

Forces for good: making the most of military land for public benefit

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Abstract

The UK will dispose of an unprecedented amount of state-owned military land following the restructuring of its armed forces. New government policies to encourage 'localism' and community ownership could provide opportunities to reuse military land and assets in ways that provide public benefits. These policies, combined with new strategic guidance from Britain's Defence Infrastructure Organisation, open up the possibility of valuing assets according to their long-term use and not just for the immediate capital receipt that can be obtained on disposal. This paper explores the scope for realising public benefits as a result of these developments, and argues that the Armed Forces Covenant, now enshrined in law, could provide the basis for a new partnership between defence and community interests.

Keywords: Military land, UK defence restructuring, Armed Forces Covenant, community benefits, reuse of redundant assets, localism

1 Introduction

On 18 November 2011 the Localism Act became law in the UK. Hailing the passing of nearly 500 pages of legislation and accompanying schedules, Eric Pickles, secretary of state for communities and local government, declared: 'Today marks the beginning of an historic shift of power from Whitehall to every community to take back control of their lives.'

The mantra of the Coalition government that took power in 2010 has been to devolve power to the people. New laws have established community rights to buy assets of public value and created the opportunity for local residents to become involved in neighbourhood planning. Public land and empty housing is to be handed over for development or repair.

A key test of these reforms will be the fate of much of the UK's military land. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) owns nearly 1% of the British landmass, and much of it is already or will soon become surplus to defence requirements. In the past the MOD has been able to raise significant sums by making surplus land available for development - a total of £3.4bn between 1998/99 and 2008/09, according to the National Audit Office [1]. With a rising tide of land values and property prices until 2007/08, there has even been money left over to fund community infrastructure, from affordable housing to the preservation of heritage buildings. Since the onset of recession in 2008 it has become much harder to realise such gains, both for the MOD and for local communities. Meanwhile public bodies are reassessing their requirements for land and buildings, creating a glut of unwanted property.

In 2010 the Bill Sargent Trust, a Portsmouth-based research charity, published *In the Public Interest?* [2]. This report, based on an extensive literature review and interviews with academics, practitioners and local government representatives, examined how community benefits could be achieved from the sale of military land in a post-recession environment, considering the models used in previous years and recommending changes to the valuation and disposal of public land.

The term 'community benefits' was deliberately defined widely. Such benefits may include affordable housing, opportunities to develop new businesses and economic activities, public open space, the preservation of heritage assets and retaining facilities for community use (or providing new ones). The premise of the report was that land owned by the state should be disposed of so as to maximise its social, economic and environmental value, rather than simply on the basis of the capital receipt obtainable.

The report found that aspirations for community benefits were unlikely to be achieved without changes in the MOD's approach to land disposals:

At the heart of the problem is the way HM Treasury deals with surplus public land: government departments must obtain market value and are set targets for asset sales which help to balance their departmental budgets. So if the MOD fails to achieve the expected value for a piece of land, savings must be found elsewhere. This forces the MOD to equate public benefit with departmental benefit: the future use of the site takes second place to achieving the maximum receipt.

It added:

'...without a resolution of central government's approach to disposals of publicly owned land, we are likely to see continued conflict between the short-term demands of the MOD and the long-term needs of communities. This conflict may result in long-term blight caused by neglect or inappropriate development...'

The report recommended a new approach to valuing publicly owned land, with an emphasis on the likely long term value to be gained from the future use of assets rather than on the immediate cash receipt achievable. It called for better methods of ensuring cooperation between different government departments and local stakeholders; and more effective ways of sharing good practice.

There have since been significant developments that could offer new opportunities to achieve social and economic benefits from the disposal of defence land:

- The advent of neighbourhood planning will enable local residents to promote their own development proposals;
- The Localism Act provides a new legal approach to asset transfer;
- The reorganisation of the armed forces will make new land and facilities available;
- The formal recognition of the ‘military covenant’ provides the basis for new partnerships between local communities and the armed forces.

This paper, an abbreviated version of a discussion document published by the Bill Sargent Trust in January 2012, considers the impact of current government policies and explores how a partnership approach to military land disposals could facilitate locally generated solutions to housing and economic challenges.

2 The opportunity: the changing needs of the armed forces

Britain’s armed forces are going through their most fundamental period of change since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, defence spending has come under extraordinary pressure as the government seeks to match its military commitments with radical cuts in public expenditure. The MOD is being forced to examine all its landholdings in order to maximise the use of its assets and realise whatever gains it can from the sale of surplus land. However, this exercise is being undertaken at a time when property values outside central London remain depressed and developers already have large land banks.

Much MOD land is in areas that have been highly dependent economically on military activity (such as Aldershot and Whitehill Bordon in Hampshire). The release of land creates an opportunity not only to meet housing need but also to reconfigure defence-dependent local economies.

The MOD remains one of the UK’s largest landowners. Its estate is spread over 4,000 sites and covers some 230,000 hectares, plus another 205,000 hectares where there are military rights of access and use [3]. This does not include land and buildings used by the Reserve Forces. The landholdings include more than 49,000 properties used as family accommodation, of which 6,000 are currently empty. The estate was valued at nearly £20bn in 2010, and the National Audit Office calculates that it costs £2.9bn a year to maintain [4].

The MOD’s 2006 report *In Trust and On Trust* set out a strategic goal of rationalising the estate to give fewer, larger sites, while smaller sites were to be sold [5]. This was followed by the Defence Estates Development Plan 2009, which stressed the need to relocate away from southern England, stating that the department has a ‘disproportionately large presence there’ [6]. The Strategic Defence and Security Review published in October 2010 [7] outlined two priorities: to protect the armed forces’ mission in Afghanistan, and to ‘make sure we emerge with a coherent defence capability in 2020’ [8]. But there was a third

priority, which was to balance the books: in the 12 years since the previous defence review the MOD had accumulated a deficit of £38bn. In the next five years, the review revealed, the armed forces would lose 17,000 Army, Navy and RAF jobs, and 25,000 civilian posts.

These cuts, however, turned out very quickly to be insufficient. The size of the 'black hole' in the MOD's finances had been underestimated: the funding gap for 2010-2020 was closer to £74bn, the Royal United Services Institute estimated [9]. A further wave of cuts was announced in July 2011, along with plans to rationalise the armed forces' bases. The 20,000 Service personnel based in Germany will return to the UK, and the regular Army will be centred on five 'multi-role brigades', based in Salisbury Plain, Catterick, Kirknewton near Edinburgh and Cottesmore in Rutland. These contractions will have a drastic impact on the MOD's landholdings. A much smaller military sector will require far less property for accommodation, training and upkeep of equipment.

Following the SDSR, in April 2011 Defence Estates was merged into a new Defence Infrastructure Organisation. As part of this process 2,500 jobs are being lost. The aim is to improve efficiency and reduce costs, in the light of the recognition that the savings envisaged within the SDSR are only the beginning. This process of reorganisation has slowed down the disposal of sites. In particular, the DIO must work out which UK sites are still needed following the reshuffle initiated by the withdrawal from Germany. However, this is likely to be a temporary lull. In evidence to the Commons defence select committee in July 2011 [10], former defence secretary Liam Fox undertook to assess the whole of the defence estate across the UK. Many more sites are likely to be declared surplus when the review is complete.

On 5 October 2011 the DIO published its interim strategy for land disposal [11]. This document spelled out three key objectives:

- being transparent about landholdings and disposal principles and selling land in accordance with Treasury guidelines;
- not holding land longer than necessary;
- carrying out disposals on terms that both achieve value for money in disposal receipts and generally promote development, economic activity and growth.

While the overriding principle remains unchanged - 'to get the best price reasonably obtainable' - the land disposal strategy hints at a more flexible approach than in the past. Alongside value for money and the need to hold land required for military purposes, there is explicit reference to the value of using land to promote economic development and regeneration. The document states that disposals will be done 'as swiftly as the market will allow' and normally through open competition, unless the land is required by other publicly funded bodies such as the Homes and Communities Agency, local authorities or registered social landlords. This offers the prospect of local councils or social landlords acting on behalf of smaller voluntary and community organisations to identify and acquire land for community benefit.

The strategy adds:

'The DIO's approach to future land use will be determined by local planning policies and the draft National Planning Policy Framework ... with its strong

presumption in favour of sustainable development. DIO will work with local planning authorities to help identify MOD sites capable of supporting future housing growth, making best use of previously developed land.'

The result, if the strategy is followed, should be a closer relationship between defence and the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Homes and Communities Agency than in the past.

Only one paragraph in the strategy deals with economic development and regeneration. It acknowledges that the closure of MOD bases can have a detrimental impact on host communities, adding:

'...apart from providing land with the capacity for much needed housing, the re-use of former MOD sites can often provide new and exciting opportunities for economic development and regeneration. DIO will work closely with interested parties to seek the best possible future for the site.'

While this statement is brief, it is important. The clear recognition that economic development and regeneration should be balanced against the need to maximise capital receipts should open the door to constructive negotiations about the future use of land that may be of community value. The onus, however, will be on local communities to identify land that can be reused and put forward ideas for future uses.

3 Localism: a new wave of citizen action?

Three key areas of reform under the banner of 'localism' could help local communities unlock the potential of surplus military land.

3.1 Planning reform

A raft of planning reforms is being pursued by the UK government. Especially important are the introduction of neighbourhood planning, a devolution of some planning policies to an ultra-local level, and the National Planning Policy Framework, which aims to simplify the planning process with a presumption in favour of sustainable development [12]. 'Sustainable' is defined according to the Brundtland Commission's dictum of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. However, the draft framework places greatest emphasis on growth, stressing that 'significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth through the planning system'. The National Planning Policy Framework is expected to come into force during 2012, reducing the hundreds of pages of planning advice and guidance from central government into a brief document intended to encourage flexibility and a culture of enabling development.

The principle behind neighbourhood planning is that decisions are best taken by the people closest to a proposed development. Neighbourhood plans can

specify certain types of approved development which will then receive automatic consent via a Neighbourhood Development Order. Plans can be drawn up by parish or town councils, or by neighbourhood planning forums set up for the purpose. A forum is required to set a vision for the locality and can draw up guidelines to steer future development. While the guidelines must be in line with district-wide priorities, they cannot be overturned at a higher level. A series of 'frontrunners' for neighbourhood planning were announced in April and August 2011, with a total of 126 areas piloting the scheme by the time the Localism Act was passed.

This may present an opportunity for communities affected by the disposal of surplus MOD land, or that have already been impacted by previous sales of land and assets to third parties. Particularly where land is vacant and awaiting development, a neighbourhood forum can set a vision for the area that must then be considered by the local authority when land is sold, and by new owners when managing and developing it. However, there remain risks that a lowest-common-denominator approach will prevail, with a mentality of 'development at all costs' squeezing out considerations of sustainability, economic development and community benefit. The government's proposal to retrospectively remove planning obligations agreed under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 where developments have stalled raises questions about the value of such agreements in future.

One potentially important aspect of the planning reforms is the introduction of a 'duty to cooperate' between neighbouring local authorities and other public bodies. This is particularly significant when large or strategically important sites are released for development. The duty will require the Defence Infrastructure Organisation to work closely with local planners to ensure the acceptability of disposal plans, and could help to avoid some of the complaints of poor communication that have been levelled at the MOD in the past.

3.2 Asset transfer

The value of transferring surplus or under-used public assets to community and voluntary organisations has been accepted by all political parties since the publication of the Quirk Review [13]. This follows consistent lobbying by development trusts and other community organisations, who have argued that community-owned buildings or infrastructure such as renewable energy installations create income streams (from hiring out meeting rooms and business space, for example) and collateral against which organisations can raise loans to develop services.

Community assets have a long and varied history in the UK, from the early cooperative movement to mutually-owned building societies and insurance companies [14]. In recent years they have been promoted as a means of financing community development, local service provision and training for unemployed or disadvantaged people.

The agenda of community ownership has been particularly strong in Scotland, where large estates have historically been held by absentee landlords and the land rights movement stretches back for well over a century. Since 2004 there has been a legal right for community organisations to bid for land and assets earmarked for disposal, although only a handful of transfers of ownership to community groups have now taken place under the legislation [15].

A version of the community right to buy has now become law in England. While it carries less clout than the Scottish legislation, it establishes the principle that local residents can nominate assets of community value and delay a sale or disposal while they put together proposals for their future use. This gives them a breathing space to raise funds to buy the asset when it comes on the market, although the legislation makes no provision for taking social value into account when the sale price is negotiated. Unlike the Scottish legislation, the Localism Act does not give community organisations in England a right of first refusal.

Assets can be considered as being of community value if their current or recent use has been to 'further the social wellbeing and interests of the local community' [16]. 'Operational land' as defined in Part 11 of the Town and Country Planning Act (such as highways) is excluded. In practice, there is likely to be limited scope for applying the community right to buy to military property, and these limits may well be established on a case by case basis.

While legislation has proved something of a blunt instrument in Scotland, it has created a climate in which transfers to community ownership are becoming part of the culture. In England, the rate of asset transfers has accelerated in advance of legislation as public bodies - local authorities in particular - seek to dispose of surplus land and buildings. The government-funded Asset Transfer Unit has now helped organisations in more than two-thirds of English local authorities with advice, information and expertise. A recent evaluation of the Unit's work by consultants SQW suggested more than 1,000 transfers are in progress [17]. Parks, community centres, village halls and even castles and piers are being taken over by community organisations.

This suggests there is plenty of scope for transfers outside the provisions of legislation, given a willing seller and local enthusiasm to take over an asset. The Department of Communities and Local Government suggests a 'right of first offer' may apply in such cases, where an owner agrees to sell to a community organisation before placing the property on the open market. In such circumstances there may even be scope to persuade the Defence Infrastructure Organisation to part with assets at less than book value, if it can be demonstrated that greater value will be created (and MOD liabilities reduced) through an alternative disposal route that can quickly bring an asset into community use.

The transfer of military assets to communities is relatively uncharted territory in the UK. The main current example is a plan to transfer the Machrihanish air base on the Kintyre peninsula in Scotland to a community association. Although this has been approved in a local vote, negotiations over site remediation and the upgrading of utilities have proved thorny. Because the transfer is being handled under Scottish legislation it is not likely to be replicable outside Scotland.

Important lessons may be learned, however, about the practicalities of negotiating asset transfers.

3.3 Housing policy

UK government housing policy for the last 30 years has sought to encourage private home ownership. While this broad thrust has remained unchanged despite the stagnation of the property market and the collapse of credit, there are signs of a more flexible approach and a readiness to consider new ways of meeting housing need. The Department of Communities and Local Government's housing strategy, published in November 2011, makes it clear that housing has a key role in the economy, providing jobs and training as well as homes [18]. It emphasises the need to incentivise housebuilding, with plans to underwrite 95% mortgages for first-time buyers and to make public land available for construction on a 'build now, pay later' basis. There is particular support for bringing empty homes back into use, with a £150m fund to convert empty property, and backing for self-build approaches.

Its approach to public land may be helpful for communities likely to be affected by the disposal of MOD sites. The usual Treasury objective of achieving maximum capital receipts has been significantly qualified by the emphasis on making land available at an early stage for development, with payment deferred until after building has taken place. The government estimates that 40 per cent of all previously used land suitable for development is owned by the public sector, and is keen to speed up its release. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation's disposal strategy is intended to complement this programme.

In addition to the 'build now, pay later' policy, the strategy emphasises the community right to reclaim land, first announced in February 2011 by housing minister Grant Shapps. This 'right' is an important development of the existing Public Request to Order Disposal (PROD), which applies when a public body is holding onto land and property assets that could have an alternative public or community use.

The reformed PROD mechanism creates a potentially powerful method for citizens to bring under-used property back into use by triggering an order that the owner should dispose of it. The scheme covers a range of public bodies set out in Schedule 16 to Part X of the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980. Where a public body is not included in Schedule 16, DCLG intends to sign a memorandum of understanding enabling its land to be treated in a similar manner. If the secretary of state for communities and local government considers that evidence supports a request, he can serve a disposal notice on the owner (or, in the case of bodies not covered by Schedule 16, write a letter recommending disposal).

Extending the community right to reclaim land to MOD property may be problematic, particularly given that significant areas of MOD land are affected by the Crichel Down rules, which require that land acquired by compulsion must first be offered back to the former owners or their successors. However, a

qualified right to reclaim or a strong memorandum of understanding between DCLG and MOD could provide a basis for accelerating the transfer of land that no longer has military use, advancing both the MOD's objective of estate rationalisation and the localism agenda of DCLG.

4 A new model: how the Armed Forces Covenant could bring communities together

For many years there has been concern that on leaving the forces, ex-service personnel often face difficulties in adjusting to civilian life. Some may suffer mental health problems as a result of their time in the forces, and many experience homelessness.

A survey by the Howard League for Penal Reform [19] found that around 3,000 former members of the armed forces end up in prison. While the incidence is slightly lower than among the civilian population, the offences for which they are jailed are often more serious. The study points out that while for many, life in the armed forces significantly improves a person's life chances, there are some who struggle to manage the transition to civilian life.

Failure to manage this transition can lead to drug or alcohol problems, poor health, petty crime or homelessness. Prison may be the last stage of this journey. While it is important to note that prisoners who have not served in the forces are as likely to have experienced such problems, there is strong political and public concern that this should not be the fate of people who have served their country.

4.1 The Armed Forces Covenant

In recent years the idea of the 'military covenant' between the citizens of the UK and its armed forces has gained momentum, with a strong campaign by the Royal British Legion. In July 2010 Prime Minister David Cameron established an Armed Forces Covenant Task Force, led by Professor Hew Strachan, to examine how the bonds between the armed forces and society could be strengthened. The task force recommended an 'Armed Forces Community Covenant', based on a US scheme in which local municipalities, businesses and voluntary organisations pledge their support to the military community in their area. In particular, this would strengthen the links between public services such as health and education and the local military [20].

Among the recommendations were better use of the MOD estate to provide 'mixed economy housing which would include priority for Service personnel', improved access to home ownership and financial services, and a 'veterans' privilege card' providing discounted goods and services. The Armed Forces Covenant has now been enshrined in law for the first time, with the passing of the Armed Forces Act in November 2011 [21]. The legislation requires an annual

report to Parliament setting out how the government is supporting the armed forces, their families and veterans through public services such as housing, health and education.

The Covenant states:

'Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.'

When leaving the services, armed forces personnel should have the same access to housing and employment and the same opportunities to take part in civilian society as other members of the public, and where appropriate receive special treatment. Some of the measures already agreed include plans to improve mental healthcare for service and ex-service personnel, university scholarships for the children of bereaved armed forces families, and help for former members of the forces in accessing further and higher education. Ex-forces personnel will also get additional help in accessing social housing. The armed forces covenant seeks to strengthen the ties between the forces and the wider community, especially in areas that host defence activities. To turn the idea into practice, the government has created a £30m 'community covenant grant scheme' over four years to encourage local activities that build bridges between the military and civilian population.

The thinking behind the armed forces covenant could provide an important framework for considering the future use of surplus assets. Former military buildings could be reused to provide housing or business premises for ex-service personnel and their families; some of the proceeds of land sales could be channelled into initiatives such as community land trusts, which could provide affordable homes for ex-service personnel as well as for the local population; and community initiatives involving ex-service personnel could be given help and support in bidding for surplus property.

4.2 Long term value

Taken together, the new emphasis on the armed forces covenant, combined with the greater flexibility implied by changes to the housing and planning regime, the recognition of the importance of economic development and regeneration within the DIO's disposal strategy, and the government's backing for the development of community assets, could provide the basis for a new partnership approach where the MOD works with local communities to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

A parliamentary private member's bill could help establish the foundations for such an approach. The Public Services (Social Value) Bill, tabled by Chris While MP, seeks to require public agencies to give greater consideration to economic, social and environmental wellbeing when letting contracts [22]. It is expected to become law in 2012.

This echoes a recent declaration by the European Parliament that ‘the criterion of lowest price should no longer be the determining one for the award of contracts, and that it should, in general, be replaced by the criterion of most economically advantageous tender, in terms of economic, social and environmental benefits – taking into account the entire life-cycle costs of the relevant goods, services or works.’ [23]

While Mr White’s bill is unlikely to affect land disposals directly, it may help to establish a principle that ‘social return on investment’ should be factored into public service commissioning and contracts. This could include contracts to provide developments or services on former MOD land. The government appears willing, at least in principle, to apply a broader understanding of value to public finance than has traditionally been the case.

Alongside the concept of social value, there is growing interest in the idea of wellbeing as a measure of the nation’s economic and social health. Following the French Government’s lead, the UK Government has asked the Office for National Statistics to undertake a consultation on measurements of wellbeing [24]. Underlying this work is a growing understanding that a well functioning society is one where people feel good about themselves and their localities, not just one where financial value and productivity is maximised.

The continuing economic challenges nationwide, coupled with the climate of uncertainty and low business confidence that has been exacerbated by problems in the eurozone, suggest that there will be no swift return to the boom of the first seven years of this century. This challenging climate underlines the need to seek innovative solutions to the future use of military land. Solutions that factor in long term social, economic and environmental value, seek to maximise wellbeing and offer the opportunity to strengthen the armed forces covenant, may prove to be of greater long term benefit than traditional open market approaches.

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