

**AGENDA ITEM**  
**REPORT TO CABINET**  
**14 OCTOBER 2021**  
**REPORT OF**  
**CORPORATE**  
**MANAGEMENT TEAM**

**CABINET INFORMATION ITEM**

**Leader of the Council – Councillor Bob Cook**

**ARMED FORCES COVENANT (AFC) – ANNUAL UPDATE**

**SUMMARY**

This report updates the Council's position in relation to fulfilling its Armed Forces Covenant commitments for the 2020/21 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 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 CMT, Cabinet and Council which highlights:
  - i. the main focus during 2020/21 with examples of progress that has been made;
  - ii. references from the Defence Secretary's 2020 Covenant report to Parliament;
  - iii. the outcome of our latest Stock Take self-assessment for 2020/21;
  - iv. new national initiatives to support the military community;
  - v. the main focus of activities for 2021/22; and
  - vi. the outcome of the submission to the MOD Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) to be considered for their prestigious 'Gold' Award in 2021.

## DETAIL

5. The Government established the Armed Forces Covenant in 2011, making a commitment to all those who serve, or 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. This was updated in 2018. Covenant branding was then standardised to help increase public awareness so they are now 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 2020/21 financial year
8. In the 2019/20 Stock Take, all the pillars were again rated ‘green’. The key area of focus for 2020/21 was to identify / implement relevant actions to mitigate the effect of Covid-19 on planned activities and events – including Armed Forces Week, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of Victory in Europe (VE Day) and Victory over Japan (VJ Day); and Remembrance Sunday – encouraging the public to participate from home utilising a variety of online content and videos.
9. In addition, we continued building on the excellent progress made around ‘Transition’; and strengthening our role as a champion advocate of the armed forces community:
  - i. Raising awareness of the Covenant to all 16 of our town and parish councils, and encouraged them to declare their support for the armed forces by signing their own Covenant – 4 have done so and 4 others plan to.
  - ii. Promoting the Covenant to our GP Practice Manager Network led to 4 more being accredited as a ‘Veteran-Friendly GP Practices’ – taking the total to 13.
  - iii. Having introduced our Veterans’ Guaranteed Interview Scheme encouraging applications for council vacancies from service leavers, we liaised with Forces Families Jobs to create a profile on their website and began promoting our vacancies to the families of those serving.
10. At the end of March we completed our submission to the MOD to be considered for the ‘Gold’ Award in their Employer Recognition Scheme – highlighting these initiatives as additional evidence of our commitment to the armed forces community.
11. In July the Council was contacted by the MOD to confirm that we were one of four north east organisations judged to be meeting the criteria for the 2021 Gold Award – the highest level of recognition organisations can achieve, having proven their commitment and support to the Defence community.
12. As a Gold Award-holding organisation the Council is automatically a member of the Gold Alumni Association (GAA). We will also be able to access a number of benefits such having a representative at the Annual Defence Insight Briefing, and opportunities for staff to attend various specialist leadership training workshops run by the military.
13. In December 2020 the Secretary of Defence delivered his ‘Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report’ to Parliament. It recognised the enormous contribution of the armed forces to support our nation through the Covid-19 pandemic and provided a national overview of delivering the Covenant – highlighting major achievements; ongoing as well as new commitments and priorities for 2021 and beyond.

14. Some of the key facts highlighted in the national report which are relevant to our Covenant delivery:
- £24.3 million was invested into the Service Pupil Premium benefitting 79,000 Service children in over 10,000 schools (in England).
  - 800 GP Practices have now been accredited as ‘veteran friendly’.
  - 54 hospitals have been accredited as Veteran Aware – which includes North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust and South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.
  - Over 6,000 organisations have now signed the Armed Forces Covenant.
  - Alongside the Defence Holistic Transition Policy, the Defence Transition Services organisation was established to assist those facing the greatest challenges to making a successful transition on their discharge.
  - The Government introduced its own Guaranteed Interview Scheme – offering an interview to any veteran applying for a Civil Service job, as long as they meet the minimum criteria for the role. It’s initially been rolled out in the Cabinet Office, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice and Home Office, including Border Force.
  - 2,319 candidates have registered on the Forces Families job website, which has 2,000+ jobs listed from over 600 employers.
  - The launch of HeadFIT, a web-based suite of video, audio and text-based tools to support mental fitness and promote good management of mental health within the Armed Forces community (<https://headfit.org>) – which is also available to the public.
15. The Defence Secretary’s report referred to plans and priorities for 2021 and beyond which will also be relevant to our future Covenant delivery:
- i. To mark the Covenant’s tenth anniversary by fulfilling a manifesto promise to further incorporate the Covenant into law – in order to help prevent disadvantage faced by the Armed Forces community due to the unique nature of their service. This has been set in motion through the 2021 Armed Forces Bill, which is making its way through Parliament, the implications for the Council are outlined at para 17.
  - ii. The Office of Veterans’ Affairs (OVA) was established in the Cabinet Office in 2019 to champion veterans and their families at the heart of government. It seeks to ensure the delivery of life-long support to veterans by providing enhanced leadership, improved use of data and better co-ordination of policies and services across government – as well as driving forward the realisation of the ‘Strategy for our Veterans’ and its ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran. The 2020-2022 Action Plan to deliver the strategy is currently being reviewed and updated to cover the period 2022-24.
  - iii. The Covenant report also referenced the “Living in Our Shoes” report by Andrew Selous MP, and the increased understanding this has provided about the diversity of Armed Forces families and their needs. His recommendations are to be used in the refresh of the “Armed Forces Families Strategy”.
16. Our own Stock Take self-assessment of the Covenant pillars for 2020/21 was completed over the summer. All the pillars once again received a ‘green’ rating so we will be using the results to consolidate and build on what has already been achieved to ensure that they remain so. This includes pursuing initiatives that were put on hold due to Covid-19 (e.g. Army ‘Pop-up’ recruitment centre; support for veterans in Holme House Prison; supporting ‘mass signings’ of the Armed Forces Covenant).

## Next Steps

17. The main focus for our activities in 2021/22 will be on the priorities outlined above from the national Covenant report – contributing to the review and update of the 2022-24 Action Plan for the ‘Strategy for our Veterans’; implementing relevant recommendations from the ‘In our Shoes’ report; and most importantly, monitoring and implementing the requirements of the Armed Forces Bill in preparation for it becoming law.
18. The Bill was introduced in January 2021. Its primary purpose is to renew the Armed Forces Act 2006 (itself renewed by the Armed Forces Acts of 2011 and 2016) for a further 5 years.
19. The Armed Forces Act 2006 provides the legal basis for the existence of the Armed Forces as disciplined bodies. Without renewal, the 2006 Act will expire at the end of 2021.
20. The Bill’s Second reading – the general debate on all aspects of the Bill – took place on 7 September. Committee stage – line by line examination of the Bill – is yet to be scheduled. The Bill is expected to become law in early 2022.
21. The key aspect of the Bill with regard to the Council, is ‘Clause 8’ – a proposal to impose a statutory duty on specified public bodies to have **due regard** to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant, as follows:
  - (a) the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the Armed Forces;
  - (b) the principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for Service personnel from membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces; and
  - (c) the principle that special provision for Service personnel may be justified by the effects on such people of membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces.

The new duty will apply to specified persons or bodies (such as local authorities) in the areas of housing, education or healthcare.
22. The MOD and Cabinet Office are due to provide draft guidance about this statutory duty in October and then Councils will have the opportunity to take part in focus groups to ensure that it is clear what the duty requires and how we would be expected to comply with it.
23. The Council is represented on the LGA Armed Forces Covenant Officer Network where we have direct access to those in the MOD Engagement Team and Cabinet Office who are involved in preparing the guidance.
24. The Council’s Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group will also monitor the progress of the Bill and utilise the experience and expertise of its members involved in housing, education or healthcare to ensure that Council is kept up to date.

## Consultation and Engagement

25. The SBC ‘Armed Forces Covenant 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

- Armed Forces Bill 2021
- 'The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2020' – Defence Secretary (Dec. 2020)
- 'Needs of Veterans in Custody, their kids & families' – Forces in Mind Trust (Feb. 2020)
- 'Strategy for our Veterans' – UK Government Consultation Response' (April 2020)
- 'Living in our Shoes – Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families' – Andrew Selous MP (June 2020)
- 'Defence Holistic Transition Policy' – (October 2019)
- "Our community – Our covenant" FiMT report (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition June 2017)
- Armed Forces Act 2006, 2011 and May 2016

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors

Not ward specific

Property

No property implications