ARMED FORCES COVENANT UPDATE

Report of the Deputy Chief Executive

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 Stockport Council remained committed to our Armed Forces Community. The purpose of this report is to provide our regular update to Cabinet 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.

1.2 Scrutiny committees are have considered a more targeted update on issues that are pertinent to their portfolio areas. This amalgamated report will also be distributed to Area Committees following Cabinet with a request that they consider what local activity is being undertaken in their area.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 The Cabinet is asked to:

- Note current work with relation to armed forces activities;
- Continue to offer their support to the Armed Forces community;
- Approve sharing current work that has progressed within the Council with Area Committees

3. OVERVIEW OF THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT

3.1 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 access here:

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

3.2 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.

4. THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT IN GREATER MANCHESTER

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 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.

5. OUR COMMITMENT TO THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY AT STOCKPORT COUNCIL

5.1 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 Elected Members from across all political parties, the North West Armed Forces Liaison Officer 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 and has recently been re-established under the stewardship of the Mayor’s Office. The Mayor of Stockport or their Deputy will now chair this quarterly group.

5.2 Stockport Council is also a member of the GMCA Armed Forces Covenant Group that 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.

5.3 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](https://www.stockport.gov.uk/topic/stockport-armed-forces-covenant)

5.4 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.

5.5 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.

5.6 As an employer, the Council has 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. We are also planning to roll out e-learning to the workforce during 2019, which will help raise awareness of support that may be available for current and former members of the armed forces, reservists and their families.

6. COMMITMENT TO THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY IN REVENUES AND BENEFITS

6.1 The majority of the activity outlined earlier in this report fall within the remit of the Corporate, Resources Management and Governance. The Armed Forces Covenant Group, Armed Forces Champions Network, interface with GMCA activity, web content, link officer support, specialist inbox and reservists policy are managed by Corporate and Support Services. In addition to this overarching corporate activity, there are a number of areas of more specialist activity within Revenues and Benefits. These include:

6.2 **Social Care Finance** - The Care & Support Guidance required that we completely disregard certain income and capital. As a consequence of this, some armed forces
veterans will be required to pay less toward the cost of care when compared to a non-veteran with the same level of income and savings.

6.3 **Council Tax** – Stockport’s Business Rates and Council Discounts & Exemptions scheme contains provision to provide a 100% Council Tax discount for a property in Stockport where service personnel are living away from home in armed forces accommodation for job related reasons. In addition, a Council Tax empty property premium would not be applied to a property that was empty for the above reasons.

6.4 **Housing and Council Tax Benefit** – Stockport’s Housing Benefit and Council Tax support contains provision to disregard certain incomes and items of capital.

6.5 **Promoting the Covenant through Business Rates** – this year for the first year the Council included some promotional material about the covenant as part of our business rate billing activity. The purpose of this material was to encourage businesses across Stockport to sign up to the Covenant in their own right. Further information about becoming a Forces-Friendly employer can be found here: [https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/](https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/)

7. **COMMITMENT TO THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY IN ECONOMY AND REGENERATION**

7.1 The 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. The promotion of the Covenant through the Business Rates billing process is part of this activity. 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.

7.2 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.

7.3 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 individual claimants to identify and determine which support is most appropriate.

7.4 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.

7.5 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.
8. COMMITMENT TO THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY IN EDUCATION

8.1 As Service families move around the country they may face challenges in finding school places for their children, sometimes outside normal admission periods or at short notice. Service families may also seek flexibility in arranging leave during term time in order to coincide with the Service person’s operational deployments and pre- and post-tour leave. The national Covenant guidance set the following goals with respect to Education:

- Children of members of the Armed Forces should have the same standard of, and access to, education (including early years’ services) as any other citizen in the area where they live;
- There should be special arrangements to support access to schools if a place is required part way through an academic year as a result of a family having to move for Service reasons.

8.2 Service Pupil Premium – State schools, academies and free schools in England, which have children of service families in school years Reception to Year 11, can receive the SPP funding. It is designed to assist the school in providing the additional support such as pastoral needs that these children may need and is currently worth £300 per service child who meets the eligibility criteria.

8.3 In total, 95 children and young people qualified for the Service Pupil Premium in schools across Stockport in 2018/19. This amounts to £28,500. Council Officers continue to promote this area of good practice in relevant written guidance. The induction process for Stockport's transient pupil population, which includes children from Armed Forces families, is subject to regular review.

8.4 Many Stockport schools also recognise the importance of the engagement with Armed Forces personnel as highly effective and important for children and young people. The learning from the emergency scenario exercise held at The Kingsway School in September 2015 which included the Armed Forces as well as civilian communities has continued to inform the ongoing community resilience work in Stockport and Greater Manchester.

9. COMMITMENT TO THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY IN HOUSING

9.1 The national Armed Forces Covenant has set the following goals with respect to Housing:

- Members of the Armed Forces community should have the same access to social housing and other housing schemes as any other citizen, and not be disadvantaged by the requirement for mobility while in Service.
- Those injured in Service should have preferential access to appropriate housing schemes, as well as assistance with necessary adaptations to private housing or Service accommodation while serving.
Where Serving Personnel are entitled to publicly-provided accommodation, it should be of good quality, affordable and suitably located.

9.2 Service Personnel should have priority status in applying for government sponsored affordable housing schemes and Service leavers should retain this status for a period after discharge.

9.3 At the highest end of housing need, are those who find themselves homeless - which can often be accompanied by a range of factors including mental ill health and substance abuse. The Rehousing Services Manager at Stockport Homes acts as the operational housing link for the covenant group, and ensures a co-ordinated and holistic approach towards assisting those in this situation. This means that where legal duties are exceeded in the provision of temporary accommodation, there is additional flexibility around what constitutes a local connection to the Borough. This means that services can be individually tailored to meet sometimes complex needs.

9.4 Stockport Council's Allocation Policy (approved in December 2016) includes 'additional preference' for ex-forces personnel with urgent housing needs as well as priority status for those in the process of leaving the military. This means that where someone has been in the forces they will be prioritised over someone in the same situation who has not. As a result, someone who is leaving the forces will usually have enough priority to be rehoused into a Council property as long as they are able to be flexible with property types and choice of areas.

9.5 From a strategic perspective, the Council and the Stockport Housing Partnership are also working closely with Step Forward, which is a specialist armed forces housing provider (pending application for Registered Provider Status) to increase the provision and availability of housing options in the Borough. This includes discussion with developers regarding the possibility of procuring properties through s106 agreements for former armed forces personnel with a Stockport link.

9.6 Stockport Homes have developed their own armed forces covenant agreement during 2018 to focus on housing issues and complement the wider Community Covenant. This includes:

- Offering personalised housing options interviews and rehousing plans for all current and former members of the armed forces
- Money advice available for armed forces applicants as well as tenants
- A website section with advice for armed forces
- Armed forces ‘champion’ acting as central point of contact
- E-learning module being rolled out to all staff
- Priority for shared ownership properties for all current and former members of armed forces
- Prioritisation of current and former armed forces members for free counselling services, employment and housing support
- Advertising of available jobs through armed forces jobs portals

9.7 The Council and Stockport Homes are also working closely with the wider Greater Manchester Housing Providers Group to help develop a sub-regional 'minimum offer',
ensuring that all current and former members of the armed forces can access the accommodation support and assistance that they need.

10. DEMOGRAPHICS

10.1 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.

10.2 However, there 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."

11. NEXT STEPS

11.1 All of our Scrutiny Committees have received similar updates during this committee cycle. All scrutiny reports will be amalgamated and then submitted to Area Committees; 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.

11.2 The Council will also continue to produce our Annual Report for Cabinet and to progress the commitments we have made in our Armed Forces Covenant. The Armed Forces Covenant Group will continue to meet on a quarterly basis and will continue to develop our shared approach. We will also be revising our Covenant in 2019 as part of our 3-year planning cycle.

Appendix One Extract from the current Armed Forces Covenant.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Nayuri Patel, Sue Williams on Tel: 0161 474 2175 or by email on Nayuri.Patel@stockport.gov.uk, sue.williams@stockport.gov.uk