

AGENDA ITEM
REPORT TO CABINET
17 NOVEMBER 2022
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 an overview of the Council's fulfilment of its Armed Forces Covenant commitments for the 2021/22 financial year and the current position to date. The report concludes the annual 'cycle' of monitoring these commitments, and sets out the focus for the coming year and beyond.

RECOMMENDED that the report be noted.

BACKGROUND

1. The Government established the Armed Forces Covenant in 2011, making a commitment that those who serve, or have served, and their families will be treated fairly and not be disadvantaged because of their military service. It covered specific Covenant 'Pillars' – themes covering everyday life such as healthcare, education, housing, benefits and tax, family life, transition and support after leaving the services .
2. In response, our Council signed its own local Armed Forces Community Covenant (AFCC) in March 2012. This was reviewed and updated in 2018. Standardised branding was introduced to increase public awareness of the Covenant, resulting in the Council signing a rebranded generic Armed Forces Covenant' (AFC) in January 2020.
3. 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 Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group, developing and delivering the Covenant Action Plan.
4. The Action Plan is based on the 'pillars' of the Armed Forces Covenant listed above.
5. At the end of each financial year the Council's Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group carries out 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.

BACKGROUND

6. The cycle ends with this report to CMT, Cabinet and Council which highlights:
 - i. the main focus during the previous financial year (i.e. 2020/21) with examples of significant progress / support for the armed forces;
 - ii. the outcome of our latest Stock Take self-assessment for 2021/22
 - iii. references from the Defence Secretary's 2021 Covenant report to Parliament;
 - iv. new national initiatives to support the military community;
 - vi. the main focus of activities for 2022/23 and beyond.

DETAIL

7. This report provides a summary of how the Council has been fulfilling its commitments to the armed forces community during the 2021/22 financial year.
8. Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic, the Council and its partners continued to pursue the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant in meeting the needs of the local armed forces community.
9. The introduction of the 2021 Armed Forces Bill in January 2021 saw it become the main focus throughout the year. Its primary purpose was to renew the Armed Forces Act 2006 which provides the legal basis for the existence of the Armed Forces as disciplined bodies. (It was due to expire in 2021, having already been renewed by the Armed Forces Acts of 2011 and 2016).
10. This was achieved when it received Royal Assent as the Armed Forces Act 2021 last December.
11. The key aspect of the Act 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:
 - (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.
12. The new Duty will apply to specified persons or bodies (such as local authorities) involved in the commissioning / delivery of housing, education or healthcare (excluding social care). The Act gives the Secretary of State the power to extend the service areas and bodies which come under the scope of the Duty.
13. In preparation for the implementation of the Duty, the Council utilised its membership of the Local Government Association's national Armed Forces Covenant Officer Network. Having direct access to Cabinet Office and MOD reps writing the draft guidance on the Duty enabled the Council to help shape its development.
14. Various members of the Covenant Steering Group took the opportunity to participate in focus groups – providing useful feedback to support the development of the draft Statutory Duty Guidance. This included reviewing the Council's local policies in relation to education, housing and healthcare.
15. The Statutory Duty was due to be implemented this summer but has been delayed. We are still awaiting the final version of the guidance to be issued, so we are following the draft guidance, and advice provided by the Local Government Association on practical steps that councils can take in preparation for the commencement of the duty. This includes:

DETAIL

- i. Raising awareness about the Duty with council colleagues in housing, education and healthcare services, and relevant external partner organisations.
 - ii. Holding local discussions about the potential impact of the Duty on relevant council functions to identify potential gaps / areas to strengthen in local policies, processes and procedures across housing, education and healthcare.
 - iii. Providing training for frontline council staff in housing, education and healthcare.
 - iv. Identifying and resolving any GDPR/data protection issues that may arise when collecting data about our local armed forces community to help us meet the Duty.
 - v. Participating in local and regional Armed Forces Forum discussions about getting ready for the Duty.
 - vi. Recording costs that we may incur getting ready for the introduction of the duty and share these with the LGA to feed into the ongoing new burdens work.
 - vii. Identify potential learning from the local introduction of other similar duties.
16. The biggest highlight of 2021/22 was being chosen as one of only four north east organisations to receive the MOD's Gold Award for 2021 – their the highest level of recognition – given to those who have proven their outstanding commitment and support to the Defence community as a champion advocate. The Award demonstrates the progress that has been made by the Council over the last few years, despite the pandemic.
17. Other significant examples of progress / support during the year were:
- i. As a forces-friendly employer we created a profile on the Forces Families Jobs website and began promoting Council vacancies to the families of those serving. To date, over 300 jobs have been advertised on the site.
 - ii. Supporting the 100th Anniversary celebrations and fundraising of the Stockton & Yarm Branch of the Royal British Legion. They were one of the first branches to be set up in the country in 1921. The Council arranged free use of an empty shop unit in Wellington Square for two months – including display materials promoting their centenary. It enabled them to increase awareness of their work; connect with many 'new' veterans; and raise thousands of pounds.
 - iii. Still celebrating 2021 Armed Forces Week with a variety of online resources for all sections of the community – including armed forces themed videos; a singalong; and craft/activities to download. Activity and craft packs were also distributed to care homes and primary schools across the borough.
 - iv. Planning and preparing for the Rifles to celebrate their Freedom of the Borough. Although it had to be postponed in 2021 due to Covid, their amazing marching band provided a wonderful visual and audio spectacle at this year's armed forces week as it returned to Stockton High Street.

Covenant Stock Take for 2021/22

18. Our Stock Take self-assessment of the Covenant pillars was carried out 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 – by pursuing initiatives like those outlined in the 'Next Steps' section (para. 22 onwards).

Covenant Report to Parliament

19. The Secretary of Defence delivered the annual Covenant report to Parliament in December 2021. It was renamed as 'Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report' to reflect that the report is now a combined effort between Cabinet Office and the Office of Veterans' Affairs. It provided an integrated update on what the UK Government and the Devolved

Administrations have been doing over the last year to deliver both the Covenant and the Strategy for our Veterans to:

- uphold the Covenant,
 - remove disadvantage caused by service for our Armed Forces Community; and
 - fulfil the UK Government's pledge to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran.
20. Some of the key facts highlighted in the national report which are relevant to our Covenant delivery:
- £24.7 million was invested into the Service Pupil Premium benefitting nearly 80,000 Service children.
 - The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust awarded £25m in grant to over 700 projects in 2020/21
 - An extra £10m was given to the Veterans' Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund to fund organisations and services supporting veterans' mental health.
 - Over 1,000 GP Practices have been accredited as 'veteran friendly'.
 - 11 new Armed Forces Champion Leads were been appointed across the DWP Jobcentre Plus network, overseeing 50 Champions – at least one in every Jobcentre Plus district.
 - Over 7,000 organisations have now signed the Armed Forces Covenant and 493 now hold a Gold award under the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.
21. The Defence Secretary's report highlighted three areas of focus for 2022 and beyond which will affect our local armed forces community:
- The implementation of the new Covenant Duty, contained in the Armed Forces Act 2021 – requiring certain public bodies to pay due regard to the principles of the Covenant in the areas of housing, healthcare and education. This will help raise awareness of the issues the Armed Forces Community can face and lead to better outcomes for Service personnel, veterans and their families.
 - The delivery and initial implementation of the new Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-32 will provide a framework that reflects modern and diverse family needs and encourages recruitment to and retention in service.
 - The implementation of the Office of Veterans' Affairs' (OVA) new 2022-24 Action Plan for delivering the Strategy for our Veterans – setting out the Government's commitments to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran.

NEXT STEPS

22. The main focus for our activities in 2022/23 will be:
- continuing our preparations for the implementation of the due regard Duty, which will include increasing the accuracy of data about our local armed forces community; new training for frontline staff; and monitoring and implementing Duty guidance;
 - supporting the implementation of the 2022-24 Action Plan for the 'Strategy for our Veterans' in the borough;
 - ensuring that we maintain our Gold Award status by continuing to build on the progress of previous years;

NEXT STEPS

23. Gold Award-holders are re-assessed every 3 years to decide if this status' should be retained so the Council's will be due in 2024. This will require the Council to demonstrate that it has continued to stand out as a 'Champion Defence Advocate'. Some of our current and planned activities should help provide this evidence, such as:
- i. The Council's Employment and Training Hub has recently started working with the Armed Forces Careers Office in Middlesbrough to support recruitment in our borough and promote military career opportunities. This will hopefully develop into a strong partnership providing employment for both veterans and local residents.
 - ii. Holme House Prison – is piloting a national project to support prisoners that are veterans, and their families. Prior to Covid the Council was building links with prison staff so we will be seeking to renew them and help provide links with organisations that can support the veterans and their families whilst there and as they prepare to leave.
 - iii. Due to the success achieved through the Covenant Steering Group, we plan to investigate the feasibility of establishing a similar model for businesses and other organisations who have already signed the Covenant. As well as helping increase awareness of the Covenant, it will encourage more organisations to sign their own; promote the benefits of employing veterans; and utilise their combined expertise, ideas and contacts to boost the support provided to our armed forces community.
24. The Council's Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group will continue to utilise their experience and expertise across all the Covenant pillars – especially housing, education and 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

- Veterans' Strategy Action Plan 2022-24
- UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-32
- Armed Forces Act 2021, 2016, 2011 and 2006.
- 'The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2021' – Defence Secretary (Dec. 2021)
- 'Strategy for our Veterans' – UK Government Consultation Response' (April 2020)
- "Our community – Our covenant" FiMT report (2nd Edition June 2017)

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors

Not ward specific

Property

No property implications