

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

The Introduction of the Armed Forces Bill in Parliament

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):

INTRODUCTION OF THE BILL

I welcome the introduction of the Armed Forces Bill to Parliament, which took place on 15 January 2026. This legislation represents an important step in reinforcing governmental commitment to the Armed Forces community.

PURPOSE OF THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT

The Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) is a UK-wide pledge designed to ensure that members of the Armed Forces community are not disadvantaged when accessing public services. It places duties on public bodies requiring them to give due consideration to its principles in the exercise of their functions. The Armed Forces Act enshrined key parts of the AFC into law, creating a statutory duty for these public bodies to have due regard to the Covenant principles. The new Bill will extend the Covenant principles, and I am keen to ensure that my Department does all that it can to support implementation.

CONTEXT FOR EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

I recognise that children from Armed Forces families often face unique challenges, such as frequent mobility, transitions between schools, and concerns around emotional wellbeing. These factors can disrupt continuity of learning and affect social integration for children of service personnel (CoSP) within the school environment. The Department, the Education Authority (EA) and schools have a responsibility to mitigate these disadvantages and provide appropriate support to ensure these children can thrive and reach their potential.

ACTIONS TAKEN TO DATE

To date, several measures have been implemented by my Department to support CoSP. An additional funding premium is provided to schools through the Common Funding Formula for CoSP pupils which enables schools to provide flexible support as best suits their cohort. Engagement and data-gathering exercises, including surveying schools with significant numbers of CoSP, have helped to identify particular challenges faced by this cohort of children and will help to inform policy considerations in this area to ensure that we are best supporting the additional needs of CoSP. I have asked officials to engage further with these schools.

I have appointed the Director of Raising Aspirations and Supporting Learning, who has policy responsibility for CoSP as the Department's Armed Forces Liaison Officer in order to ensure substantive and meaningful oversight for this area.

The EA applies AFC principles in practice, for instance, admissions and Pupil Allocation Numbers within schools can be amended to ensure that CoSP are treated fairly in the admissions' process. CoSP also benefit from the EA's wider offering, including the School Improvement Service which provides guidance on educational attainment and curriculum matters through assigned professionals. In addition, efforts are underway to secure Ministry of Defence funding for psychology services within the EA to provide specialist support for these children.

NEXT STEPS

Looking ahead, my Department will strive to strengthen engagement with schools which have significant numbers of children from Armed Forces families and explore the scope for additional support measures and facilitation of the sharing of best practice. It is also my intention to issue updated guidance to all schools, reminding them of their duties under the AFC and providing practical advice. Furthermore, the Department will continue to collaborate with stakeholders to identify, promote, and implement effective strategies that support Armed Forces families and enhance educational outcomes for their children.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of the Armed Forces Bill marks a significant milestone in reaffirming the commitment to the Armed Forces community, ensuring that their families receive the support they deserve. By embedding the principles of the AFC into education policy and practice, we can help mitigate the challenges faced by service children and promote equality of opportunity. Through continued collaboration, targeted interventions, and the sharing of best practice, the Department will work to create an inclusive and supportive environment where every child from an Armed Forces family is supported to achieve their full potential.