1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide our regular update to the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee on the support offered to current and former members of the armed forces, reservists and their families as part of our commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant.

2. Overview of the Armed Forces Covenant

2.1 The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise by the nation ensuring that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces and their families are treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives. The Covenant does not intend to replace current work by public service providers, charities and individuals, but rather formalise a commitment and build on existing sources of support. Further information and online support relating to the Covenant can be accessed here:

https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/

2.2 The Stockport Armed Forces Covenant was jointly drafted and approved by the Council and Borough’s Armed Forces Liaison Officer and Regional Headquarters in April 2013. The document has since been revised earlier in 2017 following approval from CLT, Scrutiny and Cabinet. The current Covenant, is available on the Council’s Armed Forces Internet page and will be revised in 2020. An extract of our key commitments is attached at Appendix One for information. Underpinning our promise that the Armed Forces Community should be treated fairly are two principles:

- The Armed Forces Community should not face disadvantage when compared to other citizens in the provision of public services
- Special consideration is approach in some cases for those who have given the most, such as the injured or the bereaved.

3. The Armed Forces Covenant in Greater Manchester

3.1 In 2014, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) became the first city-region to sign the Armed Forces Covenant. One fifth of the armed forces are recruited from North West England, more than any other region in the UK. The commitment of the GMCA and local authorities in Greater Manchester to the Armed Forces Covenant was reaffirmed in June 2017 when it was re-signed.

3.2 The Greater Manchester Armed Forces Covenant which was reaffirmed in June 2017 will provide a Minimum Guarantee to all veterans in the city-region:
- Creating a Greater Manchester Armed Forces Homelessness pathway that seeks to end veterans living on the streets by 2020.
- Launching a Greater Manchester Housing pathway for Armed Forces families that seeks to give commonality of approach to all members of the Armed Forces Community.
- Deliver a Greater Manchester Reservists policy for local authorities (and other public sector organisations) to sign up to, supporting employees who wish to become, or who are reservists.
- Setting a standard policy across all local authorities for the Armed Forces Communities that offers a Minimum Guarantee.
- Delivering a Greater Manchester Cadets strategy.
- Linking existing data systems with a view to be able to ‘flag’ members of the Armed Forces family on relevant systems where this will aid service delivery.
- Develop colleague education and customer facing staff development to act as the first point of contact for members of the Armed Forces Community in need.
- Create a Greater Manchester Employment and Skills pathway.

3.3 In December 2018 the Ministry of Defence Covenant Fund awarded Greater Manchester a grant of £232,000 so that Greater Manchester authorities can step up and continue their work in support of the updated Covenant. This financial commitment will underpin the delivery of the Greater Manchester Armed Forces Plan which was also adopted by the Greater Manchester Reform Board in December 2018.

4. Our Commitment to the Armed Forces Community at Stockport Council

4.1 Stockport’s Strategic Armed Forces Covenant Group was established in August 2013 to oversee the implementation and on-going development of our approach. The Group comprises of the North West Armed Forces Liaison Officer, Elected Members from all political parties and representatives from a range of associations including Royal British Legion, Stockport Territorial Army, Royal Air Force Association, Soldiers’ and Sailor’s Families Association (SSAFA), Disability Stockport, Stockport’s Breakfast Veterans Club, Department of Work and Pensions, NHS etc. This group met regularly until 2017 but then lost momentum in 2018 due to changes in personnel. We are pleased to confirm that the network has recently been re-established under the stewardship of the Mayor’s Office and this quarterly group will now be chaired by the Mayor of Stockport or their Deputy. These details of our Elected Member representatives are included in Appendix Two.

4.2 Stockport Council is also a member of the GMCA Armed Forces Covenant Group which meets monthly and which has been instrumental in the development of the GM Armed Forces Covenant and the associated Armed Forces Plan detailed earlier in this report. By attending this group, Stockport Council is able to learn from best practice and discuss ideas with each of the other Local Authorities.

4.3 The Council’s website has an online resource for former and serving Armed Forces personnel. The current webpage can be found here: https://www.stockport.gov.uk/topic/stockport-armed-forces-covenant
4.4 The Council has a dedicated email address for current and former members of the armed forces, reservists and their families who need support to access Council Services. Armed Forces Champions, members of the Armed Forces Covenant Group and our workforce can also email armedforces@stockport.gov.uk as and when they identify someone associated with the Armed Forces who may require additional assistance.

4.5 The Council also has a designated link officer and a network of designated champions across both the Council and Stockport Homes who represent areas such as housing, education, adult social care and advice and guidance. These champions are invited to our Quarterly Armed Forces Covenant Group on a regular basis to provide updates and are our first point of contact if a member of the Armed Forces or their family require additional support. The current Armed Forces officer Champions are attached at Appendix Two.

4.6 As an employer the Council have reviewed our employment Policies to ensure that they support Reservists and former Armed Forces personnel. Our Reservists Policy has been communicated to Managers and has previously been included in internal communications activity.

Specific activity relating to the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

4.7 While the majority of Service leavers go on to have productive and successful lives in the civilian world, the period of transition can be a challenging one and personnel may require some support identifying their transferrable skills, aligning Armed Forces qualifications with their civilian equivalents and breaking into the Civilian job market.

4.8 Council seeks to promote the Armed Forces Covenant to local businesses through promotion of the covenant in the Stockport Business Bulletin and local networking events. It is also expected the new GM Good Employer Charter (to be launched in 2019) will promote the covenant as an example of best practice amongst employers in Greater Manchester.

4.9 The National Careers Service provides the first port of call for individuals wanting Advice and Guidance on how to develop their career aspirations, improve their skills and prepare for work. The service includes face-to-face adviser support, telephone support and online support. This complements the MoD’s own Careers Transition Partnership that supports those leaving the forces / recently left.

4.10 Jobcentre Plus provides the access point for out-of-work benefits claims and payments, as well as providing back-to-work support for individuals. There is a range of support provision delivered or managed by Jobcentre Plus for those recently unemployed. Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches support individuals claimants to identify and determine which support is most appropriate.
4.11 Jobcentre Plus also refers customers to programmes aimed at the longer term unemployed and those with health conditions, claiming out-of-work benefits. In Stockport, this is primarily in the form of the Greater Manchester Working Well Work & Health Programme which is a locally led and managed partnership programme. Working with the DWP, the programme delivers employability support integrated with the full range of local services that are needed to address particular barriers to employment, eg issues relating to physical health, mental health, housing, debt, skills, substance dependency and childcare. All individuals on the Work & Health Programme have a Key Worker to support them back in to work, and sustain employment.

4.12 Support is also available, through the Motiv8 Programme, delivered by Stockport Homes for those individuals furthest from the labour market, with the greatest confidence building needs.

4.13 Stockport’s Work Clubs which are managed by both Stockport Council and Stockport Homes, provide weekly drop-in support for individuals to assist with job search, CV’s and interview techniques in a number of the Borough’s priority areas. These can be used by anyone looking to either enter employment or to move from low paid employment into more sustained employment with increased earnings.

5. Demographics

5.1 It is estimated that 1 in 5 servicemen will return to live in the North West after service and over 500,000 veterans currently live in the region. This number is likely to increase over the next few years as a result of the Armed Forces redundancy programme. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Royal British Legion (RBL) attempted to disaggregate the veteran population by metropolitan borough in 2007. The data suggests that approximately 22,524 veterans were living in Stockport.

5.2 However are no definitive figures for the total number of serving personnel, veterans and armed forces families living in Stockport at the present time because this information is not collected as part of the Census. The next census in England and Wales will be in 2021 and on the 30th June 2016, Stockport Council agreed the following motion:

“To support and promote the Royal British Legion’s call for Parliament to include a new topic in the 2021 census that concerns military service and membership of the Armed Forces Community when they approve the final census questionnaire through the legislative process in 2019.”

6. Next Steps

6.1 Stockport Council remains committed to our Armed Forces community. All of our Scrutiny Committees have received similar updates during this committee cycle and these will be amalgamated into a single report and submitted to Cabinet in March 2019 in order to raise awareness of this commitment.
6.2 This amalgamated report will also be distributed to the Chairs of Area Committees following Cabinet with a request that they consider what local activity is being undertaken in their area. In particular, members of the Armed Forces Covenant Group have expressed a desire to participate in Area Committee discussions in order to raise awareness of the available support at a local level.

6.3 The Council will also continue to produce our Annual Report for Cabinet; the next report is scheduled to be presented in April 2020. The Armed Forces Covenant Group will continue to meet on a quarterly basis and will continue to develop our shared approach.

Appendix One Extract from the current Armed Forces Covenant
Appendix Two Armed Forces Champions- updated

7. Recommendations

7.1 The Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and our future plans to support the armed forces community in Stockport.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Sharon Mayo, Nayuri Patel on telephone number Tel: 0161 474 3733, or alternatively email sharon.mayo@stockport.gov.uk, Nayuri.Patel@stockport.gov.uk