



Armed Forces Special Interest Group

The **United Kingdom's Armed Forces community** represents one of the nation's most diverse and skilled reservoirs of talent. From cadets learning resilience and leadership, to early service leavers searching for a foothold in civilian life, to reservists balancing dual careers, and families demonstrating adaptability under pressure - the community is rich with capability. Yet for too long, much of this potential has remained under-recognised, under-utilised, or overlooked.

To address this, **The 5% Club** - an employer-led movement championing "earn and learn" opportunities - has convened an **Armed Forces Special Interest Group (AFSIG)**. Launched formally in September 2025 at its first in-person meeting, the group brings together employers, policymakers, and armed forces representatives to shape a practical agenda for change. Its journey is deliberately ambitious: to translate insights into action, and to showcase measurable outcomes ahead of a **Parliamentary launch at the House of Lords in February 2026**.

A Collective Vision

The creation of AFSIG was inspired by the determination of **Tony Ellender, Fellow of The 5% Club**, who sought to "give back" by ensuring that all elements of the armed forces community - not only veterans - receive recognition and opportunity. His vision was echoed by **Mark Cameron, CEO of The 5% Club**, who reminded participants that the initiative is about "action over campaigning": building tangible successes that can influence policy by proving what works.

Crucially, the AFSIG seeks to broaden employer understanding beyond the traditional focus on veterans. The scope deliberately includes:

- **Cadets** – 140,000 young people and 30,000 adult volunteers across the UK, many of whom gain vital life skills even if they never serve in uniform.
- **Early Service Leavers (ESLs)** – around one-third of annual service leavers, often unsupported, leaving with significant training but little guidance.
- **Reservists** – highly skilled individuals contributing thousands of days of service monthly, but too often undervalued or even hidden in the workplace.
- **Families and spouses** – resilient, adaptable, and qualified, yet frequently underemployed, with continuity of career proving the single biggest challenge.

This inclusive framing reflects the **Armed Forces Covenant** principle of "no disadvantage", but goes further: it aims to **proactively create advantage** for both employers and the armed forces community.

Employer and MOD Perspectives

The launch meeting brought together perspectives from across the MOD and employer community.

- **MOD engagement:** Senior representatives outlined new initiatives, including *Zigzag Careers* (enabling movement between Defence and industry) and the long-awaited *Defence Skills Passport*. Both are in formative stages, and employers were urged to contribute feedback to shape their development.
- **Cadet Forces:** Brigadier Anthony Lamb underscored the ambition to expand cadet numbers by 30% by 2030, highlighting both the mobility and social confidence cadets gain, and the pressing challenge of supporting adult volunteers.
- **Resettlement:** Squadron Leader David Bailey reminded employers that 85% of service leavers take up apprenticeships during service—clear evidence of their readiness to learn. The challenge is ensuring they "leave well" and are connected into opportunities.
- **Families and spouses:** Representatives described underemployment as the central issue. Spouses often conceal their service links for fear of discrimination, despite being, in the words of one speaker, "Swiss army knives of skills."

These voices reinforced a



consistent theme: **partnership with employers is critical**. MOD cannot deliver the Armed Forces Covenant alone, and charities, while important, should not eclipse the role employers can play in systemic change.

Practical Insights from Employer Workshops

The working sessions were designed to draw out the **realities of employer engagement** with the community. Four dedicated workshops examined cadets, ESLs, reservists, and families, producing concrete insights and opportunities:

- **Cadets:** Employers called for a centralised point of contact - currently engagement is highly localised and inconsistent. Ideas included creating a **national employment hub for cadets**, aligning engagement with apprenticeship ambassador networks and UCAS, and recognising cadet force adult volunteering in HR policies (mirroring best practice for reservists). Sponsorship and social value recognition were also proposed, but participants acknowledged the need to cut through bureaucracy to make these viable.
- **Early Service Leavers:** The group identified this as an “invisible” talent pool, too often overlooked compared to other under-represented groups. Employers suggested piloting a **careers clearing house**, virtual and continuous career fairs, and even a dedicated “veteran” recruitment filter for younger leavers. Comparisons were drawn to structured approaches used with ex-offenders - highlighting a missed opportunity for ESLs.
- **Reservists:** Discussion highlighted wide variation in employer policies. Some organisations already provide additional paid leave; others barely recognise reservist commitments. Suggested actions included embedding reservist skills in CPD and personal development reviews, using *Armed Forces Week* to celebrate reservists visibly, and ensuring HR systems recognise reserve training as accredited development.
- **Families:** Participants stressed the importance of

flexible employment policies and transparent pathways for spouses. Practical measures included job-share models, family-specific jobs boards, buddy systems, and incorporating families into social value commitments. Employers recognised the diversity of family situations and agreed that national frameworks must be balanced with flexible, localised action.

“Cadets, spouses, reservists, and early service leavers all bring value - if we create the pathways to unlock it.”

Across all four groups, two systemic themes emerged:

1. **National vs Local Tension** – strong examples of support exist locally, but national structures are weak.
2. **Employer Visibility Gap** – employers often feel overshadowed by charities in the ESL and families space, leaving their potential contribution under-utilised.

Immediate Actions and Long-Term Goals

The meeting concluded with a clear action agenda. The 5% Club will:

- **Establish working groups** for each of the four priority areas.
- **Draft an action plan** drawing together shared priorities, such as jobs boards, pathways, and HR policy shifts.
- **Seek employer commitments** to pilot tangible projects over the next 12 months.
- **Showcase progress** at the House of Lords launch in February 2026, supported by a brochure of case studies and commitments.

This approach reflects The 5% Club’s ethos: **practical action over rhetoric**, and small, tangible successes that build momentum and influence policy in due course.

The Strategic Opportunity

The launch of AFSIG is not simply another employer network. It represents a **strategic opportunity for UK industry**:

- To access a skilled, motivated talent pool in a tight labour market.
- To demonstrate leadership in social value, inclusion, and national resilience.
- To strengthen the connection between business and Defence at a time of significant geopolitical uncertainty.

As Mark Cameron observed, The 5% Club can act independently but supportive of the MOD and drive beyond the boundaries of the Covenant. Employers are not merely supporting Defence - they are strengthening their own organisations by embracing resilience, adaptability, and leadership qualities that the armed forces community brings.

The AFSIG’s first meeting made one thing clear: **this is not about promises, but about proof**. By February 2026, employers intend to stand before Parliament not with words, but with case studies, pilots, and lived examples of how business can unlock the potential of the armed forces community.

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