

# POLICY BRIEFING

## Public Attitudes to the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland (NI)

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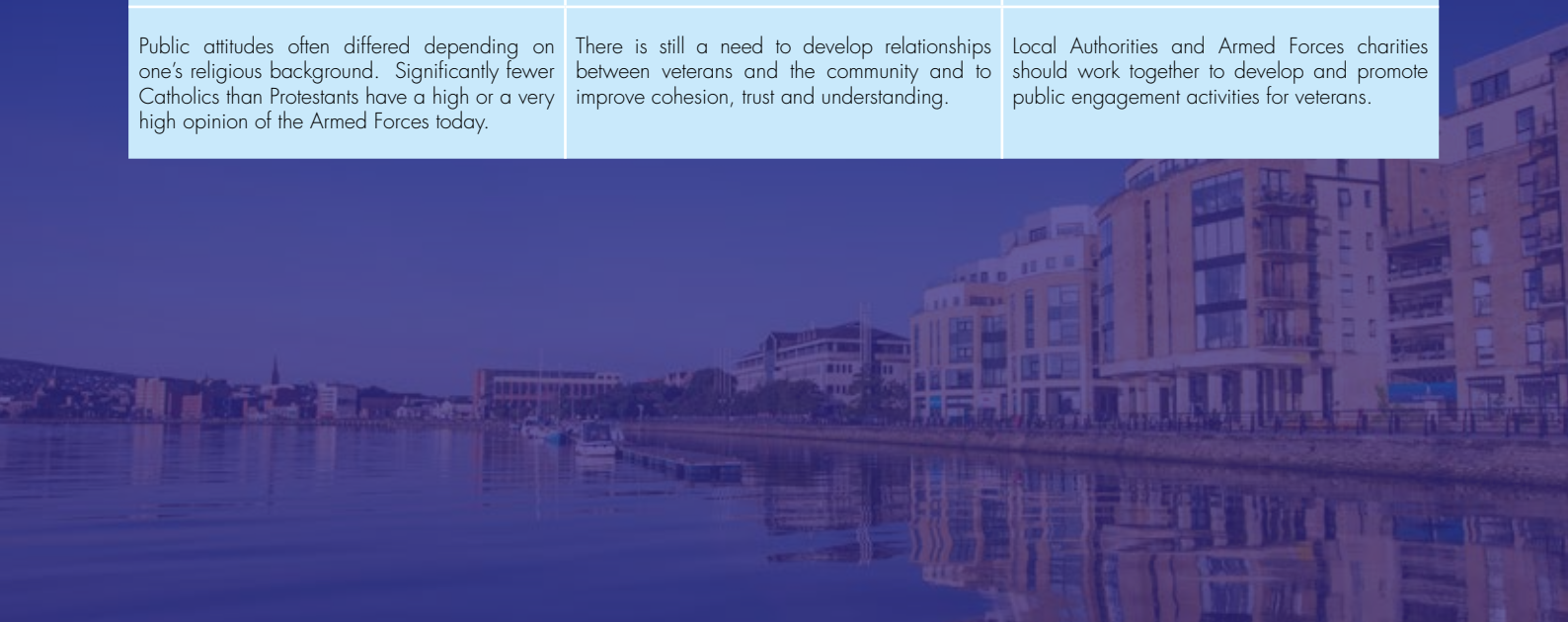
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The attitudes and opinions about the UK Armed Forces and their actions during the Troubles are complex and political tensions continue. Until now, the perception has been that such opinions would be divided along religious, political and ethnic lines (Loyalist/Protestant supportive and Republican/Catholic unsupportive). Because of this, it was important to conduct the first survey about public attitudes towards the UK Armed Forces in the region, to help inform debates on how to best support the veteran population in NI. **Public Attitudes to the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland** (see Armour et al, 2018) is the fourth in a series of reports from the Northern Ireland Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Study

(NIVHWS). In 2017, the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT) funded the inclusion of the first ever set of questions on public attitudes towards current and former UK Armed Forces personnel in NI in the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT). NILT respondents were asked for their opinion on a range of issues related to the UK Armed Forces in NI, and responses were explored with reference to key demographic variables. Some of the questions mirrored those routinely asked in public attitudes surveys in Great Britain so that a regional comparison could take place. A number of questions focused on issues arising out of NI's status as a 'post-conflict' society.

### Key Findings And Recommendations

Key Findings	Implications	Associated Recommendations
Though some groups in NI still hold negative views about the UK Armed Forces, attitudes are generally positive and 78% of the NI public respected the Armed Forces in general.	The way that some veterans feel they are perceived is not reflective of actual public attitudes towards veterans.	There is a need to build relationships between veterans and the wider community, as feeling supported by the public could lead to better mental health and wellbeing within the veteran (NI) population and increase their willingness to seek help.
Public attitudes often differed depending on one's religious background. Significantly fewer Catholics than Protestants have a high or a very high opinion of the Armed Forces today.	There is still a need to develop relationships between veterans and the community and to improve cohesion, trust and understanding.	Local Authorities and Armed Forces charities should work together to develop and promote public engagement activities for veterans.



Key Findings	Implications	Actions
Almost half of those surveyed believed that those who have been in the Armed Forces are more likely to have problems with alcohol and/or mental health problems than someone from the general population.	Negative perceptions of veterans' mental health and alcohol use could increase stigma and increase reluctance among veterans to disclose their veteran status.	A public facing campaign could promote positive images of veteran mental health and address perceptions of alcohol misuse.
Almost one in five respondents believed that public services in NI discriminate against people who have been in the Armed Forces.	There may be a lack of confidence that public services are not discriminating against UK Armed Forces personnel.	Public sector agencies should consider monitoring techniques which include veteran status in order to improve understanding of outcomes for veterans and provide evidence of fair and equal treatment of veterans.
There were variations in opinions within the sample according to geographical location, age, gender, religion and family connections. The most striking being the differences in relation to religion.	The more negative opinions about the Armed Forces of Catholics relative to Protestants reflect the legacy of the conflict.	There needs to be more community integration and building of relationships to help normalise relationships across NI.
The vast majority of respondents (80%) indicated that they had never heard of the Armed Forces Covenant. <sup>1</sup>	There is a need for raising awareness about the Covenant amongst service personnel, veterans and the wider population.	A public engagement exercise could increase awareness of the Covenant and help identify potential solutions to its lack of implementation in NI.
There is public support for the provision of tailored services to veterans. For example, 69% of the NI population believed that soldiers with service related PTSD should get priority treatment for their mental health problem.	It may be the case that people in NI are willing to separate out their feelings about institutions and their feelings about individual citizens.	Stakeholders, including veterans, could seek to find an alternative terminology for the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant which would be less politically contentious.

## References

Armour, C, Waterhouse-Bradley, B., Ross, J., McLafferty, M., Hall, M. (2018). Public Attitudes to the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Study. Retrieved from: <https://www.fim-trust.org/reports/>

<sup>1</sup>In the rest of the UK, the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) provides a guarantee that those who have served in the UK Armed Forces and their families will not be disadvantaged as a result of their military service. The AFC also suggests that special consideration may be appropriate for some members of the Armed Forces community. In NI, debates concerning the full implementation of the AFC are bound up with debates about the compatibility of the Covenant with robust equality legislation and contested narratives concerning the role and actions of the UK Armed Forces during the conflict.

## Acknowledgements

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