

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO COUNCIL

31 OCTOBER 2018

REPORT OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY COVENANT UPDATE

SUMMARY

This report provides details of the current position, and progress that has been made since Cabinet considered a review of the Council's commitment to its Armed Forces Community Covenant (AFCC) last October and recommends the adoption of a revised Covenant.

At its meeting held on 18 October 2018 Cabinet considered this matter and resolved that it receive an annual report highlighting the work being carried out to fulfil the commitments in the Armed Forces Community Covenant. A copy of the relevant minute extract is attached to this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Recommended to Council that the revised Armed Forces Community Covenant be adopted (replacing the original Covenant signed in 2012).

DETAIL

Background

1. In 2011 the Government introduced a national Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) to legally recognise the nation's obligation to the armed forces community – past and present. It established how they should expect to be treated in relation to 15 areas known as 'Pillars' – such as housing, education, healthcare, family life, transition and support after leaving the services.
2. The Covenant's twin underlying principles are that members of the armed forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured, or the bereaved.
3. In response, this Council signed its own local Armed Forces Community Covenant in March 2012. Since that time a number of national and local developments relating to the Covenant have taken place such as:
 - the Forces in Mind Trust research into improving the delivery of Covenant pledges;
 - the Defence Secretary's 'Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report' to Parliament;
 - the Government's wider focus on all fifteen themes (pillars) of the AF Covenant, rather than just the four named in the Armed Forces Act 2011 (healthcare, education, housing and inquests);
 - the introduction of MOD Employer Recognition Scheme (MOD ERS) to encourage employers to support the armed forces and inspire others to do so;
 - new AF Covenant branding to provide consistency in engaging different audiences across multiple channels;
 - the establishment of the Tees Valley and North East Armed Forces Forums;
4. In October 2017 a report was submitted to Cabinet outlining a review of the original Covenant and proposals for bringing it up to date and making it fit for purpose. As a result, Cabinet resolved that:

- i. The local Armed Forces Community Covenant be brought up to date and made fit for purpose by implementing the proposals from the review of the existing covenant;
 - ii. The proposed consultation with all service areas of the Council on the draft Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan be implemented to utilise their knowledge and expertise in identifying existing support activities, and further actions needed to fulfil the principles of the Covenant;
 - iii. The development of a joint funding bid by the Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum to the AF Covenant Fund be supported which would include each Council committing to invest a sum of money (approx. £5K year each) into the project beyond the funding period – on the basis that the sums saved through the project outweigh the investment. The bid was to provide a full time outreach worker working across the Tees Valley improving and co-ordinating awareness and effective delivery of the pillars of the AF Covenant within the sub region.
5. At this point, the Council had already achieved successes in its approach to the Covenant – sharing information and best practice through active membership of both armed forces forums; monitoring and applying appropriate responses to reports and research like those stated above; implementing an annual ‘Stock Take’ of support for the AF community; and achieving the ‘Bronze’ and ‘Silver’ awards from the MOD ERS Scheme.

Progress made since last October

Annual Stock Take self-assessment of meeting the needs of the AF Community

6. The Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum (TVAFF) developed an annual Stock Take ‘traffic light’ monitoring tool to measure how well Local Authorities were meeting the needs of their armed forces community. Our 2016/17 Stock Take resulted in an overall rating of ‘amber’ as over 50% of the individual pillars were assessed as ‘amber’ – meaning activity was taking place but we had not identified the availability and sources of information to demonstrate this.
7. The 2017/18 Stock Take showed significant improvement. The Council achieved an overall rating of ‘green’ – with 9 ‘green’ and 4 ‘amber’ pillars (Education, Housing, Benefits & Tax, and Transition. Three of the amber ratings were only due to the fact that the supporting information is collected on a different time-cycle to the time of the self-assessment. So these will be ‘Green’ in the future.

The ‘Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan’ Steering Group

8. Following Cabinet, a consultation was carried out across each of the directorates in the Council. This identified a number of staff with relevant knowledge and expertise to contribute advice and information related to specific Covenant pillars.
9. The Steering Group’s role includes:
 - shaping activities / delivering relevant sections of the AF Covenant Action Plan;
 - supporting provision of information for the annual Stock Take;
 - identifying others inside/outside the Council who could help deliver the action plan, or provide relevant information about the support being offered/provided.
 - helping to review and update the Action Plan;
10. Each December the Defence Secretary’s ‘Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report’ is published. This is used to provide examples of best practice; and highlight upcoming national issues and priorities; and identify if changes are needed to our delivery plan. Then in January our Stock Take self-assessment of each pillar is completed. The aim is to work towards achieving a ‘green’ rating for each pillar and then maintaining it. The Stock Take is also used to highlight actions and areas of focus for the next delivery plan.
11. The establishment of the steering group is best practice. At present, we are the only Tees Valley Council to have set up such a group and enjoy the combined benefits that it provides. This has been shared with the Tees Valley AF Forum.

Updating the original Armed Forces Community Covenant (AFCC)

12. An updated version of our original AFCC has been produced (see Appendix A). The updated Covenant includes:

- reference to the national AF Covenant ‘pillars’ and the local ones introduced by the Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum (TVAFF);
- requirement for a specific delivery plan in place to ensure the ‘pillars’ are being delivered locally to meet the needs of the AF community, and progress made;
- carrying out an annual ‘Stock Take’ of the pillars to review progress and to inform the following year’s delivery plan;
- the need to consider the implications (or not) of the Defence Secretary’s annual AF Covenant report to Parliament;
- reference to active membership of the TVAFF and North East AF Forum to promote support for the AF community and share best practice.

Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum Joint-Funding Bid Update

13. Last October Cabinet gave its support to the development of a joint funding bid by the Tees Valley AF Forum to get a full time outreach worker to operate across the Tees Valley to help each Council to improve the effective delivery of the Covenant pillars in their area. This included a financial commitment beyond the funding period of approximately £5K a year into the project from each Council – on the basis that the sums saved through the project would outweigh the investment.
14. At present the bid has ‘paused’ due to staffing changes and the appointment of a new Chair (Lt. Col. Nathan Teale) to the Tees Valley AF Forum. Any bid would need his support and approval. More will be known after the next Forum meeting when the bid will be discussed.

New Web Content

15. The web page outlining the Council’s commitment to the AF community and support available to it has been reviewed and updated. The improved layout and content includes sections for those currently serving, reserves, veterans and their families. A new page is also being developed called “How you can show your support?” to highlight various ways for individuals, businesses and organisations to provide their support to the AF Community.

Armed Forces Covenant Awareness Training for Frontline Staff

16. As the Council’s frontline staff are most likely to be contacted by members of the AF community, they have a vital role to play. An e-learning training package was developed by Warwickshire County Council through AF Covenant funding and was made available nationally and promoted through the North East AF Forum as best practice. We took advantage of this and it has been uploaded on to our intranet – making it available to all staff and elected members. Team leaders and supervisors from our Customer Contact Centres attended an introduction to the course in March 2018 and they then arranged for it to be rolled out to their teams. The course will now be a part of the induction of new Contact Centre staff.
17. The steering group is now seeking to identify opportunities to roll-out the training to other frontline staff both inside and outside the council.

CONCLUSION

18. In order to ensure that our Covenant-related activities and initiatives remain current and continue to support the local AF community, the Council will need to:
 - continue to review the Defence Secretary’s annual Armed Forces Covenant report to Parliament each December;
 - continue to review the guidance provided to local authorities on the MOD’s newly launched AF Covenant website;
 - review the cross-Government ‘Veterans’ Strategy, which is due to be published this November.
 - review the work of the Government’s ‘Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans’ Board’ which was launched in October 2017.
 - review the Covenant-funded ‘Map of Need’ which was commissioned in April 2017 to provide an evidence-based analysis of what Veterans and Armed Forces families’

services are being sought and where. We are awaiting its completion and publication. This may help to improve our profile of the local armed forces community and its needs

- review the update of the SBC Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for veterans' health needs, which is just about to start.

19. By doing this we should be able to retain our Silver Award from the MOD ERS; begin to make progress towards the Gold Award; and continue working towards and maintaining a 'green' rating for delivery of the Covenant pillars.

20. The 100th Anniversary of Armistice Day is a fitting reminder of the debt our nation owes to the Armed Forces community. A number of projects and events to mark this historic occasion are being organised by the Council. This makes it a very opportune time for the Council to commit itself to a new Armed Forces Covenant.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

21. Signing up to the Armed Forces Covenant and implementing the delivery plan is seeking to remove disadvantage experienced by the AF community.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

22. The delivery of the AF Covenant commitments will be achieved utilising existing resources and budgets.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

23. None.

RISK ASSESSMENT

24. This review is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

COUNCIL PLAN

25. Stronger Communities – encouraging and empowering individuals to become active citizens. Fulfilling the Council's commitments made to the Armed Forces community in our existing Armed Forces Covenant.

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD COUNCILLORS

26. 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

- "The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2017" by the Defence Secretary (Dec. 2017)
- "Armed Forces Covenant: 2010 to 2015" Government Policy paper (June 2016)
- "Our community – Our covenant" FiMT report (Aug. 2016)
- UK Armed Forces Families' Strategy 2016 - 20" (April 2016)
- Armed Forces Act 2006, 2011 and May 2016

Ward(s) and Ward Councillors

Not ward specific

Property

No property implications