



Service Personnel Policy Families

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See Distribution

03 December 2001

MINUTES OF SERVICE FAMILIES TASK FORCE MINISTERIAL GROUP MEETING

Please find attached the minutes of the above meeting, held on 15 November.

B R N DAVIDSON

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AD SP Pol Families

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PS/Barbara Roche MP, Cabinet Office
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PS/John Hutton MP, Department of Health
PS/Maria Eagle MP, Department of Work and Pensions
PS/Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, Department of Education and Skills
PS/Sally Keeble MP, Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
PS/Rt Hon Paul Boateng MP, Treasury
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SERVICE FAMILY TASK FORCE MINISTERIAL GROUP MEETING

Minutes of a Meeting held in the Old War Office
On Thursday 15 November at 4.30pm

PRESENT

Rt Hon Adam Ingram MP
Minister of State for Armed Forces
(Chair)

Rt Hon Barbara Roche MP
Minister of State, Cabinet Office

Mr Stephen Timms MP
Minister of State for School Standards

Ms Maria Eagle MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
for Work and Pensions

Mr Dermot Nesbitt MLA
Junior Minister in the Office of First
Minister and Deputy First Minister
Northern Ireland Executive Committee

Mr Mark Svensson
representing the Department of Health

Mr Paul Downie
representing the Department of Transport
and Local Regions

Ms Roz Harvey
representing the Treasury

Mr Mike Ewart
representing the Scottish Executive

Ms Rosemary Kennedy
Representing the National Assembly
of Wales

Air Marshal Sir Malcolm Pledger
Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Personnel)

Commodore Noel Preston Jones
Director Service Personnel Policy
(Manning and Welfare)

ALSO PRESENT

Lt Col Brian Davidson
Assistant Director Service Personnel Policy
(Families) (Secretary)

Commander Simon Ancona
Military Assistant, Minister of State for
Armed Forces

ITEM 1 - INTRODUCTION

Mr Ingram welcomed everyone to the Service Family Task Force Ministerial Group Meeting, pointing out that it was the first that had been held since September 1999, although there had been considerable work carried out by officials during the intervening period. He emphasised to the meeting the uniqueness of Service families. If personnel were to be recruited and retained in the Armed Forces it was essential that all Government Departments were actively engaged in resolving

the issues that were becoming an increasing irritant to Service families. The consistent message he had been receiving on his visits was that health and education issues were of the most concern.

He intended to put as much energy as possible into addressing these concerns; however, there was a need for individual Departments to tackle the issues jointly. There was a rising sense of frustration from families, some of whom considered that there needed to be positive discrimination to ensure that they were not disadvantaged by their necessarily mobile lifestyle. Mr Ingram said that he fully accepted that positive discrimination would be difficult to sell to OGDs but he certainly wanted any disadvantages removed.

ITEM 2 - PRESENTATION

Commodore Preston-Jones gave a short presentation to the meeting, explaining the size of the Armed Forces, the details of typical careers and the lifestyle of Service families.

ITEM 3 - PRINCIPLES

Mr Ingram introduced the item by explaining that many of the problems affecting Service families arise because of the way in which legislation or regulations have been written. While acknowledging the responsibility of the MOD in examining new legislation he considered that Departments should ensure that, given the size of the interest group, the implications for Service families were properly addressed, when preparing new legislation and regulations. He drew attention to the suggested principles that had been issued to Departments prior to the meeting, which were that:

- a. subject to the normal exigencies of Service life (for which allowance is made by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body in setting pay and charges), dependant families of Service personnel should not be unfairly disadvantaged in comparison with their civilian counterparts;
- b. when preparing new legislation and regulations, all Departments would ensure that the implications for dependant families of Service personnel are properly addressed, and will consult the MOD sufficiently in advance;
- c. the Group agree that acceptance of these principles should be announced to the Service Family Associations.

In response Ms Eagle stated that she would not be in a position to agree to the proposals at this meeting. There was ambiguity in the wording of the first principle as to whether it sought parity with civilian counterparts, who were overseas, or parity with those in the UK. There were different rules for each benefit and the implications for each would need to be examined. There were already guidelines for many of the benefits which enabled Service personnel to be treated as normally resident in the UK, when serving overseas. This already gave them special treatment in comparison to their civilian counterparts who were working overseas. Mr Ingram asked whether benefits could follow individual claimants when they move; Ms Eagle acknowledged this possibility but indicated that DWP would need time to consider such a proposal.

In discussions on the examination of emerging legislation, it was suggested that this was part of the machinery of Government and should already be happening. It was up to the MOD to examine legislation to see what implications it might have on their personnel. Air Marshal Pledger pointed out that this did not always work and the MOD was brought into the loop too late.

Mrs Roche suggested that there needed to be a parallel group at officials level, to map the various benefits and allowances and look at the different requirements for residency, defined in regulations. The officials group could also examine the process for ensuring the MOD were made aware of changing legislation and regulations.

Mr Ingram thanked Mrs Roche for this helpful suggestion. He emphasised that the difficulties encountered by Service families were not just an issue for MOD but required involvement from all Government Departments. He wanted to ensure that a clear answer was given on whether or not these principles could be accepted. There was a requirement for Departments to be proactive in taking these issues forward. The meeting of officials would need to be at a senior enough level to provide a broad overview and to ensure that a timetable is devised for resolution of the issues. It was agreed that there would be an early meeting of senior officials to take this matter forward. (Afternote: To reinforce the work that has already taken place between MOD and other Government Department officials, bilateral meetings are being arranged between Air Marshal Pledger and representatives of DfES, DWP and DH.)

Mr Nesbitt apologised that he would have to leave the meeting early and confirmed that he would be very willing to pursue the SFTF's various topics within the Northern Ireland Executive. He made clear that he had no objection to the principles outlined by Mr Ingram, as he saw them as no more, nor less, than the aspiration for all groups in society

ITEM 4 – RESIDENCY STATUS

This item had been discussed under the previous item and would be taken forward in the meeting of senior officials, especially to investigate MOD's proposal that, as a matter of principle, Service families should normally be regarded as 'resident in the UK' when on an overseas posting.

ITEM 5 – SCHOOLS ADMISSIONS

Mr Ingram drew attention to the particular problems faced by Service family in finding school places. He referred to the background information that had been issued to Departments with the agenda.

Mr Timms in reply stated that the DfES was currently reviewing the School Admissions legislation. DfES was considering whether to stipulate that a school admissions forum should be established for every Local Education Authority (LEA), and that that a Service representative should sit on the forum in appropriate areas. The comments received from the MOD in response to the consultation document were being considered. The suggestion that places should be reserved for Service children is unlikely to be considered; however, in the process of revising the Code of Guidance to LEAs, consideration was being given to the particular problems faced by Service families. The issues could be further discussed when the senior officials meet.

Mr Ingram pointed out that some Local Authorities give priority to Service leavers in the allocation of housing, so felt that there was a precedent for a measure of positive discrimination for Service families. He also considered that LEAs should plot the pattern of movement of Service children so that better planning and provision for them could be made. In reply Mr Timms pointed out that it would not be acceptable to leave school places empty and it would not be possible to forecast accurately the age or numbers of Service children that might be posted into the area in the future. He accepted that there was a need for DfES to find out why some LEAs accept applications without an address, while others do not.

ITEM 6 – NHS WAITING LISTS Mr Ingram drew attention to the problems faced by Service families who were on a waiting list for a consultant's appointment or operation, and were posted to a different area before they reached the top of the list. They could then find themselves at the bottom of the waiting list in the new Trust area.

Mr Svensson informed the meeting that the implementation of the NHS plan, which will reduce waiting lists, should do much to resolve this issue. The NHS Waiting and Booking Team were currently producing guidance to be given to Service families advising them on the steps to take when moving between Trust areas. He would also be looking at including particular mention of Service families in the planning guidance which was shortly to be issued to NHS Trusts although Air Marshal Pledger wondered how much effect such guidance has on NHS Trusts in practice. He also informed Mr Ingram that his Minister was happy to arrange a bilateral to further discuss the issues facing Service families.

ITEM 7 ACCEPTANCE OF ENGLISH TEACHING QUALIFICATIONS IN SCOTLAND

Mr Ingram introduced this item and in reply Mr Ewart stated that this was an issue not only confined to Service families. The qualification requirements for teaching in Scotland were being reviewed, however progress was slow. The implementation of the rules was a matter for the General Teaching Council of Scotland. The Scottish Executive would be happy to have further discussions with MOD officials and to keep them informed on the progress of this issue. The Executive would also be happy to discuss school admissions.

ITEM 8 – ANY OTHER BUSINESS Mr Paul Downie for the Department of Transport and Local Regions stated that his Minister, Mrs Keeble, was concerned with the issue of Service spouses who found themselves homeless when a marriage broke up. She would like officials from her Department to have further discussions with the MOD on this issue so that there was a coordinated approach. This was agreed.