



AFF Conference 2008 - Update

Conference 2008 was attended by over 500 delegates. Speakers included Derek Twigg, Under Secretary of State for Defence, Gen Sir Freddie Viggers, Adjutant General (AG), Vice Admiral Tim Laurence, Chief Executive Defence Estates (CE DE), and General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff (CGS).

Issues discussed were:

1. Housing.

- a. Lack of investment. Derek Twigg accepted responsibility for lack of investment in accommodation, and stated that the £8bn spending over the next decade would see improvements. CE DE argued that real in-roads were being made into the worst estates, added to which old fashioned kitchens and bathrooms would be replaced over the next 2-3 years. AG called for no further increases in accommodation charges until they were genuinely merited.
- b. HICs. CE DE acknowledged that Warminster and Aldershot were the worst; improving these two centres was now top priority. Staff were receiving training and visiting estates, and the number of HICs was also under debate. On the ground management was debated; CE DE admitted that the housing officers and MHS technical offers had not been sufficiently engaged, but had now been given a geographical patch to look after and would be more actively involved. CRF (Lt Gen Nick Parker, Commander Regional Forces) said the HICs lacked knowledge of who their local units were. He argued that the Chain of Command needed to be reconnected and guaranteed military liaison officers would be in the poorest HICs to liaise between customers and HIC staff within 1 month of Conference. They would remain in place for at least one year.
- c. Voids. The state of repair of patches with large number of voids was debated, in particular mixed estates. CRF said income was needed from mixed estates; the solution of civilian and military families living side by side and the responsibility to prevent 'sink estates' fell to him. CE DE said they were in discussions with housing associations to rent out some voids, and in Woolwich the first agreement had been signed. DE would try hard to only lease houses in separate blocks. CRF said the Chain of Command needed to be reconnected over this issue as well and that the Army needed to be more clear about its accommodation requirements.
- d. Repairs & Maintenance and Allocations. CRF acknowledged that DE and MHS had lost the confidence of the community they were looking after; the service was not improving as much as people were being told. He

asked for people to write to him with their housing problems¹. MD MHS (Seumas Kerr, Managing Director MODern Housing Solutions) claimed that MHS staff were being re-trained to deliver better customer service.

- e. Estate Wardens. CE DE said they would not be reinstated; AG suggested that veterans could be employed as Estate Wardens.

2. Health

- a. Selly Oak. Derek Twigg stated that it was clinically excellent and that welfare support had substantially improved. Currently, there was a military managed ward and there would be a new ward in the new Selly Oak hospital supported by military ethos.
 - b. NHS waiting lists. Progress was being made; the MOD was working closely with the Department of Health.
 - c. Dentists. Derek Twigg believed that the NHS operating framework was the way forward, but further work needed to be done to make sure PCTs deliver.
3. **Service Personnel Command Paper**. Government paper that reviews what is currently provided for Service personnel, their families and veterans; it was engaging the rest of government as never before been possible.
 4. **Compensation for wounded soldiers**. Being looked at it again to see what more could be done to improve the package. Regarding psychological support for families, Combat Stress (www.combatstress.org.uk) was able to offer this.
 5. **Foreign & Commonwealth**. The new Home Office criteria for nationalisation charges have not been extended to spouses. AG stated there was a need to see F&C spouses as key workers. The MOD was working with the UK Borders Authority and this issue was in the Service Personnel Command Paper; hopefully it will get changed.
 6. **NI Normalisation and loss of allowances**. Allowances were designed to recognise the specific nature of living in the Province; following normalisation it was a hard task to convince AFPRB (Armed Forces Pay Review Board) that allowances were still needed. AG stated there was a need to do a review of the policy and practice of living in NI.
 7. **Change of marital status**. The period of 93 days to leave SFA on divorce was questioned. AG said there was a need to define times at which events have to happen. PS4 were reviewing this from an Army perspective as there was a need for a more realistic and up to date approach, and for a simpler eviction notice procedure.
 8. **Electoral Votes** & facilitating ease of voting for the Service community. Proxy votes had been an improvement. An electronic voting system was being looked at and would possibly be trialled on an overseas base.

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