

REPORT TO: Corporate Policy & Performance Board
DATE: 26 February 2013
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Communities
PORTFOLIO: The Leader
SUBJECT: Armed Forces Community Covenant
WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To inform the Policy and Performance Board of the Armed Forces Community Covenant (appendix one).

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That:

i) the report be noted.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 In referring to Armed Forces this encompasses the Army, Royal Navy & Air Force.

Halton is part of a pan Cheshire Covenant covering the Local Authorities of Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Cheshire, Warrington and Halton. In addition to local authorities, health, probation and job centre plus are involved in supporting the covenant.

The Armed Forces Community Covenant was signed by dignatories representing each of the authorities on the 30th June 2012, Armed Forces Day.

Each Local Authority is required to have a nominated Armed Forces Champion, the Community Development Manager has been designated this role in Halton. The Armed Forces Champion provides representation on a Community Covenant working group that covers the Cheshire area and provides a point of liaison for the forces.

4.0 ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY COVENANT

4.1 The Armed Forces Community Covenant is a voluntary statement of mutual support between the civilian community and its local armed forces community. It aims to provide awareness of the role of the armed forces, the sacrifices that in service and ex service personnel

and their families make, encourage activities that integrate armed forces and local communities together and continue to foster civic pride in our armed forces.

4.2 The Armed Forces Community Covenant sets out pledges, twenty in total around five key themes:-

- Housing
- Employment & Benefit
- Education
- Health
- Wellbeing

4.2.1 **Housing**

There is evidence that securing accommodation can be difficult, in particular for those leaving the forces. The pledges request priority is given to armed forces personnel with high priority for veterans injured or disabled or their spouse and dependants for widow (ers). Halton's policy supports this approach, this has been tested through support given to an army widow earlier this year and is cited as an example of good practice by the Armed Forces.

4.2.2 **Employment & Benefits**

These pledges identify it can be difficult for service leavers to secure employment and for those with spouses in service, it can be difficult to seek employment as they often have sole responsibility for childcare. Organisations and services that provide employment and benefit support need to identify service leavers and veterans and ensure additional support is offered.

4.2.3 **Education**

Accessing education provision for service families can be outside of routine school admission timetables, sometimes this is linked to whole regiments moving about or could be individual families. Policies should ensure service families are not disadvantaged in accessing schools of their choice by being resident elsewhere. Schools need to also be vigilant in ensuring support for forces children in integrating to a new environment. Where a child has additional needs appropriate support should also be put in place by the relevant council departments in a reasonable timescale.

4.2.4 **Health**

Access and engaging in health support services for veterans is a priority. There are five pledges which set out (regardless of changes in structures for health provision) access to services will be made easier for armed forces and their families to support good physical health, positive mental health and wellbeing. Health records should indicate if a patient is a current or former service member, places on waiting lists for clinical procedures should be maintained where relocation occurs and the provision of prosthetic limbs will match the

standard provided by the Defence Medical Services. Access to mental health services is a key issue and since the Community Covenant was adopted “Live At Ease” has been launched. This is an initiative commissioned by health aimed at veterans and provides wrap around support to issues which are impacting on the mental health and wellbeing of the veteran i.e debt advice, addiction support, counselling, etc. It aims to be a one stop to provide the required support however complex.

4.2.5 **Wellbeing**

Wellbeing cuts across the other four themes however the pledges here are about supporting access to services in communities and support for those who become involved in the criminal justice system. Areas are urged to consider discounts to leisure facilities and other services if possible for the armed forces community. These pledges reinforce the need for partners to work together to ensure signposting and referrals arrangements with appropriate priorities are in place.

4.2.6 **Community Covenant Working Group**

The working group consists of the Armed Forces Champions from the four authorities, the Lieutenant Colonel of 75 Engineer Regiment, a representative from Wirral NHS (currently has strategic lead responsibility for Health Provision for Military Veterans, transferring to York & Humber shortly), Cheshire Probation Service and input from Job Centre Plus. The group is required to undertake annual reviews of the covenant.

There is a national pot of money to support initiatives endorsed through the Community Covenant Working Groups, there is £30 million unallocated at this stage. Any proposals have to be endorsed from the local covenant working group and from there are submitted to the Ministry of Defence. Projects that have been successful vary from small scale community based projects to replacing a scout hut with a community building, the underpinning theme is integration between the forces and civilian communities. £3.7 million has been allocated so far, 200 applications have been submitted with 86 being successful. The deadline for the next round of proposals is 12th November 2012.

5.0 **WIDER CONTEXT OF ARMED FORCES FOR HALTON**

5.1 It is difficult to know exactly how many in service personnel are from Halton and exactly how many veterans reside here, some work is progressing to provide more accurate figures. Support organisations for veterans have indicative figures from their membership however, one factor for Halton is there is no garrison located here, hence forces members and their families are intrinsic in our regular communities and not always easy to identify. It is a balance not to contradict the concept of integration for forces members and their families in civilian communities whilst ensuring appropriate support and priority is given.

- 5.2 The armed forces are reducing their personnel, 10,532 will be leaving the forces between September 2012 to June 2013, 63% of these have sought service leaver advice and 237 are from the north west and 520 have stated they wish to resettle in the north west, a total of 820. It is anticipated a further breakdown by local authority areas will be available shortly and will be shared with Chief Executives.
- 5.3 It is anticipated from January 2013 there will be a further 6000 service leavers. As one in five in the forces originate from the north west it is reasonable to estimate 1200 returning to the region.
- 5.4 A service leaver event is being held in Liverpool in November 2012, it is an information event for service leavers wishing to return to the area, the Community Covenant Working Group will be represented there including Halton.
- 5.5 There are a number of support organisations that exist to support veterans, some have a presence established in Halton and others deliver services in the area. A web based directory is due to be launched by December 2012 to provide a comprehensive list of organisations and what support they can offer.
- 5.6 The Council will work with partners to assist and support our armed forces and their families in line with the pledges set out in the covenant.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

Ensuring the school admissions process allocates the appropriate priority for serving families and additional support for special needs children in armed forces families is provided in a reasonable timescale.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

Approximately 5000 early service leavers depart the forces each year with 61% being employed at six months following discharge. Over a third of service leavers are unemployed and require additional support when entering the job market.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

Priority for the health & wellbeing of armed forces and veterans is present in health services in Halton. Traditionally, access to mental health support has been low across the forces however a bespoke service "Live At Ease" has been commissioned to provide additional services to clients and is available to Halton residents.

6.4 **A Safer Halton**

Some service leavers and veterans find it difficult to adjust to civilian life and become involved in the criminal justice system. Additional support from custody staff and the probation service are pledges identified in the Community Covenant.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

None to report at this stage.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 The covenant is a voluntary statement of pledges to support armed forces personnel, veterans & their families at this stage however, there are indications this will become a statutory requirement in the near future. As the makeup of the armed forces changes from heavy reliance on full-time serving officers to reservists there will be greater impact on regular communities and proactively considering their needs and priorities will enable us to plan effectively.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 It is incumbent on the authority to ensure Armed Forces Families and Veterans are not disadvantaged and appropriate priorities are awarded in accessing services.

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

9.1 None under the meaning of the Act.