

Meeting:

ARMED FORCES COVENANT SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS 2018-2021 AND PRIORITIES 2021-2024

Report of the Corporate Director (Corporate and Support Services) and Deputy Chief Executive

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report provides a summary of key achievements since the publication of the 2018 Stockport Armed Forces Covenant priorities and introduces our draft Covenant priorities for 2021-2024. The report includes: -

- Background to the Armed Forces Covenant, including the purpose of the local covenants;
- A summary of key achievements since the publication of our previous Stockport Armed Forces Covenant priorities in 2018;
- Draft priorities for 2021-2024

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The national Armed Forces Covenant was introduced by the Government in 2011. It is 'a promise by the nation ensuring that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly'. The Covenant is fulfilled by different groups including Central Government, local government, the armed forces, businesses, charities and communities.

2.2 Local covenants are very important in delivering the Armed Forces Covenant at local level. In Stockport, our Armed Forces Covenant was produced in 2012 and we have refreshed our priorities every three years since. Our Covenant is developed and overseen by our Armed Forces Covenant Partnership Group which comprises representatives from Stockport Council and other public service providers, charity and voluntary sector organisations and representatives of the local armed forces community.

2.3 Our priorities were most recently refreshed in 2018. A summary of key achievements since the publication of the 2018 Covenant priorities is set out below.

3. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS 2018-2021

3.1 Stockport Homes signed the Armed Forces Covenant in December 2018 and made a number of pledges to address housing need for veterans and armed forces families. The offer of a personalised rehousing plan for all ex-armed forces applicants through the Housing First Initiative and systems in place for providing permanent and temporary accommodation for homeless veterans or those at risk of homelessness were identified as particular areas of success by respondents to the recent Covenant engagement exercises.

- 3.2 The Stockport veterans passport scheme was introduced in 2019 and enables veterans to disclose information they wish to share with health and social care professionals in a way that is comfortable to them and reduces the need to retell information multiple times and re-live traumatic memories. In preparation for the launch of the scheme, an extensive training programme was rolled out for staff across the Foundation Trust and within GP settings and a veterans action group was established supported by trust staff and veterans of all ages. The scheme was the first of its kind in the North West and has generated interest from other healthcare providers across Greater Manchester.
- 3.3 A wealth of local third sector organisations offer support to veterans and their families in Stockport, including a range of veterans' groups who have an essential role connecting veterans within the community, supporting their transition into the civilian community and signposting to further sources of information and advice.
- 3.4 Education, employment and skills support is provided locally for veterans by Job Centre Plus and Stockport Homes. In addition, Project Recce is a local initiative where two veterans are supporting ex armed forces personnel into employment in the construction sector – capitalising on veterans' transferrable skills to provide a route into sustainable employment.
- 3.5 A working group was set up by the Council to ensure Remembrance Day commemorations in November 2020 were adapted to provide veterans in Stockport with an opportunity to participate safely in a private civic commemoration whilst complying with Covid-19 restrictions. In addition the Council promoted other ways for Stockport residents to reflect and remember safely including promotion of the 'Two Minute Doorstep Remembrance', the Royal British Legion's online Poppy Appeal and an online book of commemoration.
- 3.6 The Stockport Armed Forces Covenant Partnership Group has continued to meet during the Covid-19 pandemic to discuss issues affecting the armed forces community and to help raise awareness of the support and good work taking place locally. Meetings of the Group transferred online in September 2020 and continue to be well attended.
- 3.7 Stockport Council received a silver award for the Ministry of Defence Employer Recognition Scheme in July 2021, in recognition of the Council's support to defence and the armed forces community.
- 3.8 The armed forces have played an essential role in the delivery of Stockport's Covid-19 vaccination programme (as part of the national vaccination delivery programme), including ensuring the delivery of vaccinations to the Borough's most vulnerable residents.
- 3.9 At a Greater Manchester level, the Greater Manchester Armed Forces Programme post has been made a permanent appointment. This demonstrates the commitment of the 10 local authorities of Greater Manchester to work together cohesively to deliver a 'gold standard' Armed Forces covenant for the city region.

4. DRAFT PRIORITIES 2021-2024

4.1 In the three years since we published our 2018 priorities, we have seen huge changes which have impacted on all sectors of society, including the armed forces community. As part of the process of refreshing our priorities for the next three years, we have carried out extensive engagement in order to get a true picture of what it is like to be a member of the armed forces community in Stockport in 2021. This has provided invaluable information which has been used to shape our draft priorities for 2021-2024.

- We have produced two surveys – one asking for the views of veterans, serving personnel and their families and the other targeted at the people who work with the armed forces community. The surveys were circulated as widely as possible and advertised through various newsletters and social media in order to maximise the opportunity for feedback. The surveys were available online (and where requested in paper copy) for 6 weeks and we received a total of 41 responses
- Members of the Armed Forces Covenant Partnership Group also participated in a workshop, independently facilitated by the Armed Forces Lead at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. The workshop provided an opportunity for members to discuss achievements and successes since the publication of our previous Covenant priorities; issues and opportunities; and priorities for the next three years.

4.2 The overarching vision which underpins the Stockport Armed Forces Covenant priorities for 2021-2024 is: -

'members of the Stockport armed forces community and their families receive the support they need to thrive, whilst also celebrating their unique skills and diverse experiences, and maximising the opportunities for veterans and serving personnel to bring their invaluable contribution to civilian society.'

4.3 This vision is aligned with the 'One Stockport' vision to create a 'fair and inclusive borough for everyone, where diversity and inclusion are celebrated and everyone has equity of opportunity'. In addition, the Covenant aims to align with and complement the Greater Manchester Armed Forces Covenant.

4.4 Our draft priorities for 2021-2024 respond to the issues and opportunities identified through engagement with veterans, their families and the local organisations / services working with the armed forces community. The priorities are grouped into the following 4 key themes: -

- Supporting transitions;
- Connecting the armed forces community to available support;
- Promoting and celebrating our armed forces community;
- Leadership and advocacy

4.5 A series of more specific 'pledges' sit beneath each priority theme and the intention is to develop action plans with deliverable actions and leads for each theme. The delivery of the Covenant priorities will be overseen by the Armed Forces Covenant

Partnership Group and an annual report will be produced each year to provide an overview of progress towards achieving priorities.

- 4.6 Stockport Council received a silver award for the Ministry of Defence Employer Recognition Scheme in July 2021. This scheme was launched to reward employers who support Defence People objectives and encourage others to do the same. Our priorities for 2021-2024 confirm and support the Council's ambition to work toward the Gold award of the Employer Recognition Scheme. This includes a greater focus on 'advocacy', including encouraging partners and other local organisations / businesses to sign the Armed Forces Covenant and engage in the Employer Recognition Scheme.
- 4.7 The draft Stockport Armed Forces Covenant priorities for 2021-2024 are appended to this covering report.

5. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- a. There are no financial and risk assessment considerations arising from this report. The activities the council undertakes to support the armed forces community are embedded within existing core services and delivered through existing core service budgets.

6. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

- a. Whilst community covenants complement, at a local level, the Armed Forces Covenant, which outlines the moral obligation between the nation, the government and the armed forces, the Armed Forces Covenant is not a legally binding document. Therefore there are no legal considerations arising from this report.

7. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

- a. There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- a. The Covenant is focused on the provision of support for an identified minority group. Further assessment of the equality and environmental impact of specific delivery plans will be considered as part of the implementation of the Covenant.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- a. There is no anticipated environmental impact arising from this report. Further assessment of the environmental impact of specific delivery plans will be considered as part of the implementation of the Covenant, if appropriate.

10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Scrutiny / Cabinet is invited to

- Comment on and endorse the priorities set out in the Stockport Armed Forces Covenant 2021-2024;
- Comment on and endorse the Council's intention to work towards the Gold award of the Employer Recognition Scheme

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Stockport Armed Forces Covenant

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Kirsteen Roe on or by email on kirsteen.roe@stockport.gov.uk