

Cabinet

A meeting of Cabinet was held on Thursday, 17th September, 2020.

Present: Cllr Robert Cook (Chairman), Cllr Jim Beall, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr Lisa Evans, Cllr Mrs Ann McCoy, Cllr Steve Nelson, Cllr Michael Smith

Officers: Julie Danks, Margaret Waggott, Nigel Hart (MD), Beccy Brown, Jonathan Nertney (HR&L), Garry Cummings (F,D&BS), Martin Gray (CHS), Reuben Kench (CL&E), Jamie McCann (CS), Ann Workman (AH).

Also in attendance: Cllrs Baldock, Clark, Gamble, Hall, Large, Moore, N. Stephenson and Mrs Walmsley.

Apologies: None

CAB 12/20 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillors Cooke and Nelson each declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest in respect of the item entitled 'Armed Forces Covenant - Annual Update' as a result of having a family member serving within the armed forces.

CAB 13/20 **Minutes of the Meeting held on 16th July 2020 - For Signature/Approval**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 16th July 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

CAB 14/20 **Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) Report 2019/20**

Consideration was given to details of the Ombudsman's annual review letter for the Council for 2019/20.

It was noted that 40 enquiries were submitted to the Ombudsman during the year, 8 less than were received the previous year. Of those received, 10 met the threshold for a detailed investigation by the Ombudsman. Of these 10 complaint investigations, six were upheld.

All recommendations made by the Ombudsman have been implemented since receipt of the report. It was noted that the Ombudsman published public interest reports for more serious cases in order to share the lessons learned from the cases they investigate, as well as holding authorities to account. In 2019/20 63 Public Interest Reports were issued nationally. It was pleasing to note that no reports were published for the Borough in 2019/20.

All matters raised with the Ombudsman were reviewed by the Corporate Governance Group and by the Council's Corporate Management Team on a quarterly basis to ensure that all learning was shared and picked up by the relevant department. Detailed reviews were also shared with the appropriate Directors and Cabinet Portfolio leads to ensure that appropriate action was taken. The Corporate complaints team have also benefitted from national training provided by the LGSCO and have a positive and constructive relationship with the Ombudsman via the link officer seminars. The guidance issued this year on good administrative practice and handling of complaints during the Covid-19 crisis has been of particular relevance and value this year.

RESOLVED that:-

1.Cabinet note the report which sets out that no formal public interest reports have been received.

2.Cabinet note that effective procedures remain in place to ensure that all learning from Ombudsman recommendations and findings take place.

**CAB
15/20**

Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) – Annual Update

Consideration was given to 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 concluded the annual 'cycle' of monitoring these commitments, and set out the focus for the coming year.

In the 2018/19 Stock Take, all the pillars of our AFC were rated 'green' except for 'Transition' – which remained 'amber' – meaning activity was taking place but it had not been verified, making this a priority area to build on and improve during 2019/20.

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.

Consequently, our own Stock Take self-assessment of the Covenant pillars for 2019/20 was completed in June 2020 and all the pillars received a 'green' rating, including 'transition'.

With regard to the focus for 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.
- 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.

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. 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.

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.

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. 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.

CAB 16/20 Minutes of Various Bodies

In accordance with the Council’s Constitution or previous practice the minutes of the meeting of the bodies indicated below were submitted to members for consideration:-

Tees Valley Combined Authority Cabinet – 13th March 2020
Tees Valley Combined Authority Cabinet – 28th May 2020

RESOLVED that the minutes detailed in the appendices of the report be received.

CAB 17/20 Stockton-on-Tees Electoral Review 2020 - Local Government Boundary Commission – Council Size Submission

Consideration was given to the content of the Council’s proposed Council Size submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission as part of its electoral review of ward boundaries for the Borough of Stockton on Tees. The submission was to be considered for approval at full Council on 23rd September 2020.

The start of the electoral review process required the Commission to gather initial information from the local authority, including electoral forecasts and other electoral data to enable the Commission to decide how many Councillors should be elected to the local authority in the future. This decision is based on the evidence received from the local authority itself and any political groups that

wish to make their views known. Factors taken into consideration by the Commission would be to understand elected members requirements across the following aspects presented as part of the Council size submission:

- Strategic Leadership – how many councillors are needed to give strategic leadership and direction to the authority?
- Accountability Scrutiny – how many councillors are needed to provide scrutiny to the authority?
- Regulatory – how many councillors are needed to meet the regulatory requirements of the authority?
- Partnerships – how many councillors are required to manage partnerships between the local authority and other organisations?
- Community Leadership – how the representational role of councillors in the local community is discharged and how they engage with people and conduct casework.

A sustained case was made throughout each Section of the proposed Submission, that validated the retention of Councillor number at its current size, and makes reference to the increasing workload of councillors, carrying out each of their various roles. With an increasing population to serve and a rise in Independent elected representatives reflecting the wide political views and aspirations of the community, there was already huge demands required of each representative prior to the Covid 19 pandemic outbreak. Now, even greater emphasis is placed on each of our community representatives assisting community cohesion and rebuilding our economy, all of which would be shaped by our Council Plan. It was considered vital that all of our elected members can lead this critical work, communicating and engaging the message with all constituents of the Borough. The proposed submission therefore invited Council to recommend to the Boundary Commission that the Council size should at least be maintained at 56 Councillors to ensure that the inevitable increasing needs of constituents were met.

Appreciation was extended to all Political Group Leaders and those members that had participated in preparing this submission. It was noted that in addition to Council's recommendation to the Boundary Commission, each political group/individual could also make their own submission.

Subject to Council approval on the 23rd September of the Council Size submission, it was expected to hear back from the Boundary Commission on the 20th October when they would announce that consultation on warding patterns would officially commence from the 27th October-11th January 2021. Officers would continue to support Group Leaders and all members during this stage.

The Commission's decision on council size would not be formalised until the Final Recommendations were agreed and published at the end of August 2021.

RECOMMENDED to Council that the content of the proposed Council Size submission document be approved and be submitted to The Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

