

SUPPORTING THE ARMED FORCES AND THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That Cabinet note the current position with regard to the Armed Forces Community Covenant and the initiatives in place to support the Armed Forces community within the District.
- 1.2 That Cabinet authorise officers to work with HQ Solent Station to review the Armed Forces Community Covenant, including the enhancements outlined in section 6 of this report. This will be formally signed by the Chairman of the Council as the District's First Citizen, in recognition of the nation's commitment to the Armed Forces community at the local level.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 This report presents the Council's current initiatives to support the Armed Forces community within the District. This covers both serving and former members and their families working or residing within the District.
- 2.2 Additionally, this report details what we have undertaken to do, what we are actually doing and what more could be done, with proposals on how this may be achieved. Due regard has also been given to latest guidance and best practice.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Council entered into a Community Covenant with the Armed Forces Community of Solent Station in May 2013.
- 3.2 The Armed Forces Community Covenant is an additional, voluntary statement of mutual support between a civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community. It is intended to complement the Armed Forces Covenant, which outlines the moral obligation between the Nation, the Government and the Armed Forces, at the local level.
- 3.3 The purpose of this Community Covenant is to encourage support for the Armed Forces Community working and residing in Solent Station, Hampshire and to recognise and remember the sacrifices made by members of this Armed Forces Community, particularly those who have given the most. This includes in-Service and ex-Service personnel, their families and widow(er)s in Solent Station, Hampshire.
- 3.4 For the Council, the Community Covenant presents an opportunity to bring our knowledge, experience and expertise to bear on the provision of help and advice to members of the Armed Forces Community. It also presents an opportunity to build upon existing good work on other initiatives such as the Welfare Pathway.
- 3.5 For the Armed Forces community, the Community Covenant encourages the integration of Service life into civilian life and encourages members of the Armed Forces community to contribute to and assist their local community whenever possible.
- 3.6 In 2021, the relevant legislation was amended to place a legal duty (the 'Covenant Duty') on specified public persons and bodies, including Local Authorities, to have due

regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when exercising certain statutory functions in the fields of healthcare, education and housing. The Covenant Duty came into effect on 22 November 2022, with guidance issued alongside the Act stating that the specified bodies must have regard to this Guidance when exercising a relevant function.

4. KEY COMPONENTS OF THE STATUTORY ARMED FORCES COVENANT FOR NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

- 4.1 The relevant functions discharged by New Forest District Council covered by the national Covenant and its legislation, are mainly in housing. Namely; the allocations policy for social housing; tenancy strategies; homelessness and disabled facilities grants.
- 4.2 The Council must have a due regard when exercising the above functions. The duty is primarily about informed decision making. This means as an authority, we should think about and place an appropriate amount of weight on the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when considering all the factors concerned with carrying out the above functions.
- 4.3 The Covenant is not prescriptive about the actions specified bodies should take in order to comply with their legal obligations, and it does not mandate specific public service delivery outcomes. Local authorities are expected to draw on their experience and practice in complying with similar 'due regard' duties. The due regard duties of the Armed Forces Covenant are split into the following categories:-
 - i. Having due regard to the unique obligations and sacrifices made by the armed forces.
 - ii. Having due regard to the principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages for Service people from membership, or former membership, of the armed forces.
 - iii. Having due regard to the principle that special provision for Service people may be justified by the effects on such people of membership, or former membership of the armed forces.
- 4.4 Only a small minority of the Armed Forces Community will need to access the housing services provided by the Council as the local housing authority. However, when disadvantages are experienced, they are most likely to be experienced by veterans. These disadvantages at a national level may include:-
 - i. A lack of knowledge about the social housing services available in their local area, or how to access them.
 - ii. Not building up sufficient 'local connection'.
 - iii. Not being prioritised to receive suitable social housing, or experience a lack of available social housing.
 - iv. Finding it more difficult to communicate with a housing body, particularly if overseas.
 - v. A lack of knowledge about how to navigate the civilian housing sector, welfare system and budgeting.
 - vi. A reluctance to seek early help to avoid homelessness, for reasons such as stigma, shame or a belief that civilian bodies may not understand their experiences.
 - vii. Requiring adaptations to be made to their home when they move to a new area, or lacking knowledge of what grants are available.

4.5 New Forest District Council complies with its statutory duty under the Covenant as part of the following initiatives:-

- i. The Army Welfare Unit at Marchwood are in regular contact with our Homelessness Team and have worked with them in the past.
- ii. Recognising the unique circumstances of those who are leaving the Armed Forces by providing individually tailored support throughout their homelessness journey, as well as ensuring appropriate signposting to relevant support agencies as necessary.
- iii. Utilisation of additional funding sources and services available for veterans and their families from SSAFA (the Armed Forces Charity), The Royal British Legion and other charities such as Homes for Heroes to help secure housing, advocacy and support.
- iv. Provision of Mental Health Support through the Council's Mental Health Practitioner
- v. Working with Domestic Abuse charities to support those experiencing domestic abuse and homelessness from the sector.
- vi. Providing support to access specialist ex-armed forces accommodation nationally.
- vii. The Council's Allocations Policy features a number of specific armed forces pledges, ensuring our duty of care is met through:
 - a. disregarding compensation payments received for injury or disability;
 - b. exemption from the local connection qualification requirement, and
 - c. automatic placement into housing needs band 3.

5. GOING FURTHER TO SUPPORT – OUR ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY COVENANT

5.1 The Community Covenant the Council entered into with the Armed Forces Community of HQ Solent Station in 2013 pursues not only the initiatives above, but non-statutory, voluntary commitments to the Armed Forces community locally to enhance the support available.

5.2 This is now timely for review to ensure it remains fit for the organisational and operational circumstances of both the Council and HQ Solent Station, including whether there are additional measures that can be included in support of the local Armed Forces community.

5.3 A summary of the wide ranging work currently taking place across the Council in support of the voluntary community covenant commitment is detailed below:-

- i. The Council has recently received the Bronze award from the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme. This follows the Council being nominated, by a newly employed veteran. In doing so, the Ministry of Defence has thanked the Council's statement of intent in this area. The DERS encourages employers to support defence and inspire others to do the same. The scheme encompasses bronze, silver and gold awards for employer organisations that pledge, demonstrate or advocate support to defence and the armed forces community, and align their values with the Armed Forces Covenant. The Council will now move forward to pursue Silver, and then Gold awards.
- ii. The Council is a 'Forces Friendly' Employer. We have an HR policy for Reservists, ensuring they receive additional paid leave, if necessary, for their annual military training requirements. Our HR Team advertise available employment opportunities on the Ministry of Defence's Career Transition Partnership website. This website is accessible to military personnel during the last 2 years of their military career and includes course providers, CV writing

guidance, interview advice and industry programmes alongside job opportunities. We have recently had our first successful recruitment through this website, for a gas engineer.

- iii. The Council's Physical Activity and Partnerships Manager is in regular communication with the 17 Port and Maritime Regiment's Community Development Worker, who is part of the Army Welfare Service. We have collaborated on a number of projects and programmes as well as the general communication flow, sharing pertinent information that can be of interest and benefit for the community. Some recent projects include:-
 - a. Working with the Army Welfare Unit and other partners, to set up the Calshot Youth Group, supporting the army community living in that area.
 - b. Working with Fawley Parish Council, The Handy Trust and the Army Welfare team to support local families.
 - c. Identifying and targeting the Armed Forces Community in our application to the Arts Council England for Culture in Common and ensuring that the delivery of the Culture in Common programme has supported the Army Welfare Unit to deliver cultural activity for the local army community.
 - d. The Community Development Worker is also invited to the New Forest Youth Forum and the Local Children's Partnership, to aid partnership working and information sharing.
 - e. Working with HQ Solent Station to ensure the delivery of the Covenant outcomes through the artificial turf pitch at Applemore College, with the Council contributing £50,000 toward the costs.
- iv. Membership of Freedom Leisure centres can be obtained at a corporate discount rate, including the gym, public swimming and group fitness classes at any of the New Forest Partnership Leisure Centres.
- v. There is a long standing civic commitment to the Armed Forces in the District, most notably with the District Council awarding Freedom of the District to 17 Port and Maritime Regiment RLC in 2016. These commitments also include the marking of Armed Forces day and Armistice and Remembrance Sunday Commemorations, with the work of the Armed Forces Member Champion, who supports the Chairman at these events.

6. WHAT FURTHER CAN THIS COUNCIL DO?

- 6.1 In refreshing the Community Covenant, there are some initiatives that the Council could pursue to enhance the local offer to our armed forces communities. This could include:-
 - i. The creation and maintenance of a dedicated website for the Armed Forces, providing appropriate signposting to support available across the Council.
 - ii. Ensuring appropriate support is provided to applicants for temporary road closure applications relating to Remembrance Sunday parade road closures.
 - iii. Exploring the appetite for an annual meeting with HQ Solent Station to ensure the spirit of the Community Covenant is being met and review of any measures taken, in order to ensure not only that the appropriate engagement and assistance is being provided, but also whether any further actions would be helpful.

- iv. An annual review of Community Covenant activity undertaken across the Council, sponsored by the Armed Forces Member Champion, with a report to the Council's EMT and made available to all councillors.

7. CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 It is important to note that the Council is meeting its statutory duties in respect of the national Armed Forces Covenant, and also does a significant amount in addition to these, as part of the Community Covenant. This report seeks to work with HQ Solent Station to understand if there are any appropriate additional activities that the Council could also consider, to meet the principles of a refreshed Community Covenant.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are none arising directly from this report. The creation and maintenance of a website page can be managed within existing resources. Meeting with the Armed Forces community at HQ Solent Station on an annual basis can also be met from within existing budgets and resources.

9. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

10. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

11. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The Armed Forces Covenant and the Council's Community Covenant are in support of delivering positive measures to enable equality of opportunity and outcome with other citizens.
- 11.2 The measures specifically mentioned throughout paragraph 4.5 ensure there is a positive impact to the protected characteristic of disability, which is experienced by some veterans, by ensuring the Council makes adjustments, such as disregarding compensation received for injury or disability.

12. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS

- 12.1 Whilst it is critical that the Council continues to meet its statutory responsibilities of the National Covenant, namely in Housing, I am delighted to note all of the additional activity this Council is undertaking in support of our local armed forces community.
- 12.2 I am particularly thrilled that the Council has received the Bronze award for the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme. I look forward to seeing us pursue Silver, and then Gold, as we pledge, demonstrate and advocate support to defence and the armed forces community, aligning our values with the Armed Forces Covenant as an Employer of Choice.
- 12.3 We have a long standing commitment to our local armed forces community and I welcome the opportunity to review our Community Covenant and build on the excellent work outlined throughout the report.

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Background Papers:

Armed Forces Covenant – A Guide for
Local Authorities: How to deliver the
Covenant in your area

Statutory Guidance on the Armed
Forces Covenant Duty (Issued under
section 343AE(1) of the Armed Forces
Act 2006