



Research Update

Public Attitudes to the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland (NI) is the only region of the United Kingdom (UK) where the modern military have been deployed in an operational capacity. It is also the only region where 'home service' units existed. Indeed, more than 40,000 'home service' veterans served in either the Ulster Defence Regiment or the Royal Irish Regiment. These regiments were recruited locally and often included individuals who served in a part-time capacity alongside their civilian jobs.

Research into public attitudes in Britain toward UK Armed Forces suggests they are held in high regard, in spite of low public support for recent missions in Iraq and Afghanistan (NatCen, 2012). However, such research has not been undertaken in Northern Ireland, despite significant differences in context related to the role of the UK Armed Forces during the Troubles. The likelihood that the part-time soldier patrolling the street could also be a neighbour, as well as the presence of a formal military operation, presents a unique set of circumstances in which to examine public acceptance of military personnel, given that public attitudes may be strongly related to the legacy of the Troubles.

Thus, in 2017, the **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey** asked the public about their attitudes towards a range of issues relating to Armed Forces. While the survey refers to the UK Armed Forces (i.e. Royal Navy/Marines, Army and Royal Air Force), many respondents were likely to base their responses on their opinions of the British Army, who played a key role in NI during the Troubles. This Research Update explores the historical and political context, as well as key findings from the survey. Further detail on the findings, and the potential policy implications, are available in the full report *Public Attitudes towards Veterans in Northern Ireland* (Armour et al, 2018).

The UK Armed Forces and the Troubles

The British Army was initially deployed to the streets of Northern Ireland in 1969 at the request of the then devolved unionist government in response to increasing civil unrest. This led to a visible presence of the British Army until 2007 via Operation Banner. Whilst these armed forces were welcomed in many communities, civilian/military relations can be complex and fraught, particularly when their role

is politicised. Throughout the course of Operation Banner, there were issues with contentious policies and practices, such as stop and search, interrogation and internment, and restricted movement. Some of these policies were more likely to affect those living in predominantly Catholic and socio-economically deprived areas (Darby, 2003).

As a result of the Troubles (including post-1998 figures), 203 'home service' soldiers and veterans died (including 60 after they had left the forces), and 590 were injured, compared to 454 deaths and 5,672 injuries among other UK Armed Forces personnel (CAIN, 2018, www.ark.ac.uk/cain). The majority of 'home service' deaths and injuries occurred off-duty. Security issues continue to affect these individuals, many of whom remain reluctant to disclose their service, which in turn impacts their employment prospects and their willingness to access some public services (see Armour et al, 2017 for a more detailed discussion). Because of the politicised and contested nature of the presence of the UK Armed Forces in Northern Ireland, opinions of their role during the Troubles are assumed to vary among different identity groups.

Table 1: Opinion of UK Armed Forces

	%	
	Opinion of how UK Armed Forces acted during the Troubles	Opinion of the UK Armed Forces today
Very high	12	15
High	21	27
Neither high nor low	27	35
Low	12	5
Very low	14	7
Don't know	14	11

Attitudes towards Armed Forces

Approximately one third of NILT respondents had a positive opinion of how the UK Armed Forces acted *during the Troubles* (Table 1). However, opinion was divided along religious lines with only 6 per cent of Catholic participants indicating that they had either a high or very high opinion in comparison to 61 per cent of Protestants. Around one third of 18-24-year-olds reported not having an opinion on the Armed Forces during that period, and a further 29 per cent had neither high nor low opinion; perhaps because they were not directly impacted by the Troubles or did not live through them. However, those who expressed an opinion in this younger age group were more likely to have a negative opinion. Indeed, positive opinions increased slightly with age, with those aged 65 and over having the most positive opinions of the UK Armed Forces during the Troubles (48%).

In relation to the UK Armed Forces *today*, over 40 per cent of respondents indicated that they have a high or very high opinion, although around a third had neither high nor low opinion (Table 1). Divergences were obvious along religious lines, with only 13 per cent of Catholics having positive opinions, compared with 71 per cent of Protestants and 44 per cent of those with no religion. Again, younger participants were less positive, and more likely to indicate

that they did not know or had a neutral opinion.

These findings suggest more positive opinion of UK Armed Forces now, compared to during the Troubles. In particular, one half of Catholic respondents had a negative opinion of how they acted during the Troubles, while 26 per cent thought this of UK Armed Forces today.

The Life and Times survey also explored opinion to armed forces more widely. There was little agreement (16%) for the statement 'I feel more negatively about members of the UK Armed Forces who served in Northern Ireland than I do about

those who fought in other conflicts', and 62 per cent disagreed with this. The majority of respondents indicated that they respect the armed forces of different countries, with more than three quarters (78%) either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement 'I don't respect the armed forces of any country'.

Social distance

NILT respondents were asked if they would be comfortable in a number of scenarios with someone who had been in the UK Armed Forces. Overall, Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents would be comfortable if someone who had been in the UK Armed Forces moved in next door (70%) or married a close relative (70%). This figure falls slightly in relation to a family member joining the Armed Forces (63%), which may be related to fear for that family member, rather than solely being due to negative attitudes towards the Armed Forces.

Discrimination

When asked whether or not those who have served in the UK Armed Forces experienced discrimination, opinions were mixed. Around 1 in 5

Figure 1: Acceptance of Armed Forces veterans (%)

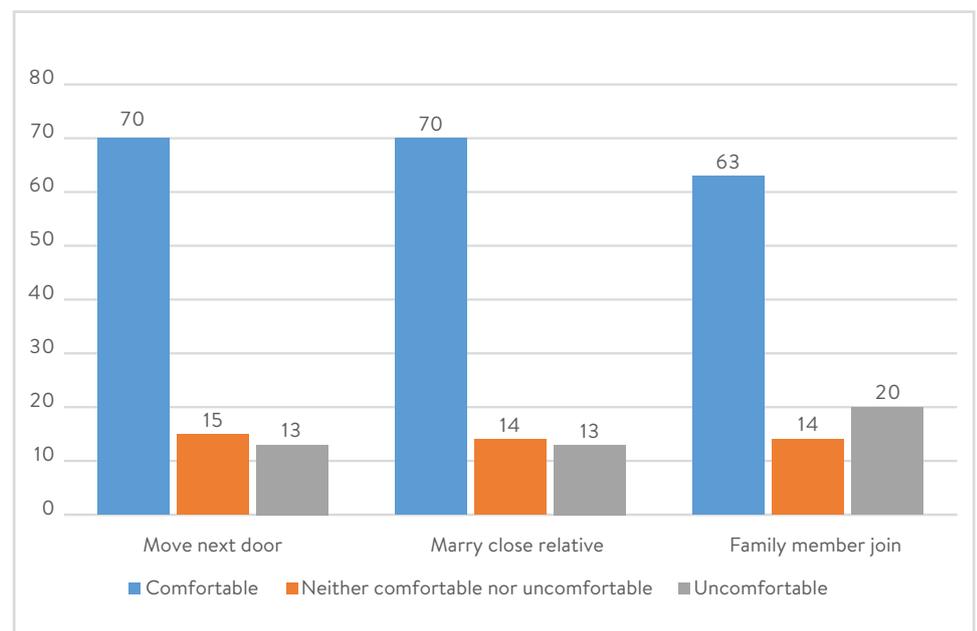


Table 2: Attitudes related to Armed Forces Covenant

	%	
	Definitely or probably fair	Definitely or probably not fair
The Covenant promises that members of the UK Armed Forces will never be put at a disadvantage in getting access to things like health treatments or housing because of their time in the military. Thinking about an ex-soldier living in England – is this fair?	78	12
The Covenant promises that members of the UK Armed Forces may get priority health treatment or housing if they face special issue as a result of their time in the military, for example if they are injured. An ex-soldier living in England – is this fair?	72	19
The AFC does not apply in NI. Some people would like the rules extended to here but others feel that they are unnecessary. Suppose an ex-soldier living in NI was given priority health treatment or housing because of their injuries – is this fair?	66	22
Frank was a soldier in Afghanistan before returning to his home town of Belfast. Before joining, he was on a waiting list for a Housing Executive house, he was deployed, he had to go back to the bottom of the housing list. Suppose he was allowed to keep his place on the waiting list – is this fair?	67	22
Anna was also a soldier in Afghanistan before returning to her home in Enniskillen. She suffers from PTSD because of her experiences in Afghanistan. If she lived in England she would get priority treatment -is this fair?	69	21

people (19%) thought that former Armed Forces personnel were discriminated against by some public services in Northern Ireland, whilst 30 per cent believed that they were not. Furthermore, 32 per cent did not know how to respond, and 19% gave a neutral response (neither agree nor disagree), indicating perhaps that almost half of the population were unsure.

Opinion was split about whether those who were in the Armed Forces were generally disadvantaged in Northern Ireland due to their military service. Whilst 25 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement, 26 per cent disagreed, and 21 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. Nearly one in three respondents did not know how to answer this questions.

Armed Forces Covenant

In the rest of the UK, the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC, or ‘the Covenant’)

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 has two core principles: no member of the current or former Armed Forces community should be disadvantaged compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and special consideration may be appropriate for some members of the Armed Forces community such as those who have been injured or bereaved (House of Commons Library, 2018). This commitment is actioned through specialist services, exemptions related to some eligibility requirements (such as for schools and public housing), and is underpinned by an investment of £10m per annum.

However, there are concerns that the implementation of the AFC in Northern Ireland could provide preferential access to government services for military personnel, and

thus contravene Section 75 of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act. Section 75 requires public authorities to carry out their functions and duties equally irrespective of gender, ethnicity, political opinion, religious belief, disability, age, sexual orientation, dependant and marital status. While a number of key actors presented evidence to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2013) meeting that the first principle of the Covenant is in keeping with the spirit of Section 75, evidence to the same committee suggested that much of the opposition relates to political and public perceptions toward the UK Armed Forces and their role during the Troubles.

Table 2 shows overall support for the AFC among NILT participants. Almost three quarters of respondents (72%) thought that it was definitely or probably fair that current and former Armed Forces personnel living in England should receive preferential treatment afforded by the full implementation of the Covenant. Around two thirds (66%) thought the same about Armed Forces personnel living in Northern Ireland. Additionally, the majority of respondents felt that it would be fair for a soldier with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), resulting from their military experience, to get priority treatment for their mental health problem (69%) and to keep their place on the housing waiting list whilst they are on deployment (67%). However, opinion was very much divided according to community background. In particular, 87 per cent of Protestant respondents thought that was fair that an ex-soldier living in Northern Ireland is given priority health treatment or housing because of their injuries, whilst 47 per cent of Catholic respondents thought this. In addition, support for this extension of AFC to Northern Ireland increased with age.

Finally, respondents were asked if a specialist mental health service should be provided in Northern

Ireland for UK Armed Forces. There was strong support for this, with half of the respondents (51%) saying 'Yes, definitely', and a further 26 per cent saying 'Yes, probably'. The youngest age group (18-24) showed the least (yet still high levels) support (61%). Whilst 92 per cent of Protestants felt that such a service should definitely or probably be provided, support was lower among Catholics (62%).

Why do opinions matter?

The results provide important information on attitudes towards the UK Armed Forces, in the past and today. The findings give some insight into the long-term impact of armed conflict on citizens' perceptions of the Armed Forces in a post-conflict society. Opinions clearly vary according to respondents' religion and age, reflecting differential experiences of armed forces and of the Troubles. Importantly, the Life and Times survey provides an evidence base to inform ongoing debates about the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant in Northern Ireland, which has the potential to promote the provision of specialist services to veterans in the region. This has important implications for the mental health and wellbeing of

veterans in Northern Ireland, many of whom are reluctant to access public services and believe that they are disadvantaged as a result of their service.

References

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Perceptive Insight carried out the interviews for the 2017 survey. 1,203 adults took part.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks.

Key Points

- One third of NILT respondents had a high opinion of how the UK Armed Forces acted during the Troubles, and 42% had a high opinion of them today.
- Most respondents would be comfortable if an ex-member of the UK Armed Forces moved next door or married a close relative, but slightly less so if a family member joined the UK Armed Forces.
- There was overall support for the Armed Forces Covenant, and for its extension to Northern Ireland.
- 76% of respondents would support a special mental health service in Northern Ireland for ex-military people.
- Results varied according to religion and age, with Catholics and younger respondents being least likely to have a positive opinion about UK Armed Forces.

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