

Report of:	Cllrs Ron Arundale and Barrie Cooper – Armed Forces Champions
Submitted to:	Council – 24 March 2021
Subject:	Update on Armed Forces Community Covenant

Summary

Proposed decision(s)
To provide Council with an update with regard to the Armed Forces Community Covenant

Report for:	Key decision:	Confidential:	Is the report urgent?
To be noted	No	No	No

Contribution to delivery of the 2020-23 Strategic Plan		
People	Place	Business
The covenant improves access to culture and quality of service for those transitioning from the armed services.	Not applicable	Not applicable
Ward(s) affected		
None		

What is the purpose of this report?

1. The 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 re-signed on 12 November 2020.

Why does this report require a Member decision?

2. To update members on the progress made against the Covenant Pillars.

Report Background

3. Middlesbrough Council originally declared its support for the armed forces community through the signing of its first Armed Forces Community Covenant (AFCC) on 19 June 2012.

4. In 2016 Middlesbrough Council received the Employee Recognition Scheme Silver Award in appreciation of their ongoing support to the Armed Forces Community. The MOD Employer Recognition Scheme Silver Award publicly recognises the support employers and organisations provide the Armed Forces Community and is a formal way of thanking those businesses and organisations for their ongoing support.
5. The Council has reinforced its commitment to the Armed Forces again this year by re-signing the Covenant on 12 November 2020 and is currently working towards achieving the ERS Gold Award.
6. The report details the current position and progress made by the Council to fulfil its AFC pledges with specific reference to:
 - the formation of the Armed Forces Working Group
 - the 2019/20 Stock Take self-assessment of delivery of the Covenant Pillars (detailed in Appendix 1 and 2);
 - the Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan for 2020/21;
 - working towards achieving the 'Gold' award from the Ministry of Defence's Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS);

Armed Forces Working Group

7. An Armed Forces Forum (AFF) was established in 2016 which met at least once a year to discuss armed forces related issues and ensure that the Council met the needs of the armed forces community as outlined in the Covenant Pillars. Over time, attendance at these meetings became sporadic and actions arising from them were not always progressed. To ensure that identified actions were followed up, it was agreed that a smaller working group would be established to include core members from the AFF. The working group would report back to the AFF who were also welcome to attend meetings at any time or feed any ideas back to them. The Terms of Reference for the Armed Forces Working Group were formally agreed at a meeting in September 2019.
8. This smaller group consists of staff from across the council, Police, Housing, the prison service, MOD, Age UK, recovery services, RBL, NHS as well as representatives from other local organisations, 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.
9. The Working Group has met several times and progress has been made in delivering the Council's Covenant commitments. The biggest initial step was achieved in re-designing the Armed Forces pages on the Council website which provide information and advice relating to serving personnel, reservists and veterans.
10. The Defence Transition Service attended a meeting of the AFWG on 8 January 2020 and gave a presentation on transition from the military to civilian life. Following this meeting an A4 sheet containing important information in relation to services in Middlesbrough was devised and sent to them for future use. The DTS give this information to all those leaving the military who wish to relocate to Middlesbrough.

11. No meetings have taken place since the January meeting due to covid-19 but information is shared on a regular basis and a virtual meeting will be held in February 2021.

Stock Take Self-Assessment

12. The working group also had input concerning the annual Stock Take self-assessment (Appendix 1) regarding delivery of the Covenant 'Pillars' (Appendix 2) and this is used to identify priorities for the AF Covenant Action Plan in the following year.
13. 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.
14. The 2019/20 Stock Take resulted in a 'green' rating for all of the pillars except the 'Transition' pillar – which is 'amber. Apart from the Forces Careers Office there is no significant military presence in Middlesbrough which means that we have very limited knowledge about those returning to our area and makes this pillar an area for improvement. We are starting to make progress towards achieving 'green' and will continue to address the matter through our AF Covenant Action Plan for 2020/21.

Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan 20/21

15. The Action Plan is reviewed and updated continually. The Armed Forces Champions together with the Working Group use 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 2020/21 is based on the results of the 2019/20 Stock Take. Over the last year our main focus has been to:
 - Continue to update the dedicated pages to the armed forces on the website
 - Promote the e-learning module to all Council staff as part of the induction process
 - Identify Armed Forces Champions in all service areas of the Council
 - Refresh the Armed Forces Covenant
 - Undertake a staff survey to identify numbers of ex forces and reservists at Middlesbrough Council
 - Roll out the Veterans Health Survey in conjunction with Middlesbrough Council, CCG and the AF Partnership.
 - Ensure that anyone seeking help from the Homelessness & Housing Solutions team is immediately identified as armed forces
 - 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)

16. The scheme was introduced to encourage 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.
17. The Council was initially awarded the Bronze Award and subsequently met the criteria to achieve the Silver award at the end of 2016 in appreciation of their ongoing support to the Armed Forces Community. The ERS Silver Award publicly recognises the support employers and organisations provide the Armed Forces Community and is a formal way of thanking those businesses and organisations for their ongoing support.
18. 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. This entails much greater and stricter scrutiny regarding being a robust supporter and advocate for the armed forces community.
19. The following are recent examples of work being done by the Council, which will be put forward in the submission for the gold award:
 - Re-affirming our commitment to the Armed Forces community by signing up to the new AF Covenant together with a number of other local businesses.
 - Introducing a Reservists policy for serving personnel.
 - Signing up to the Careers Transition Partnership and Forces Families Jobs to promote vacancies within the Council.
 - On 20 June 2018 Middlesbrough council passed a motion at full Council, that as part of their commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, they would offer every armed forces service leaver a job interview within 3 years of leaving service provided they have the right credentials.
 - 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 and then encourage them to do the same. Cllr Ron Arundale has approached many local business through his association with the Teesside Philanthropic Association highlighting the merits of signing up to the national AF Covenant.

CONCLUSION

20. Members are 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 way that this has been achieved – primarily through the establishment and development of the Armed Forces Working Group.

21. 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 Working Group to review and update the Covenant Action Plan and carry out the annual Stock take of the covenant pillars;
 - continue to monitor and implement 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;
22. 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.

Legal

23. There are no legal implications.

Financial

24. There are no financial implications.

Policy Framework

25. The decision will not amend the Council's policy framework.

Equality and Diversity

26. Report is for information only.

Risk

27. The report is for information only.

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

28. No actions are necessary, as the report is for information only.

Background papers

29. The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:
- a) Middlesbrough Council Draft Stock Take for 2019/20 – Progress / Evidence
 - b) Covenant Pillars
 - c) Ministry of Defence Employer Recognition Scheme