

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

17 SEPTEMBER 2020

**REPORT OF
CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET INFORMATION ITEM

Leader of the Council – Councillor Bob Cook

ARMED FORCES COVENANT (AFC) – ANNUAL UPDATE

SUMMARY

This report provides the latest update on the Council's position in relation to fulfilling its Armed Forces Covenant commitments for the 2019/20 financial year. The report concludes the annual 'cycle' of monitoring these commitments, and setting out the focus for the coming year.

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted.

BACKGROUND

1. Monitoring the Council's commitment to its Armed Forces Covenant is part of the ongoing work of the Council's Armed Forces Champion (the Leader), and the Council's Officer Covenant Steering Group, developing and delivering the Covenant Action Plan.
2. The Action Plan is based on the 'pillars' of the Armed Forces Covenant such as healthcare, education, housing, benefits and tax, family life, transition and support after leaving the services.
3. At the end of each year the Steering Group uses a Stock Take self-assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of delivering these pillars. This is done using a 'traffic-light' rating system with the aim of achieving and maintaining a 'green' rating for each pillar. and to inform the next year's Action Plan.
4. The cycle ends with this report to Cabinet and Council which highlights:
 - i. the main focus during 2019/20 with examples of progress that has been made;
 - ii. references from the Defence Secretary's 2019 Covenant report to Parliament;
 - iii. the outcome of our latest Stock Take self-assessment for 2019/20;
 - iv. new national initiatives to support the military community;
 - v. the main focus of activities for 2020/21; and
 - vi. the final steps in submitting an application to the MOD Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) to be considered for their prestigious 'Gold' Award in 2021.

DETAIL

5. In 2011, the Government established the Armed Forces Covenant, a commitment to all those who serve, those who have served and their families – that they will be treated fairly and not be disadvantaged because of their service. It covered specific Covenant ‘Pillars’ – or themes as listed above
6. In response, our Council signed its own local Armed Forces Community Covenant (AFCC) in March 2012. The MOD recently reviewed the format and branding of the Covenant to simplify and streamline the process. The differentiation between ‘types’ of Covenant was removed so they are all called ‘Armed Forces Covenant’ (AFC). The Council signed this rebranded version in January 2020.
7. This report provides a summary of how the Council has been fulfilling its commitments to the armed forces community during the previous financial year
8. In the 2018/19 Stock Take, all the pillars were rated ‘green’ except for ‘Transition’ – which remained ‘amber’ – meaning activity was taking place but it had not been verified. With no significant military presence in our borough, knowledge about ‘service leavers’ or the support available to help them was quite limited – making this a priority area to build on and improve during 2019/20.
9. The main focus on ‘transition’ that followed led to significant and notable examples of progress, enabling this pillar to finally achieve a ‘green’ rating in the recent Stock take self-assessment for 2019/20:
 - i) The Covenant Steering Group strengthened its partnership with the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) through its work with their Regional Employment Relationship Manager. As well as gaining a greater understanding about the types of support CTP provides service-leavers to help them find employment, it ultimately resulted in the Council setting up its own ‘Veterans’ Guaranteed Interview Scheme’; utilising the CTP’s online ‘Right Job’ portal to publicise Council job vacancies directly to service-leavers; and the opportunity for the Council to access free short-term ‘civilian work placements’ by highly skilled and experienced service-leavers, paid for by the MOD.
 - ii) The Steering Group also developed a close working relationship with the newly appointed Regional Manager of the MOD’s new combined ‘Transition Service’ prior to its launch. This put the Council at the forefront of knowledge about future plans for a ‘holistic’ approach to supporting service-leavers. The Council was able to support the launch across the north east by introducing him into the regional armed forces forums and promoting awareness of the new service to our partner organisations.
 - iii) The Council continued its successful campaign to raise awareness of the Covenant to frontline staff both within the Council and to external organisations, and to promote access to the free online training. This led to working with the local GP Practice Managers’ Network and encouraging them to participate in the national roll-out of the ‘Veteran Friendly GP Practice’ initiative. As a result, nine local GP Practices had applied and achieved the ‘veteran friendly’ accreditation by the end of April 2020.
10. The Secretary of Defence’s ‘Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019’ was presented to Parliament in December 2019. It provided a national overview of delivering the Armed Forces Covenant – highlighting major achievements, ongoing as well as new commitments and priorities for 2020 and beyond.

11. The national report highlights some key facts which we are relevant to our Covenant delivery:
 - i) There were 1,000 new signings of the Armed Forces Covenant, taking the total to over 4,000.
 - ii) An additional 285 GP Practices have been accredited as 'veteran friendly'.
 - iii) £23.1 million was invested in the Service Pupil Premium benefitting 77,000 Service children in over 10,000 schools (in England).
 - iv) 4,561 referrals were received for the NHS England's Veterans' Mental Health Transition Intervention and Liaison Service, and the Complex Treatment Service.
 - v) In total the 'Forces Help to Buy' scheme has so far helped over 19,000 Service personnel to purchase their own property, and the scheme has been extended to December 2022.
 - vi) The 'Forces Families Jobs' website was launched in September 2019 by the Families Federations to offer a 'one-stop-shop' providing free access to employment and training opportunities to families of the UK Armed Forces.
 - vii) The Office for Veterans' Affairs was set up in July 2019 to work with government departments to co-ordinate and drive government policy on veterans' welfare, covering mental and physical health, education, and employment. The aim is to "make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran."
12. The Defence Secretary's report referred to priorities for 2020 and beyond which will also be relevant to our future Covenant delivery:
 - The roll out of 'Veteran-friendly GP practice' accreditation will continue across England over the next three years to help ensure practices are equipped to best care for veterans and their families.
 - Service children have been formally identified as an underrepresented group in Higher Education by the Office for Students. To help address this the Service Children Progression Alliance is developing a Service children's support framework for schools, and a suite of evidence-based resources for practitioners.
 - The findings of the review and recommendations on how to improve the coherence of current MOD policies and those of other government departments to ensure they reflect the needs of families with additional needs. These were due to be reported at the 2020 Forces Additional Needs and Disability Forum Conference, but this has been postponed to 2021 due to Covid-19.
 - The UK Government's response to the 'Strategy for our Veterans Consultation' which was published in April 2020. The response is divided into two sections – a summary of current UK Government support to veterans; and an Action Plan of commitments it aims to deliver within the next two years.
13. Our own Stock Take self-assessment of the Covenant pillars for 2019/20 was completed in June 2020. All the pillars received a 'green' rating, including 'transition' – for the key improvements outlined earlier.
14. With regard to the focus for our activities in 2020/21, these include major national initiatives for veterans, which we will be promoting and raising awareness of:
 - **Veterans' ID Card** – from January 2020 all service-leavers receive an ID card to mark their time in the armed forces. The cards allow veterans to easily verify their service to the NHS, their local authority, and charities, helping them to access support and services where needed.

The scheme is to be extended to existing veterans but has been delayed due to the need to future-proof the scheme and safeguard against fraudulent use. We are awaiting will be a new launch date and information on how our local veterans can apply.

- **Veterans' Railcard** – will be launched on Armistice Day 11/11/2020. Any veteran, no matter their age, will be able to buy the card unlike other railcards that normally apply to particular age groups. The railcard can be used at any time – peak or off-peak. If a cardholder is travelling with their spouse or children, they are all able to claim discounted tickets.
- **Veteran Census question approved** – following new legislation passed on 13 July 2020 former armed forces personnel will for the first time be able to identify themselves as veterans in the 2021 Census. This should provide both central and local government with a more accurate understanding of the profiles and needs of the ex-military community – allowing for more targeted and efficient support, and leading to improved services for veterans.

15. In the coming year we will also continue to build on what has already been achieved. This will include:

- i) identifying / implementing relevant actions to mitigate the effect of Covid-19 on planned activities and events;
- ii) identifying and promoting different ways for individuals, organisations and businesses to show their support for the AF community;
- iii) specifically encouraging more businesses and organisations to make a public pledge of support to the armed forces community by signing their own AF Covenant;
- iv) seeking to strengthen the relationship with staff at Holme House Prison so we can develop support for veterans serving their sentences there and their families;
- v) investigating the potential opportunity for a Pop-up Recruitment Centre in Stockton Town Centre;
- vi) identifying and utilising data sources to improve the detail and quality of information about the size, location and needs of our local armed forces community;
- vii) continuing to work with internal / external partners and other members of the Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum to increase our combined impact in meeting the needs of the armed forces community.

16. The MOD Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) was launched in 2014 to recognise employer support for the wider principles of the Defence Armed Forces Covenant and the full spectrum of Defence personnel. This includes the Reserves, Service Leavers, Wounded Injured and Sick, Cadets, and spouses.

17. The Council already has a significant amount of evidence to demonstrate that the Council is a leading organisation in delivering on the Covenant agenda, which has enabled us to meet and maintain the criteria for both the MOD's bronze and silver awards.

18. To help the Council to fulfil its ambition of achieving the prestigious Gold award and be recognised as a champion advocate for the armed forces community, we will continue working closely with the Regional Engagement Team of the ERS to prepare final evidence for our submission and develop the following initiatives which will significantly boost our submission by helping to set it apart from others:

- **Mass-signing of Armed Forces Covenant** – a clear way to demonstrate champion advocacy is to encourage others to make a public pledge of support for the armed forces community by signing their own Covenant. The Council and ERS engagement team are planning an online mass-signing event on 30 September 2020 specifically for our local town and parish councils to sign their own Covenant.
- **Holme House Prison** – recent research by the Forces in Mind Trust reveals a number of issues affecting veterans in the criminal justice system and their families which need to be addressed. The Council will be seeking to build on our relationship with the prison to increase staff and inmate awareness of the Covenant; and to build links with outside agencies and charities that can provide the relevant expertise and support to help prisoners and their families prior to, and following release.
- **‘Pop-up’ Recruitment Base** – the local military units approached the Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum with a request about whether any of the Councils would be able to help them establish one of these in a town centre shop unit. The proposal is initially for a six months lease with a professional shop frontage. The request is currently being investigated to find out if it is feasible.

19. Our draft submission will be sent to the ERS Engagement Team in December 2020. They will provide feedback and advice about amendments by the end of January 2021 with a final submission being made in Spring 2021.

20. A decision on our submission will be made by the end of July 2021 and the Council will be notified of the outcome in August 2021.

Consultation and Engagement

21. The SBC ‘Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan’ steering group, Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum and Councillor Bob Cook, the SBC Armed Forces Champion.

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Education related

‘Pupil Premium’ for children of service personnel, and training / education of service leavers.

Background Papers

- ‘Needs of Veterans in Custody, their kids & families’ – Forces in Mind Trust (Feb. 2020)
- ‘Former Members of the Armed Forces & the Criminal Justice System’, Phillips Review (Nov. 2014)
- ‘Strategy for our Veterans – UK Government Consultation Response’ (April 2020)
- ‘The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2019’ – Defence Secretary (Dec. 2019)
- ‘Defence Holistic Transition Policy’ – (October 2019)
- “Our community – Our covenant” FiMT report (Aug. 2016)
- Armed Forces Act 2006, 2011 and May 2016

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors

Not ward specific

Property

No property implications

