

**AGENDA ITEM**

**REPORT TO COUNCIL**

**24 JULY 2019**

**REPORT OF SENIOR  
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

**ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY COVENANT UPDATE**

**SUMMARY**

This report details the current position, and progress made by the Council in relation to fulfilling the commitments made in the updated Armed Forces Community Covenant, which was adopted in October 2018.

It considers the vital role of the Council's Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group; the latest Stock Take regarding delivery of the Covenant 'Pillars'; the priorities of 2019/20 Covenant Action Plan; the relevant issues from the Defence Secretary's November 2018 Covenant report to Parliament; and the progress towards achieving the 'Gold' award from the MOD Employer Recognition Scheme.

**RECOMMENDATION:-**

- (1) That Council note the contents of the report and the significant progress that is being made by the Council in fulfilling its commitments to the armed forces community as set out in the new Armed Forces Community Covenant, signed in November 2018.
- (2) That Council agree the key areas of focus, for the coming year, as detailed in the report,

**DETAIL**

1. This Council officially declared its support for the armed forces community through the signing of its first Armed Forces Community Covenant (AFCC) in March 2012. Following a review, an updated AFCC was adopted in October 2018, and then signed in November 2018.
2. The following sections of the report detail the current position and progress made by the Council to fulfil its AFCC pledges with specific reference to:
  - i. the work of the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group regarding the 2018/19 Stock Take self-assessment of delivery of the Covenant Pillars (detailed in Appendix 1);
  - ii. the Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan for 2019/20;
  - iii. the Defence Secretary's "Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018" to Parliament" (Nov. 2018);
  - iv. working towards achieving the 'Gold' award from the Ministry of Defence's Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS);

**Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group**

3. This group consists of staff from across the council who utilise their experience and expertise to help maximise the Council's ability to meet the needs of the armed forces community with the resources available to us. Members focus on the pillars that are relevant to their areas of work.
4. Since the formation of the Steering Group (December 2017), there have been substantial improvements in delivering the Council's Covenant commitments. The biggest initial step forward came through the development of an annual AF Covenant Action Plan, based on each of the pillars. The Action Plan provides a valuable performance tool.

5. The group's other most significant contribution is the annual Stock Take self-assessment regarding delivery of the Covenant 'Pillars', as this is used to identify priorities for the AF Covenant Action Plan in the following year.
6. Each pillar is given a 'traffic-light' rating based on being able to demonstrate successful delivery in that pillar area. Our goal is to achieve and maintain 'green' for all of them.
7. 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 it had not been verified.
8. The 2018/19 Stock Take resulted in a 'green' rating for all of the pillars except the 'Transition' pillar – which remains 'amber' – as having no significant military presence in our borough means we have very limited knowledge about those returning, making this pillar an area for improvement in the past and present. Having said that, we are making important progress towards achieving 'green' and will continue to address the matter through our AF Covenant Action Plan for 2019/20.
9. This turnaround is a tremendous achievement, and the foundation of this success can be attributed directly to the excellent work of the Steering Group – as it has enabled the Council to considerably increase its ability to:
  - access and collate relevant information for the Stock Take;
  - utilise the vast combined experience and expertise of the group members to maximise the impact of the work being done; and
  - develop effective new internal / external partnerships to support delivery of our Covenant Action Plan;
10. Notable achievements by the Steering Group included the continued promotion of use of the free AF Covenant Awareness e-learning training package developed by Warwickshire County Council for frontline staff – as they are most likely to be contacted by members of the AF community. It was uploaded on to the intranet to make it available to all staff and elected members. Initially, it was rolled out to staff in our Customer Contact Centres and Housing Benefits/Council tax. In the last few months, over thirty staff from other service areas have completed the course.
11. Arrangements are now being put in place for promoting use of the training package internally to staff in Adult Services; and externally to staff / volunteers at Stockton District Advice and Information Services (SDAIS), and to staff at GP Practices across the borough – using a web version of the package. The Steering Group will continue to seek opportunities to roll-out the training to other frontline staff both inside and outside the council.
12. The Steering Group was also approached for help with reviewing and updating the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) of the Health and Wellbeing needs of Veterans, and did so by supporting the development of a Working Party to do this that led to the production of a new JSNA which is focused on the Health Needs of the Armed Forces Community – recognising the impact goes beyond just veterans.
13. The new JSNA was shared with the North East Armed Forces Health Network earlier this year and received very positive feedback. Those at the meeting agreed with all of the issues/unmet need and it was even suggested that our JSNA could be the template for other local authorities to use when completing their JSNAs.

#### The Defence Secretary's Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report to Parliament

14. The Council has made significant progress fulfilling its commitments to the local armed forces community in recent years. Much of this is due to the establishment and development of the Steering Group. We are still the only Tees Valley Council to have set up such a group and enjoy the combined benefits it provides. It has also been selected as an example of outstanding internal and external partnership working and will feature in the itinerary of visits undertaken by the Customer Excellence Inspector as part of the Council's CSE inspection in July.

15. This 130 page report was presented in November 2018. It provided a national overview of the major achievements of the Armed Forces Covenant and highlights remaining challenges and new commitments.
16. The theme of the report was 'Delivering Effective Support'. It emphasised how using improved measurement of the Covenant has assisted closer examination of delivery and progress against commitments, which is what this Council does through our Stock Take and Action Plan.
17. As well as recognising the differences being made to the Armed Forces community, it also acknowledged that there is much more still to be achieved.
18. The Defence Secretary's report was reviewed to identify priorities relevant to our borough, which would need to be included in our local AF Covenant Action Plan.
19. The issues which are most applicable to us have been incorporated into our Action Plan. These include:
  - helping to overcome the continued lack of awareness about the Covenant amongst the public, veterans and serving personnel;
  - increasing the number of businesses, charities and voluntary, community and social enterprises signing their own AF Covenant with specific pledges of support;
  - supporting and promoting new campaigns and initiatives appropriate to the armed forces community in our area;
  - the ongoing need to build a detailed and accurate profile of our local the armed forces community, which is robust and has processes in place to update it.

#### The Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan for 2019/20

20. The Action Plan is reviewed and updated continually. The Steering Group uses the results of the annual Stock Take to review and update the priorities of the Action Plan for the following year. Hence much of the AF Covenant Action Plan for 2019/20 was based on the results of the 2018/19 Stock Take.
21. In addition, relevant information and feedback provided through the various military forums, events and research reports – have also been utilised to inform the 2019/20 Action Plan (along with those from the Defence Secretary's report). As a result the key focus for this year will be on the following areas:
  - Promoting different ways for individuals, organisations and businesses to show their support for the AF community;
  - Encouraging more businesses, charities, voluntary, community and social enterprises to sign their own AF Covenant; and raising their awareness of the benefits of employing ex-forces personnel;
  - Improve the detail and quality of information about the size, location and needs of our local armed forces community; and  
  - Continue to work with internal / external partners and the other members of the Tees Valley Armed Forces Forum to increase our combined impact in meeting the needs of the armed forces community.

#### The Ministry of Defence's Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS)

22. This encourages employers to support the armed forces community and inspire others to do so. Those that pledge, demonstrate or advocate support to defence and the armed forces community, and align their values with the AF Covenant are recognised through bronze, silver and gold awards.
23. The Council met the criteria to achieve both the 'Bronze' and 'Silver' awards at the end of 2016. Much of the work outlined in this report has enabled the Council to maintain this accreditation and

move towards being nominated for the 'Gold' award – which entails much greater and stricter scrutiny regarding being a robust supporter and advocate for the armed forces community.

24. The following are recent examples of work being done by the Council, which sets us apart as a potential recipient of the gold award:

- The launch (October 2018) of a new Military Preparation College for Training' (MPCT) at the Army Reserve Centre in Norton. It is the third MPCT to open in the north east. MPCT has an excellent track record of successful outcomes for 16 - 19 year olds. The organisation received an 'Outstanding' rating from Ofsted and 'Training provider of the Year 2017' by the Times Ed. Supplement. Since launching in 1999, over 2,900 young people have been helped into a military career; over 10,000 have progressed into further training or other careers. Courses last from 6 weeks to 2 years. Courses are free and do not require any financial contribution from the Council.

The Council has therefore become a strong advocate for the fantastic opportunities MPCT offers to school-leavers thinking about a military career, or who may have struggled with formal education and/or behaviour issues – promoting it across council services, secondary schools, youth organisations and the Pupil Referral Unit.

- The most simple and effective way of increasing support for the armed forces community amongst local businesses, charities, voluntary, community and social enterprises is to raise awareness of the Covenant amongst those that already have a close relationship with the Council – such as key partners, and then encourage them to do the same.

Earlier this year a meeting was held with Leon Jones, the Managing Director of Tees Active, to highlight the principles of the national AF Covenant and provide examples of the support provided to the local armed forces community – in fulfilment of our Armed Forces Community Covenant.

We also explained the opportunity for businesses to publicly demonstrate their support by signing their own Covenant and making specific pledges. Tees Active are now in the process of arranging to sign their own 'Business' Covenant.

- A few months ago, the Council was approached for help by a local recruitment company who specialise in helping those about to leave the forces (and veterans) into employment.

As Armed Forces Champion, Councillor Bob Cook, met with them to consider ways that the Council could help the company to raise awareness about the support into employment that they offer to the armed forces community. The meeting resulted in the company being provided with a network of contacts to build partnerships with and publicise their employment / training opportunities; also access to the local and regional armed forces forums.

This is a breakthrough for the Council in strengthening the work being done as part of the 'Transition' Pillar; and offers an opening to build and expand on.

- The Ministry of Defence has appointed the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) as the official provider of Armed Forces Resettlement. CTP also offers a free recruitment service for employers wishing to hire ex-military personnel.

CTP also has a specialist 'CPT Assist' team to help those wounded, injured and sick individuals who have the greatest need for support when leaving the forces. The Council has built up a strong relationship with the local CTP Assist team and seeks to enhance the work they do by offering work experience / shadowing visits for those about to leave the forces – providing employment specific information and advice, as well as a timely boost to their confidence. The Council recently arranged a placement at Cowpen Depot for a soldier with significant expertise in logistics, who is leaving the army after being diagnosed with a severe illness.

## **CONCLUSION**

25. Cabinet is asked to note the contents of the report and the significant progress that is being made by the Council in fulfilling its commitments to the armed forces community, and the innovative way that this has been achieved – primarily through the establishment and development of the pioneering Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group.

26. 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 support the ongoing work of the Covenant Steering Group to review and update the Covenant Action Plan and carry out the annual Stock take of the covenant pillars;
  - continue to monitoring and implementing appropriate responses to the information, guidance, research and reports provided through the various defence e-bulletins, e-newsletters and websites; and the Defence Secretary's annual report to Parliament;
27. By doing this we will be able to retain our Silver Award from the MOD ERS; maintain progress towards the Gold Award; and continue working towards and maintaining a 'green' rating for delivery of the Covenant pillars.

## COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

28. Fulfilling our commitments to the Armed Forces Community Covenant and implementing the Covenant Action Plan contributes to meeting the needs of the AF community and helping to remove disadvantages they may face.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

29. AF Covenant commitments will be achieved utilising existing resources and budgets.

## LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

30. None.

## RISK ASSESSMENT

31. The actions covered by this report are categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

## COUNCIL PLAN

32. 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

33. The SBC 'Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan' steering group, contact officers from 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 2018" by the Defence Secretary (Nov. 2018)
- "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