

SKDC Armed Forces' Champion Comment

I am grateful, Madame Chair, and I sense that I am swimming against the current...

I am SKDC's Armed Forces Champion. I am also Chair of the Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Board and I will be briefing the Board on this discussion and decision when the Board next meets.

I wrote to members of this Committee on 18 July 2023. I said that I was delighted that the proposal to extend the Local Council Tax Support Scheme to Veterans had been approved. I thought that the proposal showed fine initiative and that the vote reflected SKDC's commitment to honour the Armed Forces Covenant and support the Armed Forces Community, and to advocate that support, as it is required to do.

I noted the exhaustive and meticulous consultation process that would take place and anticipated that potential costs would be explored in detail. I expressed the view that this decision reflected well on the Committee.

I think the consultation was, indeed, exhaustive and meticulous and potential costs have been explored in detail. The proposal has been adapted and refined and costs are now far better understood now than they were. This was concurrent with visceral resistance to the proposal in meetings, in emails and in social media exchanges.

Resistance that disregarded the fact that 70.3% of those who responded to the consultation agreed with the introduction of a Veterans' Council Tax discount against 17.5% who did not. Resistance that ignored the fact that it is the views of those who respond to surveys that count, however many or few, not those who do not.

Resistance that looked for ways¹ to implement the proposal as it was developed rather than ways to make it work. Resistance that included comments about 'discounts for retired brigadiers'.

As the Independent Review of UK Government Welfare Services for Veterans in July 2023 noted, the Veteran welfare system is a complex ecosystem, built up over the last century, with services bolted on over time. It is difficult to understand the full scope of the system and its connections and interfaces, and it can feel almost impenetrable for those outside the system seeking support.

Therefore, in seeking to provide an additional and targeted element of support to a specific group of Veterans, complexity is a given. The comprehensive report before the Committee acknowledges this complexity. And I agree with the Leader's comments and echo his thanks in that respect.

I was deeply dismayed by the recommendation that 'no further work is undertaken on the development of a Council Tax Support Scheme for Veterans. It would not be the only scheme that applies to some people and not others, nor would it be the first to be complex, convoluted and difficult to understand.

MoD's Armed Forces' Covenant Team said that it was excellent that we are considering other ways to support the Armed Forces Community.

And the Chair of the East Midlands Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee said that this was a laudable proposal that might provide a concrete example of the Covenant not being a ceiling but actually a floor for improvements in outcomes for those who have served; a practical offer to address in-work poverty within the Veteran community. Approval would send a very strong signal about how important the Veteran community is perceived to be in the district. Stifling the scheme now would, I suspect, send an equally strong signal.

Thank you.

¹ **Note:** Cllr Dixon-Warren has made it clear that he intended to say "...Resistance that looked for ways not to implement the proposal...".