road maps appears to be relatively common among local authorities and wider Covenant partnerships, with 57 per cent of survey respondents noting that they use an equivalent resource.¹⁶⁷ As their names imply, these documents are designed to outline how stakeholders aim to deliver the Covenant and additional services to the AFC within a given area and time frame.¹⁶⁸ While the precise content tends to vary, they will often include specific goals relating to priority activities such as awareness raising, accountability, evaluation and monitoring, and future financial investment.¹⁶⁹

In April 2025, the GMCA released an Armed Forces Covenant Roadmap that sets out its ambition to make the city region the best

place in the UK for former and current Service personnel to live.¹⁷⁰ Spanning a five-year period and reviewed on a rolling annual basis, it outlines a series of objectives to be achieved through local government partnerships across multiple thematic areas (health, employment, skills and housing).¹⁷¹ The Cardiff and Vale Armed Forces Partnership maintains a similar action plan with rolling three-monthly updates.¹⁷²

Despite good practice in this area, it was also observed that Covenant planning tends to be output- rather than outcome-focused, which can result in inconsistent measurement of impact and de-prioritisation of monitoring and evaluation activity. This limits our ability to discern what ‘works’ in different local areas since tangible evidence of impact is often limited or anecdotal.

¹⁶⁷ Local authority survey.

¹⁶⁸ Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4). Local authority survey.

¹⁶⁹ Local authority survey.

¹⁷⁰ See Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2025).

¹⁷¹ Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

¹⁷² Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

5.5. Chapter summary



Strategic coordination forums, including various collaborative groups and partnership boards, play a critical role in linking local authorities with a wide range of partners. These forums facilitate information-sharing, networking, and service improvement for the AFC.



Key individuals, such as Armed Forces Champions and Lead Officers, are instrumental in advocating for the AFC, coordinating activities and ensuring that services align with Covenant commitments. The effectiveness of these roles depends on the individuals' clarity of responsibilities, available resource, and dedication



Covenant stakeholders benefit from conducting detailed needs assessments and developing strategic action plans. These efforts guide the prioritisation of resources and activities, ensuring that the delivery of the Covenant is both strategic and responsive to the evolving needs of the AFC.



Partnerships with local and national organisations are essential for extending the reach and impact of Covenant delivery. These partners provide specialist services, coordinate networks, and facilitate referrals, fostering close ties with local authorities to uphold Covenant commitments.







Chapter 6. Progress in Covenant delivery

Recognising the changing landscape of Covenant-related practices and mechanisms of delivery, this chapter examines what progress has been achieved in the Covenant's implementation, primarily reflecting local authorities' and other stakeholders' perceptions of progress during the last five years.

In particular, the chapter addresses progress in relation to:

- The extent to which local authorities and other service providers consider the AFC

and potential areas of disadvantage, including in policy and processes.

- Delivery of effective support to the AFC, including through information-sharing, sign-posting, and clear referral pathways.
- Streamlining and optimisation of Covenant delivery, including effective partnership working, awareness of the Covenant among local authority staff and service providers, and a shared understanding of Covenant-related priorities in a local authority area.

Box 5. Research questions addressed in Chapter 6

- **RQ7:** What national and local data sources are available to local authorities to support delivery of the Covenant?
- **RQ8:** What progress has been made in delivery of the Covenant and what have been the key enablers and barriers of this progress?

The analysis presented in this chapter is based on data from the project's survey of local authorities, as well as case studies and interviews with national and regional stakeholders. Comparisons with the findings of previous OCOC surveys illustrate potential areas of progress where relevant; however, as the surveys do not follow a longitudinal approach (i.e. responses are not linked and different local authorities may have participated in previous OCOC surveys), these comparisons should be interpreted with caution.



6.1. Evidence of progress achieved

6.1.1. Mitigating disadvantage through policy and understanding of the AFC

The revision or creation of policies is a key mechanism through which local authorities contribute to reducing disadvantage among the AFC. This requires consistent consideration of the AFC and the Covenant, as well as a robust understanding of potential areas of disadvantage.

It is challenging to measure policy revision as a Covenant outcome because many existing policies may already be fit for purpose and not require amendment. However, **there are indications that progress is being achieved in updating policies and related procedures to account for potential AFC disadvantage.**¹⁷³ Several local authorities offered specific

examples of progress achieved in this area: Vale of Glamorgan Council, for instance, has reportedly established an internal forum with the explicit purpose of reviewing its policies to ensure that veterans' needs are taken into active consideration.¹⁷⁴ Multiple councils similarly stated that they had revised their residency requirements for members of the AFC to access council services, most notably social housing. Acknowledging the December 2024 regulation that exempts all UK Armed Forces veterans from local connection tests for social housing by English councils, there is nevertheless evidence that such policy revisions may be improving waiting times among the AFC.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, the percentage of the Service personnel and their families on waiting lists that were allocated social housing within 6 months increased from 52.5 per cent in 2020/21 to 69.1 per cent in 2022/23.¹⁷⁶

Both survey respondents and interviewees also reported improvements in understanding and awareness of the AFC.¹⁷⁷ Notably, 81 per cent of survey respondents rated their understanding of areas and sources of potential disadvantage to AFC as either 'good' or 'very good', while 70 per cent said there has been 'moderate' or 'significant' progress in identifying relevant drivers of disadvantage.¹⁷⁸ The Covenant Duty was seen as a key enabler in this context, encouraging local authorities and other statutory actors to take a more proactive approach in considering possible vulnerabilities among the AFC.¹⁷⁹ However, there are several caveats to these findings. In particular, participants

173 Local authority survey. Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

174 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

175 Local authority survey.

176 Ministry of Defence (2024).

177 Local authority survey. Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

178 Local authority survey.

179 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1).

emphasised that the breadth and depth of institutional knowledge regarding disadvantage can vary dramatically between council departments as well as among public service providers, with those currently not subject to the Covenant Duty often noted as exhibiting a less comprehensive understanding.¹⁸⁰

The reported progress in local authorities’ understanding of potential disadvantage among the AFC appears to be matched by its consideration by local authority staff:

83 per cent of survey respondents proposed that council members consider the needs of the AFC to a ‘moderate’ or ‘significant’ extent and 79 per cent reported that the levels of consistency with which this consideration is given had improved by a ‘moderate’ to ‘large’ extent in the last five years. This trend extends to the awarding of *special* consideration, with 67 per cent of local authority survey respondents indicating that they were ‘moderately’ or ‘significantly’ confident that front-line staff granted special consideration to members of the AFC when appropriate.¹⁸¹ That said, a number of participants contended that the awarding of special consideration often remains informal and at the discretion of individual front-line staff.¹⁸²

There was significantly less confidence among local authorities about the extent to which the support needs of the AFC are considered by other service providers subject to the Covenant Duty. Just under one-third of survey respondents considered that both

GPs and maintained schools award active consideration only to a ‘small extent’ or ‘not at all’.¹⁸³ This mirrors findings from the MOD’s Covenant Duty impact survey, which showed that many state-funded schools and colleges have little or no knowledge of the Covenant and their legal duty.¹⁸⁴ The turnover of key staff, uncertainty surrounding the role and scope of the Covenant, limited communications and awareness raising activities, and a lack of mandated training were speculated to be among the key reasons for this trend.¹⁸⁵

We also found mixed evidence about key enabling activities and outputs that allow local authorities and service providers to consider AFC disadvantage and support needs consistently:



Identification of AFC members at first point of access to a service:

Data collected in the study suggests that there has been moderate progress in identifying the AFC. Among those local authorities that responded to the survey, 62 per cent stated that they were ‘moderately’ or ‘significantly’ confident that this action was being performed by front-line staff on a regular basis.¹⁸⁶ While the practices and procedures employed by councils to support the identification of the AFC vary, progress in achieving this outcome was often associated with the introduction of specialist training and

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Local authority survey.

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Local authority survey.

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Local authority survey.

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Local authority survey.

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Ministry of Defence (2024).

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Local authority survey. Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

186

Local authority survey.

streamlining ‘asking the question’ into service providers’ systems.¹⁸⁷ Similar practices were observed among other public service providers. Milton Keynes Hospital, for example, has now introduced this process after creating the relevant fields in its computer system, while the Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board has created a referral process for AFC patients with the support of the Soldiers’, Sailors’ and Airmen’s Families Association (SSAFA).¹⁸⁸ In spite of this apparent progress, however, one-third of survey respondents stated that they were ‘not at all’ or ‘marginally’ assured that members of the AFC are routinely identified by local authority front-line staff.¹⁸⁹ Choosing not to mandate ‘asking the question’ was noted as a key determinant in this regard, with some participants suggesting that doing so would either place additional burden on already over-stretched teams or be unnecessary owing to the small numbers of Armed Forces personnel or veterans in their jurisdictions.¹⁹⁰ Difficulties in updating data recording systems and procedures to incorporate AFC status were reported as additional barriers.¹⁹¹



Access to information on the characteristics and needs of the

AFC: We found uneven evidence of improvements in the data landscape supporting the identification of disadvantage within the AFC. On the one hand, stakeholders proposed that the availability of relevant data has improved in recent years. This was attributed primarily to the 2021 England and Wales Census, the 2022 Scotland Census, the 2022 Veterans Survey, improved use of JSNAs and comparable regional evaluations (e.g. Population Needs Assessments in Wales and Joint Needs Assessments in Scotland), and the development of new data resources (e.g. Northumbria University’s Map of Need).¹⁹² Yet there are also indications that many local authorities continue to rely on informal information sources, such as networking forums and ad hoc needs assessments, rather than undertaking or utilising formal research. This presents an obvious risk of providing an inconsistent or skewed picture of support needs among the AFC and therefore an unsuitable foundation from which to develop appropriate Covenant-related support.¹⁹³

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- 187 Local authority survey.
 - 188 Research interview: Other public service provider (WP2).
 - 189 Local authority survey.
 - 190 Local authority survey.
 - 191 Research interviews: Other public service provider (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2).
 - 192 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).
 - 193 Local authority survey. Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4).



Identification of potential areas and drivers of disadvantage among the AFC:

Those who participated in our research highlighted both progress and a series of outstanding gaps in their understanding of potential areas and drivers of disadvantage among the AFC.¹⁹⁴ While some statutory and non-statutory services have improved formal processes to understand local needs, many continue to struggle with restrictions on data quality and availability as well as a reliance on informal data- and information-sharing.¹⁹⁵ Participants also reported difficulties in clearly distinguishing support needs that are unique to the AFC from those experienced by the general population, which further restricts the ability to map distinct sources of disadvantage.¹⁹⁶

6.1.2. Delivery of effective support to the Armed Forces Community

When asked about the availability and accessibility of specialist services for the AFC in their local authority, 70 per cent of survey respondents proposed that 'moderate' to 'large' progress has been made in this area over the last five years.¹⁹⁷ This positive perception was shared by a number of

interviewees, who reported an increase in practices that address the unique sources of disadvantage facing the AFC.¹⁹⁸

Nevertheless, **the survey indicated varying levels of confidence among local authorities that the AFC is effectively supported in areas where disadvantage may be faced:**

55 per cent reported 'moderate confidence' in this respect, while 19 per cent expressed only 'limited confidence'.¹⁹⁹ In contrast, only 15 per cent suggested that current practices meet the needs of the AFC to a 'large extent'.²⁰⁰ Fragmentation of the support landscape appears to be a leading barrier to effective service provision, with many survey respondents highlighting the need for greater consistency in service delivery, both within and among front-line staff teams as well as different statutory service providers.²⁰¹

The above challenges were linked to a number of factors, most notably uneven progress in the strengthening of referral pathways and limited improvements in the accessibility of Covenant-related information:

- On the one hand, **respondents noted that the Covenant has catalysed work to enhance the effectiveness of formal and informal referral pathways.** Many local areas reported an increase in the number of in-person activities through which the AFC can be sign-posted and informed

194 Local authority survey. Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

195 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

196 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1).

197 Local authority survey.

198 Local authority survey. Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

199 Local authority survey.

200 Local authority survey.

201 Local authority survey.

about available support (e.g. drop-in sessions, breakfast clubs, word of mouth, peer support),²⁰² while others indicated that efforts have been made to improve the accessibility of information on formal support channels that was previously more siloed or hard to find.²⁰³ Improved awareness of the unique needs of the AFC among service providers was also linked to more robust and effective referral pathways – a finding reflected in the 2024 MoD Covenant Legal Duty survey, which found a 672 per cent increase in referrals among UK Armed Forces veterans under Op RESTORE (rising from 50 referrals in 2019/20 to 386 referrals in 2023/24).²⁰⁴

- On the other hand, **there was a sense among both survey and interview participants that many members of the AFC remain unaware of the breadth of services available to them.** This was attributed in part to the fact that many resources remain hard to locate or are otherwise poorly publicised, reinforcing a reliance on information-sharing via personal contacts and word-of-mouth. For example, we found that the identity and contact details of Armed Forces Champions are not listed consistently on local authority websites; while compilations

of personnel contacts exist elsewhere (e.g. the 2024 Veterans Scotland Information Booklet), these sources may have a limited geographic scope and they require frequent updates.²⁰⁵ It is also important to note that AFC engagement with Covenant-related local authority services often only occurs in instances of need. This reactive and time-sensitive approach can limit the accessibility and uptake of support, with many members of the AFC only beginning to explore and engage with available services at the point of crisis.²⁰⁶ As a result, stakeholders highlighted the need for improving accessibility to formal information about available support.²⁰⁷

Finally, stakeholders stressed that there are **prevailing misconceptions of the Covenant and associated support among the AFC.**²⁰⁸

It was perceived that there has been limited progress in addressing this issue, with over one-third of respondents reporting either ‘no’ or ‘limited’ observed improvement over the last five years.²⁰⁹ The persistence of these misconceptions has reportedly presented a number of barriers to Covenant implementation, causing confusion amongst those seeking support and, in some cases, leading to confrontation with service

202 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP4).

203 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

204 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

205 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP1).

206 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

207 Research interviews: Other public service provider (WP4); Third sector organisation (WP4); Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

208 Local authority survey. Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2). Research focus group (WP4).

209 Local authority survey.

providers.²¹⁰ This may place an additional burden on front-line staff, who must inform and guide members of the AFC about what the Covenant can and cannot offer them, as well as potentially delaying service access or delivery as individuals must be redirected elsewhere.²¹¹

6.1.3. Streamlining and optimising Covenant delivery

There are several enabling outcomes that support the mitigation of disadvantage faced by the AFC and the delivery of associated support:



Awareness of the Covenant among local authority staff, public service providers, and other stakeholders.



Understanding what constitutes good practice in Covenant implementation and support delivery.



A shared understanding of priorities among relevant local stakeholders for preventing, addressing or mitigating AFC disadvantage.

Our research suggests that **awareness of the Covenant is increasing among both local authority staff and other statutory service providers.**²¹² Of those who responded to the survey, 79 per cent believed that the aims of the Covenant are now understood by those delivering council services to a 'moderate' or 'large extent', with over 80 per cent reporting

'moderate' to 'large' progress in this area since 2020.²¹³ The Covenant Duty was reported as contributing significantly to this trend, alongside various activities delivered by local authority Armed Forces Champions and Lead Officers, including:

- Covenant training and peer-to-peer learning among council members.²¹⁴
- Sharing national Covenant guidance and toolkits, such as the MoD's refreshed Covenant delivery toolkit and FiMT's Armed Forces Covenant toolkit.²¹⁵
- Targeted education and awareness-raising activities (e.g. newsletters, Remembrance ceremonies, webpages, 'away days' to local Armed Forces bases).²¹⁶

Nevertheless, we registered a degree of uncertainty surrounding the role and impact of the Covenant in some local authorities;²¹⁷ several survey respondents described the language of the Covenant as 'confusing', while others commented that varying interpretations of 'due regard' continue to exist among local authorities and their partners.²¹⁸ Increasing the frequency of Covenant-related training delivery, expanding national Covenant guidance, and establishing dedicated Lead Officer posts were often identified as potential means through which these issues could be addressed.²¹⁹

210 Local authority survey. Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2).

211 Local authority survey. Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2).

212 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

213 Local authority survey. Research interviews: Local authority (WP2) Third sector organisation (WP2).

214 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

215 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP1). Shared Intelligence & FiMT (2025).

216 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). Local authority survey.

217 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2). Research focus groups (WP4).

218 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2).

219 Local authority survey.

In relation to understanding what constitutes good practice in Covenant implementation, our findings indicate that **there is a substantial level of uncertainty in some local authority areas about how to deliver the Covenant effectively.** One-third of survey respondents proposed that front-line staff either have ‘no’ or ‘limited’ sense of what good Covenant delivery looks like.²²⁰ Mirroring the identified gaps in Covenant awareness among council staff, many local authorities believed that better national guidance was needed to improve progress in this area.²²¹ Others, by contrast, proposed **that greater communication and mutual learning between public service providers was needed to foster improved Covenant implementation.**²²² While most survey participants believed that they either had ‘good’ or ‘very good’ access to effective communication channels with partners (55 and 21 per cent, respectively), some councils reported having no internal forums for discussing and planning Covenant-related activities, with individuals and departments reportedly working in a more siloed or informal manner.²²³ Some local authorities also disclosed faltering attempts to share best practice and coordinate Covenant delivery at a regional and national level owing to difficulties establishing reliable lines of communication between local authority Armed Forces Champions.²²⁴

The survey also indicated that **inconsistent adoption of strategic planning for Covenant delivery may be limiting understanding of shared priorities and the allocation of sources for local Covenant delivery.** While action plans were described by many participants as an effective mechanism for cohering and coordinating Covenant-related activity, only 43 per cent of survey respondents stated that they had an action plan or similar document in place.²²⁵ Correspondingly, about a quarter of survey respondents believed ‘to a small extent’ or ‘not at all’ that there was a shared understanding of Covenant delivery priorities in their local authority area.²²⁶ However, the research team also encountered numerous examples of efforts to formalise and publicise strategic targets for the Covenant’s delivery. The GMCA, for example, has created a roadmap that lists key deliverables and commitments over the next five years across leading thematic areas (see Chapter 5), while the East Riding’s Armed Forces Covenant Delivery Group has published an action plan that is regularly reviewed to capture the evolving needs of the AFC and the steps needed to meet them.²²⁷

220 Local authority survey.

221 Local authority survey. Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2)

222 Local authority survey.

223 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

224 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

225 Local authority survey. Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Private sector organisation (WP2).

226 Local authority survey.

227 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

6.2. Chapter summary



Our research indicates that the delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant has seen marked advancements in some areas but continues to be hindered by various challenges in others.



Local authorities have improved their understanding of the AFC's needs through initiatives such as the Covenant Duty as well as targeted data collection and needs assessments. Efforts to formalise policies have enhanced the ability to address AFC-specific disadvantage. However, gaps in data quality and availability, along with difficulties in distinguishing AFC-specific needs from broader societal issues, require further attention.



Specialist AFC support services, such as veteran-supported housing and mental health support, are seen as having improved in recent years. However, fragmentation of the support landscape and accessibility remain a challenge, in part due to inconsistent formal data sharing and communication with the AFC (e.g. through council websites) and over-reliance on informal information-sharing through word of mouth.



Stakeholders believe that awareness of the Covenant among AFC members remains poor, with misconceptions about its scope creating confusion and additional burdens on front-line staff. Many AFC members are believed to be unaware of the breadth of available local services, often seeking support only during moments of crisis.



There is mixed evidence about progress in 'enabling' Covenant outcomes, including awareness of the Covenant among local authority staff and service providers, understanding of what 'good practice' in Covenant delivery looks like, and shared understanding of priorities for local Covenant implementation. This may be linked to a perceived need for expanded national Covenant guidance as well as a need in some local areas to improve strategic planning and the efficacy of collaboration mechanisms.







Chapter 7. Enablers, barriers, and the role of partners in Covenant delivery

The chapter discusses the cross-cutting enablers and barriers that were identified by participants as impacting both current and potential future efforts to achieve progress in the Covenant's implementation. As

partnership working was identified as one of the key enablers of progress, the chapter also discusses the role of local and national partners in the context of local Covenant delivery.

Box 6. Research questions addressed in Chapter 7

- **RQ8:** What progress has been made in delivery of the Covenant and what have been the key enablers and barriers of this progress?
- **RQ3:** What are the roles of local and national partners in delivery of the Covenant?
- **RQ4:** What key areas of wider support are provided by local and national partners alongside statutory authorities to deliver collective effect for the AFC?



7.1. Cross-cutting barriers to Covenant delivery

As discussed in the previous chapter, while available evidence suggests that Covenant delivery has improved in some areas, there are challenges in achieving progress in others. Stakeholders identified five particular barriers that may be contributing to this trend among both local authorities and their partners:



Resource limitations



Conflicting pressures on local authorities



High staff turnover and other human resource challenges



Data availability and quality



Perceived gaps in national guidance and accountability mechanisms.

The most substantial barrier identified by interviewees and survey respondents was funding and resource availability.²²⁸ Over 50 per cent of survey respondents reported restricted funds to be a 'significant' barrier to Covenant delivery.²²⁹ While resource limitations have anecdotally been a source of concern for many local areas since the Covenant's inception, these apprehensions have reportedly heightened in recent years.²³⁰ Due to the non-prescriptive nature of the Covenant's drafting, the UK government has not allocated

specific resources to enhance service delivery, resulting in many statutory service providers feeling that the Covenant has been imposed onto them without the provision of sufficient resource to achieve its aims.²³¹ Reflecting on the implementation of the Covenant Duty, one respondent noted that councils have 'been asked to do more than ever, with less than ever' (see Chapter 3).²³²

Resource-related challenges have various implications for the scale and scope of Covenant-related activities. They may be constraining local areas' ability to adopt good practice, refine their local delivery frameworks, deliver individual activities (e.g. Covenant training) at sufficient scale to achieve sustainable effect, as well as monitor and evaluate Covenant delivery.²³³ Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 3, some third sector organisations have also reported resourcing challenges (e.g. due to declining donations and availability of volunteers). This signals that resource limitations may also be constraining partnership working and the ability of partners to effectively support Covenant delivery.

In conjunction with growing resource constraints, **many statutory and non-statutory service providers face competing priorities which can constrain their ability to advance Covenant delivery.** With service providers operating under constrained budgets, many have had to weigh Covenant-related initiatives and activities against other requirements, which has resulted in individual initiatives

228 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4); Other public service provider (WP4).

229 Local authority survey.

230 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

231 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1), National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

232 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP1).

233 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

being downscaled or curtailed.²³⁴ Similarly, some organisations are experiencing a ‘race to the bottom’, focusing on top priorities rather than mitigating disadvantage.²³⁵ Several service providers correspondingly expressed concern that dedicated Covenant-related posts (e.g. Armed Forces Lead Officers) could be de-prioritised and their responsibilities assigned to another role.

Many local areas are also experiencing problems relating to human resources, particularly in the form of high turnover of front-line staff. This presents a particular challenge as many local areas rely on the expertise, critical knowledge, and commitment of highly motivated individuals to drive Covenant delivery forward (see Section 7.2). High staff turnover can also divert resources from other Covenant activities due to the time and resource required to train and upskill new starters.²³⁶ As a result of these dynamics, some participants felt that the number of people working explicitly on the Covenant is getting smaller, with many individuals leaving and not being replaced.²³⁷

Data-related constraints represent another significant barrier identified by many local areas. Previous chapters have discussed that many stakeholders believe understanding of the AFC and local disadvantage has improved, particularly since the release of the England and Wales Census in 2021, the

Scotland Census in 2022, and the maturing of local needs assessment and other data gathering processes. Nevertheless, others continue to stress the currently limited availability and granularity of both national and local data on the AFC as a key challenge to Covenant delivery. Indeed, 57 per cent of survey respondents reported a lack of data, information or research as a ‘moderate’ to ‘significant’ barrier, particularly for planning, prioritisation and developing business cases for new services.²³⁸

Data-related barriers appear to reflect several different challenges relating to how data is captured and utilised in support of Covenant delivery. Firstly, stakeholders have identified issues in distilling national-level data into localised insights, since differing contexts can limit the applicability of national findings to more localised cases.²³⁹ There may also be underlying issues, including constrained local capacity and capability to exploit national datasets but also the structure and accessibility of the data itself. Secondly, some participants noted that data can be siloed across Covenant partners and the wider support landscape: a problem that is often compounded by poor information-sharing as well as data protection regulations.²⁴⁰ This can result in a fragmented data landscape and lead to duplication of effort in the capturing and analysis of key evidence. Thirdly, the inherently mobile nature of serving Armed Forces

234 Local authority survey.

235 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Other public service provider (WP2).

236 Local authority survey. Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

237 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP1).

238 Local authority survey.

239 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

240 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

personnel and their families can present a challenge to capturing longitudinal change and evidence progress at the local level.²⁴¹

Lastly, while the scope of the Covenant Duty is set – and designed to evolve with its planned extension (see Chapter 3) – the study identified frustration among some stakeholders over the **limited nature of current accountability mechanisms within the Covenant**.²⁴²

Relatedly, several participants expressed a belief that current guidance from national government is too limited and therefore places a significant burden on local service providers to interpret the Covenant and ensure its effective implementation.²⁴³ Indeed, many local authorities expressed a desire for clearer guidance from the MoD about the Covenant’s delivery and for other government departments (e.g. the Department for Education) to integrate Covenant principles more clearly into their own policies and processes.²⁴⁴



7.2. Cross-cutting enablers of Covenant delivery

Noting the barriers for Covenant delivery described above, several cross-cutting factors were seen as having advanced recent progress. These are not necessarily practices that local authorities can implement but rather external factors that provide a permissive or constraining environment for work relating to the Covenant. Apart from the effects of the Covenant Duty, which are discussed in Chapter

3, key enablers highlighted by stakeholders include access to human resources and expertise, historic funding, and the ability to leverage economies of scale through collaboration mechanisms.

Engagement with local authorities consistently revealed that Covenant delivery is driven in many areas by the work of committed and motivated individuals (e.g. Armed Forces Champions and Lead Officers) who have developed extensive expertise, knowledge, and stakeholder networks over time. Ensuring resilience in the resourcing of Covenant-related activities is therefore critical in many local areas, although there is also a risk of individuals becoming ‘single points of failure’. As discussed later in this report, many non-statutory partners provide additional expertise in relation to AFC support and Covenant delivery, which can help to augment capability that local authorities are able to maintain internally.

Given the significant resourcing challenges discussed in the previous section, **funding was identified by multiple local councils as a key enabler of supporting and progressing delivery of the Covenant**.²⁴⁵ In several instances, this funding allowed local authorities to establish an initial basis and build early momentum that has now become self-sustaining through building institutional awareness and key partnerships. It was also reported to help add authority and credibility to Covenant activity, facilitating a wider culture of change.²⁴⁶

241 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

242 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP1); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Third sector organisation (WP4).

243 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP1); Third sector organisation (WP4).

244 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP1).

245 Local authority survey.

246 Local authority survey.



Lastly, **the majority of surveyed local authorities considered collaboration mechanisms (e.g. forums and partnerships) to be ‘important’ or ‘very important’ enablers for achieving Covenant outcomes.**²⁴⁷ At its most basic, these forms of partnership working were seen as allowing stakeholders to pool resources and achieve economies of scale in the service of Covenant delivery – something that is increasingly important and arguably necessary in a constrained resource environment. Additionally, collaboration mechanisms were considered to be a vehicle for sharing good practice, information, and data as well as coordinating Covenant delivery over larger geographical areas.²⁴⁸ Partnership working can further build resilience in local support networks and can serve to mitigate unanticipated events or risks such as COVID-19.²⁴⁹ However, some respondents noted that such forms of collaboration often rely on pre-existing relationships (beyond the scope of the Covenant), may be formed organically over

time, and are often personality-dependent, making them difficult to replicate or retain (e.g. amidst staff turnover).²⁵⁰



7.3. The role of local and national partners

Further to partnership working between local authorities, the work of local and national partners represents a substantial enabler of Covenant delivery. These partners include, but are not limited to, third and private sector actors, other public service providers (e.g. integrated care or health boards, emergency services), higher education and research establishments, and national government departments or offices (e.g. the MoD, the OVA).²⁵¹ Through formal partnerships and collaboration networks, as well as direct engagement, such partners fulfil a range of roles in support of Covenant-related progress as well as the wider ecosystem of support for the AFC.

²⁴⁷ Local authority survey.

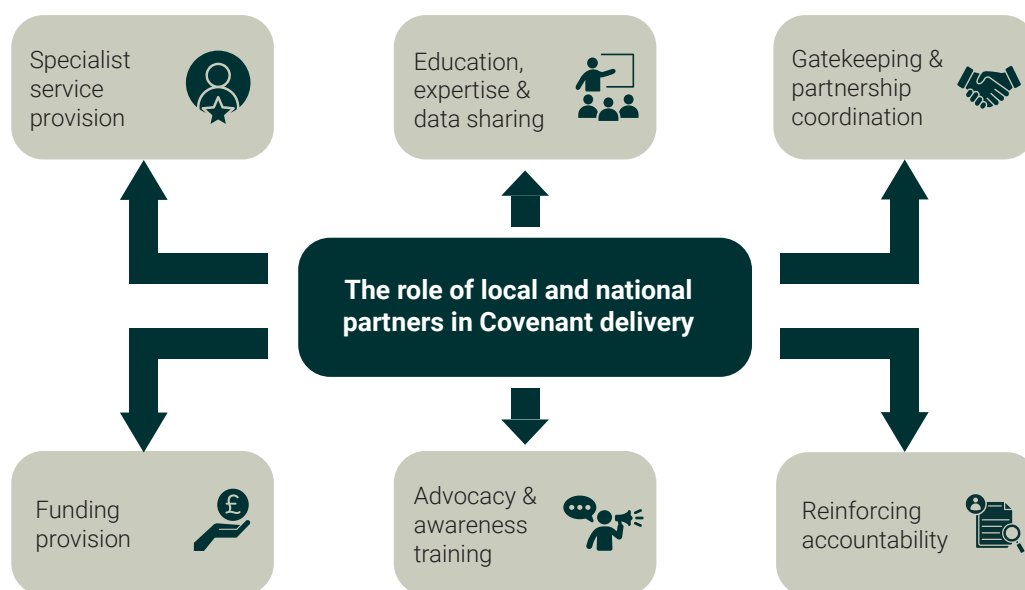
²⁴⁸ Local authority survey. Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

²⁴⁹ Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

²⁵⁰ Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

²⁵¹ Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Private sector organisation (WP2). Local authority survey.

Figure 7.1. The role of local and national partners in Covenant delivery



Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

We identified six overarching roles performed by local and national partners in supporting delivery of the Covenant and giving wider support to the AFC (see Figure 7.1):²⁵²



Specialist service provision: A leading function of local and national partners is the provision of specialist assistance that builds upon the Covenant-related support of local authorities and other public service providers. This support can take a range of different forms, including information-sharing and guidance, short-term financial aid, signposting to other service providers, as well as hosting bespoke outreach and engagement events. The nature of

this provision is often dependent on the role or specialism of the partner; an organisation may focus on service provision to specific cohorts within the AFC (e.g. veterans or Service children) or concentrate on addressing a particular area of need.²⁵³ It is similarly important to note that these services can be delivered as part of wider support networks or pathways; Op NOVA, for example, is a joint venture between NHS England, the Forces Employment Charity, and Care After Combat (see Box 7).

²⁵² It is worth noting that, for some partners, especially for some third sector organisations, AFC support is their core business and preceded the introduction of the Covenant and therefore their role is not directly tied to it. However, effective Covenant partnerships can often help to harness their work alongside that of other organisations developed in response to Covenant pledges.

²⁵³ Research interviews: Other public service provider (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Private sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

Box 7. Specialist service provision - Op NOVA



Commissioned by NHS England and delivered by the Forces Employment Charity, Op NOVA aims to enhance the wider ecosystem of support for the AFC in England by assisting former Service personnel who have come into contact with the justice system. As a non-clinical service, it acts as a single point of contact and provides personalised support packages to users, including preparing mental and physical health treatment plans via NHS England's other specialist services, Op COURAGE and Op RESTORE. With the assistance of Care After Combat as a lead subcontractor, Op NOVA also looks to support veterans across the crisis point of release from prison and facilitate their reintegration into the community.²⁵⁴



Education, expertise and data

sharing: Many local and national partners embed education and awareness-raising functions into their portfolios, including informing service providers and users about the Covenant and what its implementation means in practice.²⁵⁵

This can be achieved through the delivery of dedicated training events as well as tailored resources such as guides or toolkits.²⁵⁶ It may also assume more ad hoc forms, however, with some organisations noted as signposting public service

providers to relevant research data as well as identified examples of good practice.²⁵⁷ Local and national partners can offer further support by tailoring or redrafting national-level Covenant guidance to reflect specific needs and contexts.²⁵⁸ Such activity is considered vital to promoting good Covenant delivery, furnishing associated communications with a relevance and specificity that not only helps service providers to understand how to implement the Covenant in situ but also fosters additional buy-in by using familiar terminology and

²⁵⁴ Forces Employment Charity (n.d.).

²⁵⁵ Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

²⁵⁶ Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

²⁵⁷ Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

²⁵⁸ Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

appealing to local requirements.²⁵⁹ This was observed as having taken on a renewed significance following the introduction of the Covenant Duty, with some participants noting a growing demand and urgency among local authorities to understand how their Covenant commitments can be upheld and delivered effectively.²⁶⁰



Gatekeeping and partnership

coordination: Local and national actors can also act as gatekeepers, brokering introductions between local authorities and other service providers with the aim of developing new partnerships and enhancing

support to the AFC.²⁶¹ Regional and national organisations were considered to be particularly well-placed in this regard, with their extensive geographical remit often granting them access to a large network of potential collaboration partners.²⁶² What is more, local and national partners may help to further facilitate partnership working through coordinating or leading Covenant networks or forums. This can range from acting as a chair or host organisation to taking an active lead in directing service provision among a partnership's members (see Box 8).²⁶³

Box 8. Gatekeeping and partnership coordination - SCiP Alliance regional hubs



The SCiP Alliance is a partnership of organisations that strives to improve outcomes among children from Armed Forces families. Hosted by the University of Winchester and supported by the MoD, it coordinates 12 regional hubs across England, Scotland, and Wales that bring together regional stakeholders – including local authorities, third sector organisations, and higher education institutions – committed to mitigating disadvantage among Service children. In so doing, the SCiP Alliance provides a network of forums in which members can share issues and good practice, identify partnership opportunities, and communicate directly with the SCiP Alliance's Practice Group and Strategy Board. The chairs of each regional hub also attend a separate hub leads group to oversee the development of the network and ensure its efficient operation.²⁶⁴

259 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

260 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

261 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

262 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

263 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

264 Service Children's Progression Alliance (n.d.).



Funding provision: Local and national partners have historically supported local authorities' delivery of the Covenant through the provision of funding.²⁶⁵ A leading example is the AFCFT, which administers an annual fund of £10 million to support projects or programmes that align with its own strategic priorities for assisting the AFC.²⁶⁶ The introduction of the Covenant Duty has changed the nature of this relationship, however, with many public service providers (including local authorities) no longer being eligible to receive additional financial support for activities supporting the fostering of 'due regard' within the fields of health, education, and housing.²⁶⁷ Nevertheless, funders such as the AFCFT can continue to support the work of statutory services by awarding grants to third sector partners and funding policy areas outside the scope of the Covenant Duty. As noted elsewhere, growing resource constraints have encouraged some local authorities to form new partnerships with Armed Forces charities and voluntary initiatives to supplement their own support for the AFC. The funding that these organisations receive can therefore play a crucial (albeit indirect)



role in facilitating the Covenant's implementation by local authorities.²⁶⁸

Advocacy and awareness raising:

Through the publication of strategies and commentaries, as well as via direct engagement with government actors, some local and national partners perform an advocacy function. This frequently centres on identifying gaps in existing Covenant-related services with the intention of bringing about changes in policy and practice.²⁶⁹ In so doing, partner organisations can serve to bridge the gap between the AFC and government, communicating the needs of the AFC to relevant local and national stakeholders in the interest of enhancing available support.²⁷⁰

While this research identified select instances of locally sourced campaigning and awareness raising, participants nevertheless suggested that national actors are more likely to fulfil this role as they often possess stronger links with government.²⁷¹

The RBL, for instance, has developed numerous public policy campaigns on behalf of the AFC, such as the 'Credit their Service' campaign that seeks to exclude military compensation from welfare benefit tests.²⁷²

265 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

266 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

267 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2). Research workshop (WP5).

268 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

269 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

270 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2).

271 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

272 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2).



Reinforcing accountability:

Relatedly, local and national partners perform a vital accountability function, ensuring that local authorities and other signatories of the Covenant uphold and implement their commitments, including fulfilment of the Covenant Duty.²⁷³ Some partner organisations consulted during this research chose to frame this role using the

language of ‘enforcing’ or ‘upholding’ the Covenant,²⁷⁴ whereas others discussed their accountability function as one of collaboration.²⁷⁵ In the latter case, local and national partners were articulated as supporting statutory service providers by providing additional oversight and resource in areas where they may be struggling to implement the Covenant.

273 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

274 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

275 Research interview: National stakeholder (WP2).

7.4. Chapter summary



Covenant delivery is hindered by various cross-cutting barriers, including financial and human resource constraints; competing local authority priorities; limited staff availability and high turnover; data constraints and limitations on measuring longitudinal changes; and perceived limitations in Covenant guidance.



In contrast, several cross-cutting enablers of progress in Covenant delivery were identified: the Covenant Duty is seen as a key enabler of delivery, fostering accountability, awareness and collaboration, and enhancing service uptake. Additional key enablers include access to human resources and expertise in relation to Covenant delivery and AFC support, partnership working and economies of scale, and ability to leverage funding.



Partners enhance Covenant delivery through education for service providers and users, advocacy to address gaps in provision, and accountability mechanisms to ensure commitments are met. They tailor guidance to local contexts, share data to inform policy, and advocate for the AFC. In many cases, these roles are based on work that partners have performed over significant periods of time and thus precede the Covenant and are not exclusively tied to it. However, effective Covenant partnerships often help to harness local and national partners' work and capabilities alongside those of other organisations that were developed in response to Covenant pledges.







Chapter 8. Evidence of good practice in Covenant delivery

This chapter outlines examples of good practice in Covenant delivery that may facilitate further progress in achieving the Covenant's overarching objectives. These were identified based on the project's case studies and survey, as well as regional engagement with local authorities and their partners. The highlighted cases include formal structures, arrangements,

and networks dedicated to the Covenant's implementation (see Section 8.1), as well as wider cross-cutting principles and behaviours conducive to effective service provision for the AFC (see Section 8.2). Additional anecdotal examples of good practice are included in Section 8.3.

Box 9. Research questions addressed in Chapter 8

- **RQ10:** What examples of evidence-based good practice exist among different delivery models for implementing the Covenant and wider support to the AFC?
- **RQ11:** What are the resources and costs required for implementing identified examples of good practice?



In line with the study's realist evaluation outlook, **this chapter does not intend to be prescriptive nor does it suggest that the identified good practices follow a 'one size fits all' approach.** Rather, it aims to present a collection of mechanisms and behaviours that can be incorporated into existing Covenant delivery structures. As reflected in the project's recommendations (see Chapter 9), any efforts to adopt the featured practices should be tailored to individual local contexts, including the profile and needs of the AFC, local government structures, and current social and economic geographies.

8.1. Mechanisms for effective Covenant delivery

The study identified six specific mechanisms that have demonstrated value in helping local authorities and their partners to achieve Covenant outcomes. These are summarised in Figure 8.1 and discussed in the following sub-sections. More detailed descriptions of the individual models are provided in an accompanying case study report.²⁷⁶

276 Bryan et al. (2025).

Figure 8.1. Overview of identified ‘good practice’ mechanisms for Covenant delivery

Regional Covenant Coordinators	Military Champions	Covenant delivery centres
Regional Coordinators provide a focal point for AFC support across multiple local authority areas. These individuals can help to cohere Covenant-related initiatives, identify potential inconsistencies or duplication of effort, share national-level guidance, and host Covenant forums	Military Champions provide a strategic link between a local authority and individual military establishments, including through facilitating information exchange, publicising available Covenant services, and developing an in-depth understanding of the AFC	Centralising local authority staff, services, and information dedicated to implementing the Covenant in a publicly accessible location. These facilities can enhance the accessibility of Covenant-related support to both local authority staff and members of the AFC and can aid the development of informal support networks
Local Covenant funds	Gateway organisations	Armed Forces Community Hubs
Local authority- or partner organisation-maintained funds that supplement national funding sources to support local Covenant-related projects	Local authority- or third sector-run facilities dedicated to connecting members of the AFC with relevant service providers from across the local area and beyond. These facilities are designed to be a central point of access to a pre-existing network of Covenant delivery partners	Charity- or volunteer-maintained hubs that provide community and peer-to-peer support as well as dedicated spaces for members of the AFC to socialise

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.



8.1.1. Regional Covenant Coordinators

Participants identified the appointment of Regional Covenant Coordinators as a key enabler of effective Covenant delivery. This includes the AFLOs funded by the Welsh Government and the Armed Forces Covenant

Programme Manager who supports the coordination of Covenant delivery across the Greater Manchester area.²⁷⁷ While these roles differ in both their funding sources and geographic scope, they share a common set of objectives and activities associated with good practice. Crucially, they provide a focal

277 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2). Research workshop (WP4). Local authority survey.

point for AFC support across multiple local authority areas and ensure that Covenant-related initiatives align with both local and regional priorities.²⁷⁸ A core component of this task is hosting regional Covenant forums (see Section 5.1.2), in which local authorities, charities and other delivery partners can discuss their support for the AFC with the aim of coordinating practice and identifying collaboration opportunities.²⁷⁹ Both the AFLOs and Greater Manchester's Covenant Programme Manager also attend various national Covenant initiatives and groups, granting them access to national-level guidance that can be filtered back to their regional areas.²⁸⁰

Participants discussed a range of benefits associated with Regional Covenant Coordinators:

- Through providing oversight across multiple local authority areas, Regional Coordinators can **identify and address duplication of effort or inconsistencies** among Covenant delivery approaches and highlight cases of good practice for wider adoption.²⁸¹
- The support that Regional Coordinators can provide in organising Covenant forums and sourcing national-level information can also **reduce the burden on local authorities and their partners**. This can help to incentivise individual authorities to support the Covenant but also allow them to dedicate more time and resource to its implementation.²⁸²

- Finally, Regional Coordinators perform an **important awareness-raising function**. By representing multiple local authority areas with a single voice, they can communicate local issues to regional- and national-level stakeholders in an efficient and impactful manner, and champion Covenant delivery efforts within their respective regions more broadly.²⁸³

There are several requirements and considerations associated with the use of Regional Covenant Coordinators. Firstly, there must be **sufficient appetite among stakeholders in neighbouring local authority areas to collaborate** and manage Covenant delivery at a regional level.²⁸⁴ Secondly, the success of these posts rests in part on **discerning when Covenant-related issues require direction at the regional level and when they should be addressed locally**. This includes identifying instances of common need between multiple local authority areas, along with an appreciation of when Covenant-related projects depend on highly localised contacts or partnerships.²⁸⁵ If such an awareness is not present, there is a risk that service providers resist awarding some of their Covenant responsibilities to the Regional Coordinator. From an implementation perspective, meanwhile, effective employment of Regional Coordinators requires clear terms of reference,

278 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4). See also Welsh Government (2024); Burnham & Stannard (2024).

279 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4). Research workshop (WP4).

280 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

281 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). Research focus group (WP4).

282 Research focus group (WP4).

283 Research focus group (WP4).

284 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). Research focus group (WP4).

285 Research interview: Local authority (WP2). Research focus group (WP4).

the active involvement of statutory and non-statutory organisations in decision making processes, and long-term funding to support the longevity of the role.²⁸⁶



8.1.2. Military Champions

Although most local authorities in England, Scotland, and Wales have an Armed Forces Champion and/or Lead Officer (see Chapter 5), Oxfordshire County Council has supplemented these posts with six elected member Military Champions – one allocated to each of the county’s Armed Forces bases. In addition to reinforcing the County Council’s commitment to upholding the Covenant, these roles are intended to **form a strategic link between the local authority and Oxfordshire’s individual military establishments.**²⁸⁷ This includes raising awareness among local authority staff of the issues faced by local Service personnel and their families, alongside monitoring key developments at each Armed Forces base.²⁸⁸ Those assuming this position are also expected to publicise Covenant-related support and work with local Armed Forces commanders to tackle emerging issues within the AFC, providing referrals to local authority departments and partner organisations when necessary.²⁸⁹

As single points of contact to Oxfordshire County Council, the Military Champions have reportedly **improved the accessibility of council services for the AFC, as well as facilitated their timely delivery.** This is

particularly significant given Oxfordshire’s current two-tier local authority status; as discussed in Chapter 4, the division of responsibilities between its County and District Councils may in itself cause confusion among members of the AFC.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, participants emphasised the role that Military Champions play in developing effective Covenant-related policy and procedures. Through maintaining a presence at each of Oxfordshire’s Armed Forces bases, the Military Champions – and, by extension, the County Council – can **establish an in-depth understanding of specific sections of the AFC and modify their support accordingly.**²⁹¹

As demonstrated by the case of Oxfordshire, **Military Champions offer an effective mechanism for strengthening Covenant delivery in local authority areas that host a large Service personnel community and/or multiple Armed Forces bases.** The needs profile of the AFC is likely to be both extensive and complex in such contexts and, as such, Military Champions can provide local authorities with a way of giving tailored support to Service personnel and their families alongside other assistance for the wider community.²⁹² Allocating sufficient time and resource to form working relationships with local Armed Forces representatives is central to achieving this aim, with these contacts allowing Military Champions to locate potential sources of disadvantage quickly and ensure appropriate mitigating action is taken.²⁹³

286 Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

287 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Third sector organisation (WP4). See also Oxfordshire County Council & 145 (South) Brigade (2011); Oxfordshire County Council (2024).

288 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

289 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

290 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

291 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

292 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

293 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).



8.1.3. Covenant delivery centres

Another aspect of good practice identified in our study is the centralisation of local authority staff, services, and information dedicated to implementing the Covenant in one publicly accessible location.²⁹⁴ Rather than distributing Covenant-related services across multiple council sites or departments, these facilities are intended to provide members of the AFC

with a single point of access to relevant advice and support.²⁹⁵ These locations may also be used to host statutory and non-statutory partners on a regular basis, supporting referrals when the needs presented by the AFC exceed available local authority assistance.²⁹⁶ An example of this set-up is 'the Hub' operated by Cardiff Council (see Box 10).

Box 10. Covenant delivery centres - 'The Hub' in Cardiff



Located in Cardiff Central Library, 'the Hub' is staffed by Cardiff Council's Veterans Advice Team and offers tailored assistance to veterans, Service personnel, and their families. This support covers a range of Council services, including providing advice on benefit and social housing applications, as well as help in accessing education and employment opportunities.²⁹⁷ The Veterans Advice Team also works in close collaboration with multiple third sector and volunteer organisations (e.g. the RBL, ChangeStep), using 'the Hub' as a focal point to raise awareness about other support available to the AFC and broaden the Council's own network of Covenant delivery partners.²⁹⁸ In addition to the centralised advice service available at 'the Hub', its staff provide regular outreach support via other community hubs based throughout Cardiff and the surrounding area to ensure wider accessibility.²⁹⁹

An important strength of centralising local authority Covenant services is that it **increases accessibility of support for the AFC**. By concentrating Covenant-related assistance in one public site, councils can remove the need

for the AFC to negotiate often complex local authority structures and therefore increase the likelihood of service uptake.³⁰⁰ The benefits of this accessibility also extend to council members. As one interviewee observed, stationing Covenant

294 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4). Local authority survey.

295 Research interview: Local authority (WP4). Local authority survey.

296 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

297 Research interview: Local authority (WP4). See also Cardiff City Council (n.d.); The Hub (n.d.).

298 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

299 The Hub (n.d.); Cardiff News Room (2020).

300 Research interview: Local authority (WP4). Local authority survey.

officers and other support personnel at a single known location can **help both senior and front-line staff to identify and approach these individuals for guidance when needed.**³⁰¹ Finally, these locations can perform an important social function as places where members of the AFC can congregate. Indeed, sites such as Cardiff Council’s ‘the Hub’ were described as providing a setting for new friendships to form and aiding community integration.³⁰²

Given its potential to improve the accessibility of support and provide a space in which members of the AFC can meet, **centralising local authority Covenant services is likely to have the greatest impact in areas with an urbanised and concentrated AFC population.**³⁰³ Nevertheless, some participants observed that this approach could still aid Covenant delivery in areas with a geographically dispersed AFC. As demonstrated by Cardiff Council, Covenant delivery centres can be paired with regular outreach sessions to publicise and provide support at more remote locations.³⁰⁴ In a similar manner, it was reported that another Welsh council had previously operated a mobile ‘hub’ that allowed the full range of local authority Covenant services to be delivered throughout the area.³⁰⁵



8.1.4. Local Covenant funds

Local Covenant funds were raised by multiple stakeholders as an additional way of enhancing existing support for the AFC.³⁰⁶ An example identified in this research is the East Riding Community Covenant Delivery Group Fund, which was established to **supplement national sources of funding and help to nurture local forms of Covenant implementation.** The Fund is maintained by the East Riding of Yorkshire Council and allows members of the Delivery Group (and its sub-groups) to apply for grants of between £500 and £5,000.³⁰⁷ The grants are intended primarily to act as seed funding, allowing local charities and voluntary organisations to develop new Covenant-related projects as well as evidence their impact on the AFC.³⁰⁸

As geographically targeted sources of funding, **local Covenant funds provide a mechanism for expanding and diversifying support for the AFC in a specific area.** These initiatives were said to be particularly important within the context of the ‘cost-of-living crisis’ (see Chapter 3), which has seen a reduction in financial donations to many third sector organisations and increased competition for national Covenant grants as a result.³⁰⁹ Participants similarly highlighted that local Covenant funds can **help to ensure that Covenant delivery**

301

Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

302

Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

303

Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

304

Cardiff News Room (2020).

305

Research workshop (WP5).

306

Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4). Local authority survey.

307

East Riding of Yorkshire Community Covenant Delivery Group (n.d.).

308

Research interview: Local authority (WP2).

309

Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP5).

aligns with identified and agreed strategic priorities.³¹⁰ For instance, a key condition of the East Riding Community Covenant Delivery Group Fund is that any allocated funding must be used to support activities that address one or more components of the Delivery Group's action plan.³¹¹

In addition to requiring extensive financial resource, participants stressed the need for accompanying publicity campaigns to maximise the impact of local Covenant funds.³¹² This not only helps to encourage a broad range of service providers to apply but also raises awareness about the Covenant and signals the funder's commitment to helping the AFC.³¹³ Avoiding overly complex or extensive application procedures was also noted as being crucial to success, alongside the provision of tailored advice to support individuals or organisations who may not have previous experience in submitting funding applications.³¹⁴ While in principle applicable in most local authority areas, **the use of local**

Covenant funds is likely to be most beneficial in areas where AFC support is reliant on smaller community organisations.



8.1.5. Gateway organisations

Covenant delivery can be further strengthened through the use of 'gateway' organisations:

local authority- and/or third sector-run facilities dedicated to connecting members of the AFC with relevant service providers from across the local area and beyond.³¹⁵

These facilities are designed to be a central point of access to Covenant-related assistance, removing the need for individuals to negotiate often highly congested support landscapes by signposting them to a pre-existing network of delivery partners.³¹⁶ Subject to available resource, the referral services offered by these organisations may be paired with the provision of direct in-house assistance.³¹⁷ Gateway organisations encountered during this research include Glasgow's Helping Heroes (GHH) (see Box 11).

310 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2).

311 East Riding of Yorkshire Community Covenant Delivery Group (n.d.).

312 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

313 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

314 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Third sector organisation (WP4).

315 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

316 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4).

317 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

Box 11. Gateway organisations - Glasgow's Helping Heroes



Established in 2010 as a partnership between Glasgow City Council and the SSAFA, the Armed Forces Charity, Glasgow's Helping Heroes (GHH) aims to support the Covenant's delivery as a 'one stop shop' for accessing a comprehensive selection of services available throughout the city.³¹⁸ GHH works to achieve this objective by hosting and referring individuals to multiple delivery partners, including Citizens Advice, Crisis Counselling, the Rangers Community Foundation, and the Defence Medical Welfare Service. A growing number of on-site services and support options are also available, ranging from financial advice and job application assistance to dedicated housing advisory and peer support workers.³¹⁹

Participants emphasised that **gateway organisations can improve the accessibility and uptake of local Covenant-related support**.³²⁰ This is based on the familiarity and trust that these facilities are able to develop with the AFC. In focus groups with beneficiaries, for example, multiple service users said that they had approached and utilised GHH and the Armed Forces Community HQ trusting that they would be signposted to credible service providers.³²¹ Similarly to

Covenant delivery centres (see Section 8.1.3), gateway organisations can also facilitate networking and socialisation among members of the AFC.³²² Moreover, the information gathered by gateway organisations can help to inform wider Covenant policies and procedures; for instance, the monthly performance data that GHH submits to Glasgow City Council has reportedly been instrumental in shaping the local authority's own services and support for the AFC.³²³

318 Research interviews: Third sector organisation (WP2); Local authority (WP4). See also Glasgow Caledonian University & University of Stirling (2022).

319 SSAFA (n.d.).

320 Research focus group (WP4).

321 Research focus group (WP4).

322 Research focus group (WP4).

323 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

As with Covenant delivery centres, our research indicates that **gateway organisations are most suited to urban centres with a large and concentrated AFC.**³²⁴ Hosting gateway services in locations with strong public transport links was reported to be key requirement, especially given their overarching objective of helping the AFC to access relevant services as easily as possible.³²⁵ Sustained outreach and publicity campaigns were likewise emphasised as vital, as well as the presence of formal monitoring and reporting structures to ensure that these organisations fulfil their role in an efficient and cost-effective manner.³²⁶ But arguably the most important element of gateway organisations is **forming and sustaining a comprehensive network of delivery partners.** As establishments dedicated to connecting members of the AFC with service providers, gateway organisations are required to monitor the existing support landscape and forge new partnerships to ensure that service users can access appropriate assistance.³²⁷



8.1.6. Armed Forces Community hubs

Across several local authority areas, **charity- or volunteer-run AFC hubs** were central aspects of local Covenant delivery and support to the AFC.³²⁸ In our research, examples of this mechanism included the East Riding of Yorkshire's M.A.S.H., Cardiff City Football Club Veterans Hub, Barry Veterans Group, Woody's Lodge, the Armed Forces Community HQ in Wigan (see Box 12), as well as Glasgow Community Veterans Support. Forming part of the wider ecosystem of support available to the AFC, these organisations are united by the goal of **providing a dedicated space for members to socialise and enhance their wellbeing.** This can take numerous forms, spanning regular coffee mornings and drop-in sessions to external activities such as hikes.³²⁹ Many AFC hubs will also pair these activities with general guidance and support, while holding Covenant-related events with partners such as DWP.

324 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP4).

325 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

326 Research interview: Local authority (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

327 Research interview: Local authority (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

328 Research interviews: Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP4); Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4). Local authority survey.

329 Research interviews: Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP4).

Box 12. Armed Forces Community hubs - Armed Forces Community HQ in Wigan



The Armed Forces Community HQ was established in 2018 as a not-for-profit organisation with the aim of providing a safe, socially inclusive space for members of the AFC in Wigan and beyond to access better life chances.³³⁰ In addition to acting as a 'gateway' to an extensive network of delivery partners, the Armed Forces Community HQ hosts numerous activities for the AFC that are delivered by peers and intended to reduce social isolation by promoting new friendships and contacts.³³¹ These programmes are also designed to foster wider resilience among the AFC by instilling participants with skills to maintain their physical and mental health in the long term.³³² A recent assessment estimated that the Armed Forces Community HQ produces approximately £56 worth of social value for every £1 invested.³³³

AFC hubs were emphasised by participants as an indispensable counterpart to more formal modes of Covenant-related assistance.

Stakeholders and beneficiaries often saw informal hub-based activity as delivering direct value for the AFC, including fostering social connectedness, supporting beneficiaries' mental health, and making members of the AFC feel valued and confident that they could access local support if needed.³³⁴ Many AFC hubs have similarly incorporated

a personalised and peer-to-peer support approach in their ways of working, which staff see as a way of 'giving back to the community' and which aligns with wider national data that indicates the AFC significantly values local support services that offer community or peer-led support.³³⁵ By forming partnerships with local statutory service providers, third sector partners, and other AFC hubs, community hubs can also provide clearer pathways to formal services available in a local area.³³⁶

330 Armed Forces Community HQ (n.d.).

331 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2). Research focus group (WP4).

332 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2).

333 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2).

334 Research interviews: Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

335 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4). Office for National Statistics (2025).

336 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

This research identified several key requirements and considerations for AFC hubs. **Community hub initiatives are often reliant on financial donations or grants; neither of these are stable incomes streams**, and therefore hub activities may often be limited to short-term strategies and forms of engagement.³³⁷ Moreover, securing donations and funding was flagged as time and labour intensive, often diverting key resources away from service delivery.³³⁸ Our findings also indicate that the most successful hubs tend to be operated by members of the AFC and make a concerted effort to include underrepresented groups (e.g. the LGBTQI+ community).³³⁹ A further takeaway is that hubs can operate in locations with either concentrated or dispersed AFC populations – we encountered initiatives that consisted of a single hub in an urbanised area (e.g. Cardiff City Football Club Veterans Hub) and organisations that ran a network of hubs across larger and more rural areas (e.g. M.A.S.H., Woody’s Lodge).³⁴⁰

8.2. Cross-cutting principles for effective Covenant delivery

8.2.1. Involving the AFC and general public in delivering Covenant-related activity

One cross-cutting area of good practice is the **extension of Covenant-related activities to include members of the AFC and general public whenever possible**. This can range from engaging the public in

the coordination and delivery of a project to designing initiatives that benefit both the AFC and the wider community (e.g. joint coffee mornings, community remembrance gardens, school ‘away days’ to Armed Forces bases).³⁴¹ Facilitating such engagement was found to be advantageous in several respects. Through developing projects that are mutually beneficial to the AFC and the general public, advocates of this approach reported that they have been able to foster greater buy-in to the Covenant and advertise other available assistance to the AFC.³⁴² Proactively involving others in the implementation of Covenant projects was also seen as a useful way of obtaining additional resource, granting the lead organisation access to a wider field of potential volunteers with relevant expertise.³⁴³ Furthermore, this type of Covenant delivery was praised by members of the AFC for the sense of social connectedness and cohesion that it can create. Alongside helping to combat issues such as social isolation, it was reported that the relationships formed through community-based projects can generate informal support networks that complement more formal modes of assistance.³⁴⁴

8.2.2. Peer-led learning and delivery

Covenant-related projects designed to educate staff or introduce new practices or processes to support Covenant delivery among local service providers (see Box 13) may benefit from **peer-to-peer learning and**

337 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

338 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP4).

339 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

340 Research interview: Local authority (WP4). Research focus group (WP4).

341 Research interviews: Third sector organisation (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP4).

342 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP2). Local authority survey.

343 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Third sector organisation (WP2).

344 Research interview: Third sector organisation (WP4).

implementation approaches. By actively involving service providers (e.g. maintained schools, healthcare providers, housing associations, etc.) in a programme's execution, lead organisations may be able to enhance the impact of activities in a resource-efficient manner.³⁴⁵ This approach can also help to secure service provider support; since peer-led initiatives give recipients greater agency in the programme at hand, lead organisations face

less risk of pushback due to perceived external interference or direction.³⁴⁶ Additionally, projects of this nature are often seen as more likely to generate positive and lasting impact. Of note is the working knowledge and expertise that service providers can bring to an initiative's wider implementation, allowing them to identify and accommodate preferences that may have been overlooked by or unknown to the lead organisation.³⁴⁷

Box 13. Peer-led learning and delivery - Oxfordshire County Council's 'Festival of Friends'



The 'Festival of Friends' was implemented by Oxfordshire County Council's School Improvement Team in 2022–23 as a peer-led programme among local maintained schools for fostering good practice in the education of Service children.³⁴⁸ This included the delivery of professional training by the County Council to a series of strategically selected 'hub' schools, whose nominated Area Service Pupils' Coordinators then cascaded this information to 'spoke' or 'project' schools within pre-defined networks aligned with the county's Armed Forces bases.³⁴⁹ Each participating school was asked to use the training to devise a project that strengthened their own provisions for Service children, which could then be shared as an example of good practice via a celebration event and accompanying publication.³⁵⁰

345 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

346 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

347 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

348 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4). See also Oxfordshire County Council (2024a).

349 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

350 Research interview: Local authority (WP4). See also Oxfordshire County Council (2024a); Oxfordshire County Council (2024b).

8.2.3. Flagship partner selection

A further cross-cutting principle for effective Covenant delivery is the engagement of ‘flagship’ or highly proactive partner organisations at the start of Covenant-related projects to generate early momentum and attract other collaborators.³⁵¹ By working with service providers with an established track-record of assisting the AFC, project leads can not only secure access to vital resource, knowledge, and expertise but also provide reassurance to potential funders of an initiative’s viability and likely success.³⁵² The support and input from ‘flagship’ partners may also establish a secure basis from which Covenant-related assistance can be expanded and developed, showcasing the initial benefits of the services provided and therefore encouraging more sceptical or risk-averse institutions to enter the partnership.³⁵³

8.2.5. Cultures of accountability and improvement

Promoting cultures of accountability and continuous improvement was noted as another important way in which local authorities can facilitate effective Covenant delivery.³⁵⁴ In particular, it was proposed that Armed Forces Champions and/or Lead Officers can enhance Covenant delivery by creating an environment in which delivery partners feel comfortable reflecting critically on their activities and sharing potential shortcomings. Establishing

formal performance metrics and seeking feedback from other Covenant stakeholders were identified as integral to achieving this objective, with some local authorities reporting that they have incorporated Covenant delivery reviews as recurring agenda items in council meetings and local strategic and operational forums.³⁵⁵ As well as guarding against complacency and ensuring that Covenant-related services continue to evolve in line with the needs of the AFC, it was suggested that these activities can help to promote new partnerships in the interest of addressing identified capability gaps and enhancing available assistance.³⁵⁶

8.2.5. Positive Covenant communication

A final cross-cutting principle for effective Covenant delivery is incorporating positive language about the Covenant and the AFC in public communications about Covenant-related activities.³⁵⁷ While the objective of the Covenant is oriented at reducing disadvantages faced by the AFC, some stakeholders have advocated for reducing references to ‘disadvantage’ where possible and foregrounding instead the value and contributions that a thriving AFC can bring to public life. Rather than framing Service children as a potentially vulnerable or at-risk population, for instance, one participating local authority made a conscious decision to emphasise the resilience of this group and the richness that they can bring to school communities.³⁵⁸ By framing the work of the

351 Research interview: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

352 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

353 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

354 Research interviews: Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

355 Research interviews: Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

356 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

357 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4); Local authority (WP4).

358 Research interview: Local authority (WP4).

Covenant in this manner, local authorities can continue to incentivise stakeholder and public support while simultaneously countering misconceptions about the AFC (e.g. the ‘mad, bad and sad’ stereotype).³⁵⁹

8.3. Additional good practice and mechanisms for effective Covenant delivery

In addition to the mechanisms and practices outlined above, we identified several other examples of good practice in supporting the Covenant’s delivery:

- Healthcare Board involvement in Covenant partnerships:** In several areas, the research identified good practice from healthcare organisations (including Cardiff and the Vale University Health Board, Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board and Milton Keynes hospital) in identifying and facilitating care for the AFC. These organisations have developed effective processes for identifying the needs of members of the AFC in their care and linking them, as needed, to services from other partners.
- Voluntary organisations embedded in Covenant delivery:** Voluntary organisations are key partners in the delivery of the Covenant locally, in some cases commissioned by local authorities, providing tailored support and advocacy

for the AFC, and working closely with other partners.

- Recruiting local authority staff who are themselves members of the AFC:** Encouraging local authority staff who are themselves members of the AFC to support Covenant-related projects was highlighted as an effective means of facilitating their delivery. In addition to bringing high levels of personal motivation, these individuals were noted as often having first-hand experience of potential sources of disadvantage among the AFC. They can therefore help to tailor Covenant-related assistance to achieve maximum positive impact.³⁶⁰
- Dedicated Covenant training resources:** Using dedicated Covenant training resources – most notably the Coventry, Solihull, and Warwickshire Armed Forces Covenant partnerships’ e-learning modules – can support the building of vital institutional awareness of the Covenant and facilitate associated good practice, such embedding as ‘asking the question’ into front-line service delivery procedures.³⁶¹
- Thematic Covenant meeting agendas:** Structuring the agendas of Covenant strategic and operational forums around a particular topic or theme was indicated as providing a valuable convening focus as well as helping to develop specialist awareness and expertise throughout a partnership.³⁶²

359 Research interviews: National stakeholder (WP2); Local authority (WP4).
 360 Local authority survey.
 361 Local authority survey.
 362 Local authority survey.

8.4. Chapter summary



Our research identified a selection of mechanisms and cross-cutting behaviours that are conducive to effective Covenant delivery. These should not be viewed as providing a 'one size fits all' blueprint for mitigating or reducing disadvantage among the AFC. Rather, they offer insight into how existing modes of Covenant delivery might be amended, extended, or updated to help advance the Covenant's overarching objectives. Any lessons from these cases must be paired with an appreciation of the unique contexts in which different models and practices are used.



The appointment of Regional Covenant Coordinators was noted as a particularly effective means through which the Covenant and wider support for the AFC can be managed at scale. As a dedicated resource and single source of oversight, those assuming this role can not only enhance service provision by identifying duplication of effort but also reduce the burden on stakeholders by hosting Covenant forums and sharing national-level guidance. Such top-down coordination must be balanced with an awareness of local preferences and needs, with Oxfordshire County Council's Military Champions offering an instructive example of how this might be achieved.



Providing a single point of access to assistance offers a further overarching principle for impactful Covenant delivery. This can include the centralisation of local authority Covenant services at one location, as well as the establishment of 'gateway' organisations through which members of the AFC can be referred or signposted to a comprehensive network of delivery partners. While especially suited to urban settings with concentrated AFC populations, these structures can be adapted to more rural areas and they reduce the need for beneficiaries to negotiate often complex and extensive support landscapes.



As geographically targeted sources of funding, local Covenant funds can develop AFC assistance within a given area and can be tailored to help support the strategic coordination of Covenant delivery. AFC hubs are frequent recipients of such funds and were themselves identified as an important supplement to more formal types of Covenant support by prioritising individual wellbeing.



Formal Covenant delivery structures can be further enhanced through the adoption of select cross-cutting behaviours. These include fostering wider community engagement and support in Covenant-related projects, prioritising peer-to-peer learning or delivery in training and other education programmes, the strategic selection of partner organisations, fostering cultures of continual improvement in Covenant delivery, and generating additional buy-in to the Covenant by emphasising the value that a thriving AFC can bring.





Chapter 9. Conclusions and recommendations

9.1. Discussion of key findings

This fourth OCOC study has explored the changing realities of Covenant delivery by local authorities and partner organisations. Along with providing an updated view of progress in the Covenant's implementation, its findings offer a more nuanced understanding of how the Covenant is being administered in practice, including what 'works' in various local and regional contexts, associated enablers and barriers, and the roles of different statutory and non-statutory actors.

Below, we reflect on key findings from the study in relation to its four overarching objectives:



Understanding the evolving environment for delivery of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC

- Covenant stakeholders continue to navigate myriad political and structural developments that have both enabling and constraining effects on their activities. The combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'cost-of-living crisis', and recent declines in government spending has led many public service providers to feel that they must 'do more with less' and carefully balance resources for Covenant implementation with other responsibilities.

- Nevertheless, there are indications that growing attention on national security and defence issues, as well as the Armed Forces more generally, may support the (re-)prioritisation of Covenant-related activity and wider support for the AFC in the future.
- Our research mirrors the MoD's 2024 Covenant Duty Impact Survey in finding that the Covenant Duty has had a positive impact on key aspects of Covenant delivery overall.³⁶³ The vast majority of participants viewed the Duty as having given new momentum to the Covenant, increased awareness of associated issues relating to the AFC, and prompted a range of practical responses, including efforts to align existing policy with the Covenant's principles and strengthen both training and partnership working initiatives. However, as noted in further detail below, it remains difficult to discern the overall effect of the Duty among relevant public service providers as many do not participate in research and there is no standard measurement of impact.
- The policy environment for Covenant delivery remains highly dynamic, with several significant upcoming government initiatives anticipated to affect Covenant implementation either directly or indirectly. This includes, chiefly, the introduction of a VALOUR regional network to help cohere and coordinate support services for the veteran community, the proposed extension of the Covenant Duty to encompass all UK government departments and Devolved Governments as well as additional policy areas, and the ongoing devolution agenda in England. These developments all have the potential

to reshape the local realities of Covenant delivery, presenting opportunities as well as challenges that will need to be carefully managed through collaboration between national and local government.

- The announced abolition of NHS England and associated reductions in funding for Integrated Care Boards mark further shifts in the external environment for Covenant delivery. While the effects of these changes are yet to fully materialise, there is little doubt that they will greatly impact the coordination and performance of Covenant-related activity.



Progress achieved in Covenant delivery

- Our research suggests that Covenant delivery has seen marked advancements in some areas while continuing to be hindered in others. In many localities, the ability of councils and other service providers to mitigate disadvantage, award special consideration, and deliver effective support to the AFC is improving. This was highlighted by the project's survey findings, with a number of respondents expressing confidence that progress has been achieved in this regard over the last five years due to growing awareness of the Covenant among front-line staff. However, there remains room for improvement in achieving several key outcomes, including: (i) awareness of the AFC and the Covenant among front-line services; (ii) the ability of service providers to identify AFC members at first point of access; (iii) the availability of quality data on the characteristics of the AFC and potential areas of disadvantage; and (iv) clear communication and sign-posting to AFC services. Additionally,

363 Ministry of Defence (2024).

there appears to be inconsistency across local authorities and other public service providers in strategic planning, the setting of Covenant-related priorities, and understanding what constitutes ‘good’ Covenant delivery.

- It remains difficult to ascertain the actual level of progress achieved in Covenant delivery across England, Scotland, and Wales. For both this research and previous OCOC studies, it is likely that stakeholders who proactively uphold and implement the Covenant were correspondingly more likely to participate. To build a more representative and comprehensive picture of Covenant delivery, it is therefore recommended that the MoD, FiMT, and other relevant organisations encourage more consistent monitoring and data capture (see Section 9.2.2).



Understanding how the Covenant is delivered at a regional level

- As discussed in Chapter 4, local authority boundaries provide the basic structure for coordinating Covenant delivery throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. The four types of structure considered in this research – single-tier (unitary) authorities, two-tier authorities, clusters, and combined authority structures – present opportunities as well as challenges for Covenant implementation. The identified barriers are sometimes structural but can often be effectively mitigated and managed (e.g. through careful communication and strategic planning). It is important to recognise that local authority structures are also in flux in many areas, with changing levels of cluster activity as well as ongoing devolution across England. Our recommendations speak to the need for continued monitoring of this evolving

context as it impacts Covenant delivery and wider AFC support.

- There is widespread variation in the mechanisms employed by local authorities and their partners to implement the Covenant, not only with respect to levels of Covenant-related activity but also in terms of how this activity takes place in practice. This is especially the case with regard to partnership working and collaboration, alongside the roles of key individuals (e.g. Armed Forces Champions and Armed Forces Lead Officers). While the study was able to collect some evidence on the effectiveness of these mechanisms, there is potential for further comparative or evaluative research on a wider spectrum of approaches in the future.
- Collaboration between local authorities and relevant statutory/non-statutory partners remains an essential dimension of effective Covenant delivery. Although this may be complicated by differing jurisdictional boundaries, organisational commitments, and political affiliations, there is still opportunity to enhance and extend collaborative working in a manner appropriate to individual local contexts. Here, the project identified a mixed landscape of partnership working, with strong cases of collaboration in some locations and more mixed examples elsewhere.



Understanding how different local delivery models shape Covenant implementation and what constitutes best practice

- Our engagement with local authorities and other stakeholders validated the study's starting assumption that good practice in Covenant delivery is highly localised and dependent on the preferences, behaviours, and capacity of individual actors. The

study identified several mechanisms that have demonstrated potential or evidenced outcomes in various contexts and could be scaled to other areas (see Table 8.1). However, there is an ongoing need to share lessons learned as well as recognise that the adoption of good practice is fundamentally dependent on available resource.

- Alongside formal mechanisms and models, the study highlighted 'softer' or more informal principles that can aid effective implementation of the Covenant. Fostering cultures of accountability, facilitating mutual learning, and promoting public participation were all identified as essential, especially given the Covenant's

reliance on collaboration between key individuals and organisations.

- Despite a diversity of delivery models and variations in practice, engagement with stakeholders reiterated the value of the 'core infrastructure' for local Covenant implementation developed in previous OCOC studies. This resource, updated in the new FiMT toolkit, presents a 'scaffolding' around which local authorities can further develop approaches for Covenant delivery in a manner that matches local needs. It also provides a valuable measure of consistency and coherence in Covenant implementation.



Table 9.1. Examples of context-specific mechanisms for effective Covenant delivery

Element of Covenant delivery	Context aspects	Indicated good practice
Key individuals	Where resources allow and local context means that Covenant-related activities have sufficient scope...	...dedicated Armed Forces Lead Officer posts, which can include part-time roles , should be established to help ring-fence the Lead Officer's capacity for Covenant-related activities and provide a focal point for the expansion of existing support for the AFC
	Where resources do not allow local authorities to appoint dedicated Covenant Coordinators...	...'double-hatting' Lead Officers (i.e. where Lead Officers perform multiple roles within the council) can help streamline Covenant delivery into Council policies in a resource-efficient manner if the Coordinator's non-Covenant responsibilities overlap or are closely related to community service provision and grant them access to key stakeholders within the local authority
	Where multiple local authorities face similar demands in relation to Covenant delivery...	...regional coordinators can be appointed to cohere local Covenant delivery, help align activities with local and regional priorities, and avoid duplication of effort
	Where local authorities have multiple military base areas and a significant Armed Forces presence...	...Military Champions can help provide a strategic link between the local authority and individual military establishments, including by monitoring key developments at each Armed Forces base
Service delivery models	In urban areas with a significant and concentrated AFC presence...	...concentrating Covenant delivery in a local hub can help improve accessibility of support for the AFC as well as streamline Covenant-related support for council staff and service providers
	Where local authorities and their partners want to increase the resilience of Covenant-related activity and diversify support to the AFC...	...local Covenant funds can help ringfence funding for Covenant-related activities and expand support for the AFC in alignment with identified and agreed strategic priorities
	Where local authority areas have a modest or significant AFC presence and lack informal AFC community and peer-to-peer support services...	...AFC hubs can be set up to supplement formal service delivery by providing a dedicated space for AFC socialisation and improving pathways and signposting for the AFC
	Where new practices or processes are being introduced for Covenant delivery among service providers (e.g. schools)...	...peer-led learning and delivery can help enhance the impact of capacity- and capability-building activities in a resource-efficient manner
Partnership models	In urban areas with a significant and concentrated AFC presence...	...gateway organisations can help streamline access for the AFC to congested support landscapes by signposting them to a pre-existing network of delivery partners, thus improving accessibility and uptake of local support
	In local areas with nascent Covenant delivery...	...flagship partners can be appointed by councils to generate buy-in of key stakeholders for Covenant delivery and establish a secure basis from which Covenant-related assistance can be expanded and developed

Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

9.2. Recommendations

In this section, we present a series of recommendations based on the project's findings. Recognising the inherently collaborative nature of Covenant delivery, the

recommendations are oriented at various stakeholders, including the MoD and other parts of national government, local councils, local service providers, and the third sector. Recommendations are numbered for ease of reference and do not indicate an order of priority.



9.2.1. Raising awareness and improving understanding of the Covenant

Local, regional and national stakeholders should continue to actively promote and improve understanding of the Covenant among relevant service providers, the AFC and the wider public.

1. UK and Devolved Government stakeholders should continue to work with local areas to raise awareness and improve understanding of the Covenant among the AFC. In this context, the MoD could explore further incorporating the Covenant into existing education programmes for Service personnel, such as transition courses or life skills training.
2. Local councils should maintain active and inclusive communication with the AFC to help raise awareness of the Covenant and ensure members of the community can access up-to-date information about available services and support. To reiterate previous OCOC recommendations, councils should maintain active webpages about local Covenant delivery and ensure that the information presented is consistent, accessible and up to date.
3. Third sector partners should continue to raise awareness and educate public service providers (e.g. GPs and schools) about the unique characteristics and support needs of the AFC. This can help to address gaps in awareness and understanding of potential disadvantage among the AFC, which remains a concern among local authorities and other stakeholders.
4. Third sector organisations should actively work to improve understanding of the Covenant among their beneficiaries and the public more broadly. This should include dispelling misconceptions about the scope of the Covenant and ensuring that expectations are consistent among the AFC.
5. Where funding permits, there is need for sustained investment in training to improve awareness of the Covenant among council staff and other service providers. There may be opportunities to use or adapt established training tools and materials (e.g. online training modules) to maximise the reach of training in a cost-efficient manner as well as for local authorities to collaborate and pool resources to develop new education materials.



9.2.2. Planning, monitoring and evaluation

Covenant delivery and support for the AFC should be grounded in and evaluated against tangible and measurable outcomes.

6. Local authorities and partners must ensure that their planning for Covenant delivery is embedded in clearly specified and measurable outcomes. These outcomes should represent tangible impacts and be differentiated from outputs (i.e. activities delivered). They should also be clearly linked to local needs assessments or other data sources, which can be leveraged to evidence existing levels of disadvantage and support needs among the AFC.
7. Evaluation plans should be incorporated into planning for Covenant-related activities and wider support to the AFC to ensure that they align with agreed strategic outcomes. In conducting monitoring and evaluation, organisations should use consistent indicators in line with government guidance (if available) or the 'basket of indicators' identified in previous OCOC research. Resource allowing, evaluation results should be shared in annual Covenant reporting to support transparency around the outcomes achieved.
8. The MoD should encourage outcomes-based planning and evaluation in local Covenant delivery, including through the integration of an outcomes perspective into existing Covenant guidance. Recognising the need to avoid mandating specific objectives or activities among public service providers, the MoD can nevertheless use such an approach to foster greater accountability for local Covenant delivery.
9. To support robust planning, monitoring and evaluation, the UK and Devolved Governments should work to improve the accessibility of existing data (e.g. national datasets, Census data). This should be paired with capacity-building at the local level to ensure that local organisations have the requisite capabilities to make effective use of available data.
10. The UK and Devolved Governments (including the MoD and the Evaluation Task Force) should support the development of consistent monitoring and evaluation frameworks for local Covenant delivery. This should include instruction on potential evaluation approaches and could build on previous OCOC recommendations for Covenant monitoring, such as the OCOC 'basket of indicators'. In so doing, the UK and Devolved Governments can help to strengthen monitoring and evaluation literacy among public service providers and mitigate the frequently observed conflation of activities, outputs, and outcomes that obscures the overall impact of Covenant delivery.



9.2.3. Collaboration and engagement

All organisations supporting delivery of the Covenant and wider support for the AFC are encouraged to actively engage in partnership working.

11. Noting the convening power of local authorities, councils should make a concerted effort to draw together relevant partners, resources, and infrastructure in support of the Covenant's implementation. This can not only serve to reduce the burden on individual local authorities and achieve economies of scale but also similarly help to ensure that resulting support is delivered in a manner that aligns with identified needs.
12. It is essential that Covenant delivery structures and partnerships are grounded in both robust accountability mechanisms and cultures of collective learning. There should likewise be a clear understanding of the roles and expectations placed on individual organisations, departments, or partners to further support mutual accountability.
13. Local authorities should pursue opportunities to engage with town/parish/community councils when developing Covenant-related services where appropriate. This may create opportunities for more efficient Covenant delivery across different levels of local government and further incorporate these authorities into wider support provision to the AFC.
14. Third sector organisations should continue to engage constructively with statutory and non-statutory service providers to support Covenant delivery. In particular, the third sector should assist public service providers in identifying gaps in support for the AFC and should reinforce accountability mechanisms for Covenant delivery by advocating on behalf of their beneficiaries. This should include the sharing of internal datasets and insights where regulations permit, alongside offering insight into what 'works' in practice.
15. Local organisations should adopt participatory approaches to deliver Covenant activities and support services, engaging both the AFC and the wider public in the design and delivery of services. As discussed in Section 8.2.1, this can encourage awareness raising and public engagement with the Covenant while also ensuring that services are fit for purpose.



9.2.4. Mainstreaming and enabling effective Covenant delivery

There are opportunities to further strengthen and better enable Covenant delivery at the local, regional and national level.

16. There is a need for UK and Devolved Government stakeholders to work together to reinforce and align Covenant delivery across the entirety of national government. Noting the announced extension of the Covenant Duty, embedding Covenant considerations into national-level policy making is essential for enabling change at the local level. We also recommend that steps be taken to ensure consistency in the recording of AFC status in government datasets (e.g. the National Pupil Database) and that this data be made more accessible to aid current and future Covenant delivery efforts at the national, regional, and local level.
17. Local authorities should maximise their use of existing resources (e.g. role descriptions), information-sharing structures, and data management systems to avoid duplication of effort and ensure consistent Covenant delivery. This should go hand in hand with mainstreaming Covenant-related activities into local authority processes (e.g. policy, needs assessments), which can help to enhance the resilience of Covenant implementation against disruption stemming from staff turnover and election cycles.
18. Local areas should consider how to incorporate the delivery mechanisms and good practice presented in this report (see Table 8.1) in a manner that corresponds to their unique needs and contexts. We also encourage local authorities to draw on the updated OCOC toolkit.
19. The UK and Devolved Governments should work with public service providers to identify opportunities for strengthening existing Covenant guidance. While this needs to be balanced with differentiation and flexibility at the local level, participants in this research raised the need for more robust national instruction, including additional information on upholding the Covenant Duty, key terms (e.g. 'disadvantage', 'due regard', 'AFC'), and identified examples of good practice.
20. The MoD should actively engage with public services and their partners to identify how the regional architecture of VALOUR can further support Covenant delivery. There are clear opportunities for VALOUR to help coordinate Covenant activity as well as the wider AFC support landscape. Notably, VALOUR's Regional Field Officers could facilitate knowledge exchange, the identification and sharing of good practice, awareness raising, and the cohering of data capture and sharing. This needs to be balanced with safeguarding local areas' ability to tailor Covenant delivery according to immediate circumstances and avoiding duplication of effort between VALOUR and existing regional coordination structures. In England, special attention should be paid to how VALOUR may interlink with strategic and combined authorities in the context of unfolding devolution.
21. Local authorities should continue to update their processes for 'asking the question' to identify members of the AFC and ensure that this information is recorded in a structured and consistent manner across front-line services. This should be combined with awareness-raising activities to incorporate AFC identification into 'business as usual' among service providers.



9.2.5. Future research and analysis

Effective delivery of the Covenant and wider support to the AFC should be embedded in robust data, research and analysis.

22. Future research should examine the planned extension of the Covenant legal duty. There may be opportunities for conducting a formative evaluation of the extension to gather feedback and assess progress in the extended legal duty's adoption.
23. Future research should examine the impact of unfolding devolution in England on Covenant implementation in combined authority settings as well as the announced expansion of the Covenant Duty. As noted in Chapter 4, the dynamics of devolution are highly context-dependent and will therefore require targeted analysis to understand the implications for Covenant delivery.
24. Future research should explore Covenant implementation by bodies other than local authorities who are covered by the Covenant Duty. This includes, for example, NHS Scotland and Wales together with relevant educational institutions. While stakeholders recognise the important role that these bodies play in advancing Covenant delivery, there has been limited work to understand how this materialises in practice.
25. There are opportunities to further refine existing ToC and logic model frameworks to help guide Covenant monitoring and evaluation at local, regional and national levels. This could comprise the development of bespoke ToCs for individual local Covenant delivery models, rather than the Covenant as a whole.
26. As this research only extended to England, Wales and Scotland, there is a need for dedicated research on the unique context and corresponding modes of Covenant delivery in Northern Ireland.



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Annex A. Updated Covenant Theory of Change

A.1. Overview

This Annex sets out the ToC for the Covenant at the programme level (i.e. a theory for how inputs and activities associated with the Armed Forces Covenant are intended to translate into outputs, outcomes, and impacts). The ToC served several purposes:

- Firstly, it provided a key input and guiding framework for a theory-based evaluation approach through which the implementation of Covenant-related and wider support activities was assessed. In particular, the ToC guided the evaluation framework and methods used to assess the implementation of different delivery models adopted by local authorities.
- Secondly, the ToC established a shared understanding of the aims of the Covenant and how they are expected to be achieved from the perspective of local authorities. In this respect, it enabled the research team to chart the contributions of, and key dependencies between, the activities of local authorities. The ToC therefore

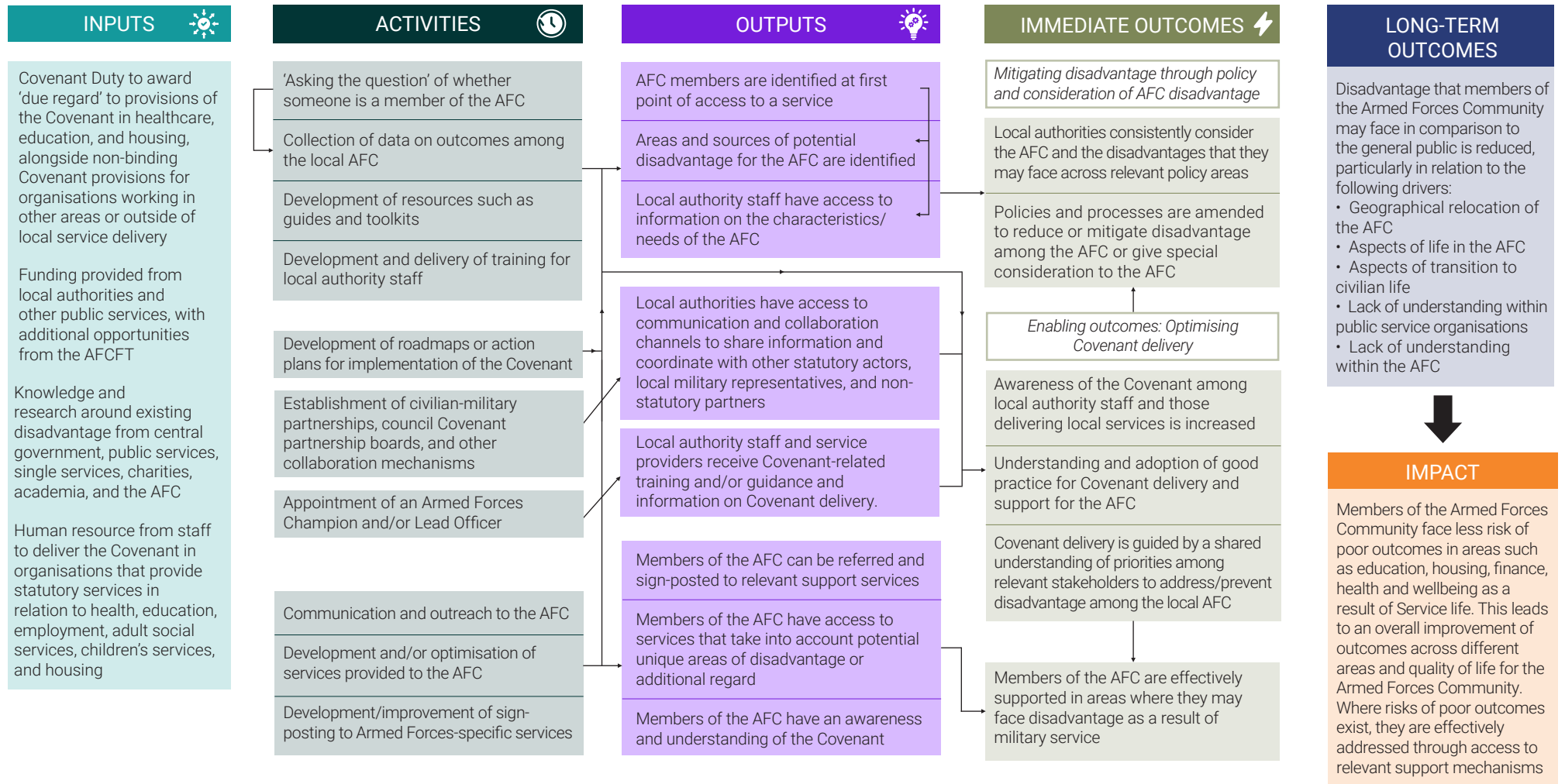
provided an overarching framework for understanding the expected impact pathways of different Covenant-related and wider support activities from the perspective of local authorities.

The ToC is presented in several stages below, starting with a visual representation of the ToC as a logic model. It is then outlined in narrative form to highlight the key causal pathways through which different inputs and activities translate into outputs, and how these outputs in turn translate into outcomes and impacts. This Annex also details the key assumptions that underpin the ToC, together with the external influences and risks that are thought to influence the Covenant's causal pathways.

This represents the second iteration of the Covenant ToC, building on an initial version that was developed in 2020 as part of the last OCOC project.³⁶⁴ In contrast to the first version, this iteration adopts a local authority perspective and limits the scope of activities, outputs, and outcomes to those relating to local authorities.

364 Shared Intelligence & Meri Mayhew Consulting (2022).

Figure A.1. Updated Covenant Theory of Change Logic Model



Source: RAND Europe & Shared Intelligence.

A.2. Key causal pathways

The logic model articulates four key output elements associated with local authorities' implementation of the Covenant: (i) Information about the local AFC; (ii) Awareness of the Covenant among local authority staff and service providers; (iii) Channels and platforms for communication and coordination between local authorities and statutory/non-statutory partners; and (iv) Services, referral pathways and understanding of available support and the Covenant among the AFC.

Five key causal pathways were identified regarding **how Covenant-related inputs and activities translate to these outputs**:

- The Covenant Duty for select statutory service providers to have 'due regard' for the principles of the Covenant and the signing of the Covenant by public sector organisations creates **an accountability mechanism** for local authorities.
- **The Covenant Duty is also understood to create coherence** in local authorities' activities pertaining to the Covenant and support for the AFC, as all local service providers are held against the same expectations with respect to Covenant implementation.
- **Awareness of the Covenant among local authority staff is increased because the Covenant is now partly embedded in law**, attaching greater importance and a legal obligation to award 'due regard' to potential disadvantage among the AFC. Awareness is also increased by training activities delivered by Covenant Coordinators. **The Covenant Duty also serves as a 'door-opener'** and helps to **initiate conversations and create buy-in** about revising policies and local services to align with the Covenant's principles.
- **Access to Covenant-related funding and human resources increases the capacity**

of local authorities to undertake the activities captured in the ToC, particularly through the work of a dedicated or 'double-hatted' Covenant Coordinator.

- **Access to knowledge and research** around areas of disadvantage among the AFC, combined with collecting new information by identifying members of the AFC, **enables local authorities to prioritise and target resources and activities** to areas of greatest need.

The following causal pathways explain how the outputs translate to three key categories of outcomes: (i) the amendment of policies and design of new procedures to understand and reduce disadvantage among the AFC; (ii) mutual learning and prioritisation of resources between local authorities and statutory/non-statutory partners; and (iii) access to effective support for members of the AFC:

- Effective amendment of policies and procedures to align with Covenant principles is enabled by increased awareness of the Covenant among local authority staff, access to information about the characteristics of the local AFC, and information-sharing opportunities with other local authorities or partners. These factors **increase understanding and thus the capability of local authorities** to amend or develop policies, while **the Covenant Duty provides a persistent incentive and accountability mechanism**.
- **Communication channels and platforms for information-sharing and coordination lead to an improved prioritisation of resources** at the local level and to improvement of practices through mutual learning, because public service providers and other actors can align their activities and pool their understanding of 'what works' for the local community. **Collaboration platforms such as Covenant**

working groups also provide an additional accountability mechanism, whereby members hold each other to account for any actions agreed for progressing Covenant implementation and support for the AFC.

- Access to effective support among the AFC is a function of: (i) the existence of effective referral pathways for AFC-specific services and an understanding of where to access services; (ii) the ability of the AFC to access services (i.e. the existence of services); and (iii) an awareness and understanding among the AFC of the Covenant's principles. The first two aspects are enabling in nature – they provide an opportunity for members of the AFC to access support – while the last builds confidence in the ability to access support and sets expectations for what the AFC may be entitled to based on the Covenant's principles.

A.3. Key assumptions

There are several assumptions that underpin the ToC:

- The ToC focuses explicitly on outcomes specified by the Covenant (i.e. the reduction of disadvantage arising from Service life and granting of special consideration to the AFC in some areas). There is an assumption that these objectives relate to, but are distinct from, the objectives of the wider ecosystem of support which exists for the AFC.
- There is an assumption that the provision of resources such as guides and toolkits is based on robust evidence about effective and efficient practices regarding Covenant delivery and support for the AFC.
- There is an assumption that relevant resources are made available to front-line staff and all those engaging in

implementation of the Covenant, and that those engaged in service delivery have access to and/or know where to access relevant resources.

- There is an assumption that effective channels of engagement and communication exist with the AFC through which service providers and other organisations can conduct awareness-raising activities. It is further assumed that members of the AFC can communicate with service providers and hold them accountable.
- Given that the ToC is formulated in a politically agnostic manner, there is an assumption of continuity in certain inputs (e.g. amount of funding and presence of certain bodies that support the AFC) that may be affected by political developments.
- The ToC does not differentiate between activities that take place at the local and national level and assumes that they have relevance for how Covenant-related activities are translated into outcomes and impacts.

A.4. External influences

Related to the assumptions outlined above, there are several external influences that might affect the outputs, outcomes, and impacts of the Covenant:

- The **COVID-19 pandemic** has affected the intended timelines of projects, requiring extensions due to project teams not being able to attend physical sites or reduced productivity (e.g. through sickness, people leaving the workforce). The pandemic also prompted a rise in beneficiary numbers and demand, particularly with respect to mental health and loneliness support, with an accompanying reduction in fundraising across the charity sector.

- The **'cost of living crisis'** represents another possible source of influence over the Covenant's delivery. This has the potential not only to result in a reprioritisation of target support areas (e.g. employment, housing and accommodation) and a reduction in revenue-raising activities across the charity sector, but also to exert unique pressures on members of the AFC.
- **UK Government policy** has a crucial bearing on the Covenant's implementation, especially with respect to securing necessary funding. Between 2010/11 and 2015/16, the CSP of local authorities in England decreased by 25 per cent, largely due to reductions in central government funding.³⁶⁵ This pattern was reversed between 2015/16 and 2023/24, with CSP increasing by 4 per cent.³⁶⁶ However, the overall trend has prompted some councils to reduce investment in non-statutory services and initiatives, including those aiding the delivery of the Covenant. The Labour government has also announced a series of Covenant-related initiatives, including the intended waiving of visa fees for non-UK veterans with four or more years of service (and their dependents) as well as the proposed appointment of an independent Armed Forces Commissioner to represent the needs of serving personnel and their families.³⁶⁷
- **Public perceptions and awareness of the AFC** can also exert an influence over the delivery of the Covenant. How members of the AFC are viewed by the public will

inform the extent to which the Covenant's principles are integrated into practice and, in the case of the charity and voluntary sectors, determine the levels of financial and practical assistance available to facilitate its implementation.

- The **wider ecosystem of support for the AFC** could multiply and extend the benefits of the Covenant's delivery, assuming there is no duplication of effort or prohibitive competition between service providers.

A.5. Risks

Alongside the assumptions embedded in the ToC described above, there is a range of general risks to the successful delivery of the Covenant. The paragraphs below summarise these risks, highlighting their potential impact on the Covenant's ongoing implementation:

- With the exception of those service providers subject to the Covenant Duty, **the provision of support to aid the Covenant's delivery remains voluntary**. There is therefore an inherent risk that stakeholders may reduce or withdraw their assistance, especially in light of the external influences outlined above.
- In addition to statutory service providers, **the Covenant's delivery relies heavily on charity and voluntary organisations**. As noted by a representative from the Directory of Social Change, '[t]he services that the Armed Forces charities provide [...] aren't an "add-on" or "nice to have" – they're central to the quality of life for millions of Serving and ex-Serving personnel and their

365 National Audit Office (2025). CSP is a measure of available funds via government grants, council tax, and locally retained business rates.

366 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2025).

367 Allison (2025); UK Parliament (2025b).

families’.³⁶⁸ While this has the potential to broaden the scope and impact of the Covenant’s delivery, it also presents a potential risk owing to the continued instability of the charity and voluntary sectors. Of note is the recent contraction of the UK charity sector, which lost an average of 44.3 organisations each year between 2016 and 2020.³⁶⁹

- There is a risk that **signatories’ commitment to facilitating the Covenant’s delivery reduces with time or because of competing priorities.** The introduction of the Covenant Duty was, in part, informed by a desire to avoid such an outcome. Yet this obligation is currently restricted to a select group of public bodies and support areas (healthcare, education, and housing).

- It is possible that **the nature and extent of the Covenant’s impact remain unclear owing to the currently limited data available.** This may result in the misallocation of inputs and activities, as well as prevent the sharing and/or consolidation of best practice amongst stakeholders.
- The Covenant’s stated objectives of removing disadvantage and, in certain instances, awarding special consideration to members of the AFC may give rise to inaccurate perceptions of this group. In particular, the impression may be given that *all* of those belonging to the AFC require dedicated support due to their (or a family member’s) military Service.

368 Ministry of Defence (2020), p.17.

369 Cole et al. (2020).

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