

**ANNUAL REPORT – ARMED FORCES COVENANT 2023**

Report of Vicki Bates Assistant Director – Legal & Democratic Governance

**1. Introduction and Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 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 the vehicle to bring knowledge, experience and expertise to bear on the provision of help and advice to members of the Armed Forces Community. It is also an opportunity to build upon existing good work on other initiatives. In that way, a common approach to meeting the needs of this identifiable community within Greater Manchester is being adopted, ensuring that the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant are upheld.
- 1.2 In Stockport, we originally produced our local Stockport Armed Forces Covenant in 2012 and have committed to refreshing our priorities every three years. During the summer of 2021, the Stockport Armed Forces Partnership Group carried out extensive engagement with the local armed forces community, their families and the local organisations / services working with the armed forces community. The Stockport Armed Forces Covenant priorities for 2021-2024 are underpinned by the following vision: -
- 1.3 ***‘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 the civilian community.’***
- 1.4 The following four priorities were developed to respond to the issues and opportunities raised:
- **Priority 1: Supporting transitions** - we will work to assist the transition of members of the armed forces community and their families, particularly in relation to the key areas of housing, education, employment, welfare, and mental health.
  - **Priority 2: Connecting the armed forces community to available support** - we will ensure that the support and good work taking place locally is effectively communicated to serving personnel, veterans and their families.
  - **Priority 3: Promoting and celebrating our armed forces community** - we will raise awareness of the armed forces and the contribution they make locally and nationally; help to identify and promote further opportunities for the armed forces community to contribute to civilian society; and further develop opportunities for youth engagement with the armed forces.

- **Priority 4: Leadership and advocacy** - we will further develop the role of the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group to provide proactive leadership in the delivery of the Stockport Armed Forces Covenant priorities and to ensure emerging issues (at a Greater Manchester and national level, including the implications of the Armed Forces Act, 2021) are identified and addressed.

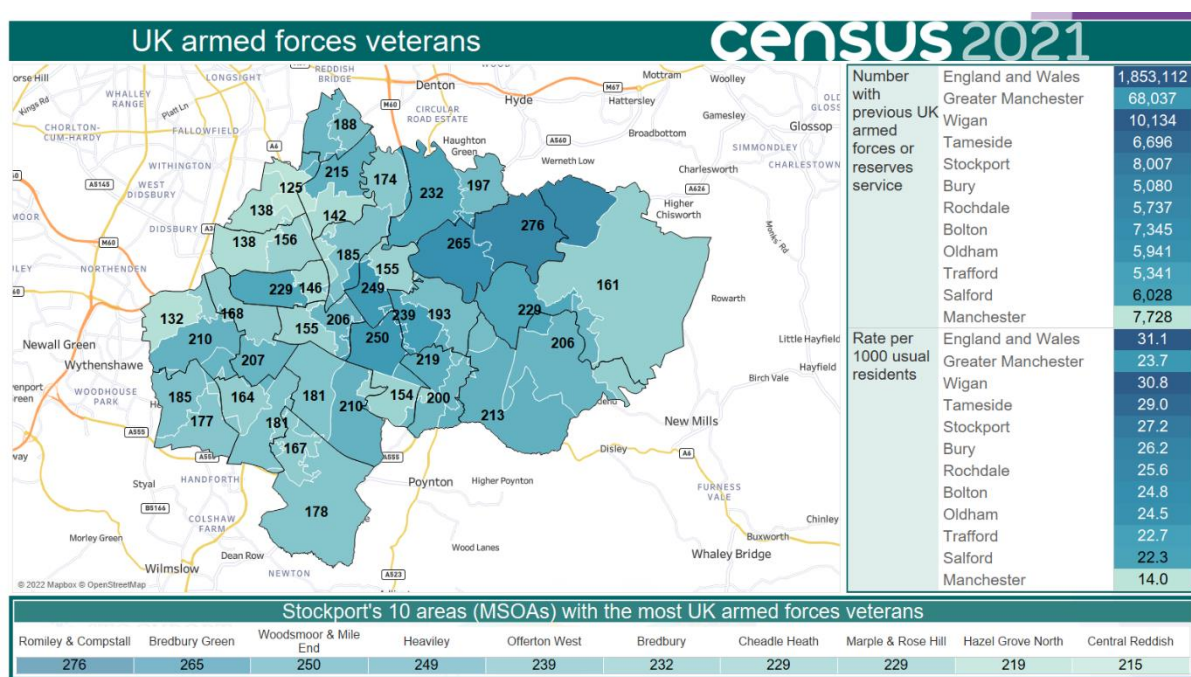
- 1.5 These priorities are now overseen by the Stockport Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group which comprises representatives from Stockport Council and other public service providers, VCFSE sector, Charities, representatives of the local armed forces community and more recently Stockport Armed Forces Community organisation (SAFCO) network members.
- 1.6 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of key achievements against the identified priorities during 2022-2023- the second year of the three-year programme of priorities. At Appendix 1 is the Stockport Armed Forces Covenant Priorities 2021 – 2024 document which was drafted in 2021 and as such does not reflect the change in personnel at the Council (the Senior Responsible Officer at the Council is now Vicki Bates (Assistant Director – Legal and Democratic Governance) and the Cabinet Member who sits on the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group and who has this priority in her portfolio is Cllr Frankie Singleton.
- 1.7 The report will also provide an update on The Armed Forces Act 2021 which has been introduced as a new requirement for some public bodies, including local authorities.
- 1.8 CLT are recommended to note the updates provided on the progress made against the progress of the Armed Forces Covenant 2021-2023 and approve the report for release through the governance process.

## 2. **About Stockport Armed Forces Community**

- 2.1 In 2021, for the first time, the UK census asked people if they had previously served in the UK armed forces. People aged 16 years and over were asked whether they had previously served in the regular or reserve UK armed forces, or both. People currently serving in the UK armed forces and those who had never served were both advised to tick "no". The data provided is a positive step forward and useful tool in helping Local Authorities identify where their ex-armed forces residents are living in order to focus the direction of the delivery of the priorities. However, as with any data collection exercise, the data is only as good as that which has been provided and the feedback from some of the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group is that the data will not be accurate, as not all ex-armed forces residents will have completed the census. This ought to be kept in mind when considering the following figures:-
- 2.2 In 2021, 1,853,112 people in England and Wales reported that they had previously served in the UK armed forces (3.8% of usual residents aged 16 years and over). **In Stockport, the number who responded on this basis was 8,007 people (3.4%).**
- 2.3 Of the UK armed forces veterans in England and Wales, 76.3% (1.4 million people) previously served in the regular forces, 19.5% (361,000 people) in the reserve forces, and 4.3% (79,000 people) served in both the regular and reserve forces. In

relation to those that completed the census the figures for **Stockport were: 73.7% regular forces, 22.0% reserve forces, 4.4% both.**

- 2.4 There were 1.7 million households (7.0% of all households) with one or more persons who had served in the UK armed forces. **In Stockport, those that responded confirmed that there were 7,621 such households (6.1%).**
- 2.5 The local authorities with the highest proportion of veterans included Gosport (12.5%), North Kesteven (10.2%) and Richmondshire (9.5%) in England, and Conwy (5.9%) in Wales. **Of those that responded, Stockport's proportion is 3.4%.**
- 2.6 The heat map below provides a breakdown of Stockport's veterans by Ward. The Key displays Stockport's veteran population in relation to the wider GM picture. According to census data Stockport has the second highest proportion of veterans among the GM boroughs.



### 3. Key achievements 2023-2024

#### 3.1. The Stockport Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group

3.2. The Stockport Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group has continued to meet quarterly to discuss issues affecting the armed forces community and raise awareness of the collaborative work taking place locally. The group is chaired by the Mayor of Stockport and comprises representatives from Stockport Council and other public service providers such as Ministry of Defence representation, Stockport Homes, NHS etc, voluntary, community and charity sector and representatives of the local armed forces community including representation from Stockport Armed Forces Community Organisation (SAFCO). This group is instrumental to creating partnerships and momentum to realise most of the achievements against the priorities. Meetings for 2023-2024 are to be held on:

- 18 September 2023
- 4 December 2023
- 15 January 2024
- 18 March 2024

3.3 In February 2022 the Cabinet awarded the grant sum of £100,000 to the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group to be spent over the following 3 years. The breakdown of the intended allocation of this grant is as follows:

<b>Event/ Project</b>	<b>Amount</b>
Armed Forces Day event support funding	£6,000
Establishment of a regular face to face drop in for veterans in Stockport Town Centre (Breakfast clubs)	£9,000
Development of a constituted partnership- Armed Forces Network (to be spent over 3 years)	£28,000
Grant funding for initiatives that benefit Stockport's armed forces community (to be led by the Steering Group and spent over 3 years)	£55,000
Printed materials	£2,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£100,000</b>

3.4 The below table sets out the amounts spent to date from the grant all of which are discussed with the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group prior to authorisation by the SRO for the Steering Group, the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Governance who has been delegated the authorisation to approve the requests for funding from the grants.

<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Spend</b>
Disability Stockport	£500.00
Friends of Stockport NVA	£500.00
Project RECCE CIO	£500.00
Mode Rehabilitation	£500.00
The Veterans Food Co (Friday Breakfast club)	£500.00
The Veterans Food Co	£2,250.00
The Veterans Food Co	£2,250.00
<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Spend</b>
The Veterans Food Co	£2,250.00
Royal Navy Association	£500.00
Mayor's reception	£226.40
AFD Flag	£169.30
The Veterans Food Co	£2,250
Armed Forces Day Leaflets and sundries	£440
AFD Entertainment	£1,000.00

#### 4. **GM Armed forces Partnership**

- 4.1 In October 2019, the GMCA recruited a permanent Armed Forces programme manager to support and coordinate the delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant across the city region. Stockport council lead officers have been working closely and are represented at the GMCA Armed Forces Leads Officer Group which has been vital to sharing best practice and jointly working with other local authorities. Additionally, the GMCA has instigated a quarterly Armed Forces partnership forum that brings together the public and VCSE partners operating in support of the community in GM.
- 4.2 With input from armed forces representatives from across Greater Manchester, including Stockport, an 'education package' has been developed for circulation to Greater Manchester local authorities and partner organisations. The Greater Manchester Lead Officers group has commissioned a series of organisational development packages which will consist of e-learning, presentations, leaflets and brochures, all designed to raise awareness across all sectors of Greater Manchester professionals. The packages will comprise generic Armed Forces Covenant awareness and targeted packages tailored to key support providers. The rollout of the full package of training has been delayed by the expansion of statutory duties of local authorities under the Armed Forces Act 2021 and the need for clarification of those duties, particularly in relation to Health & Care settings. The education package is now expected to be completed by early 2024.
- 4.3 Progress under each of the four priority headings is outlined below.

#### 5. **Priority 1: Supporting transitions**

- 5.1 The Armed Forces Covenant has already led to a range of support to service leavers and their families being embedded into core public services across the borough. For example, Stockport's housing allocations policy makes specific provisions for veterans within the allocations points system and organisations. They also provide money advice, access to counselling, tenancy support, dedicated drug and alcohol support to homeless people including ex-forces, employment support, personal housing plans for all ex-service people who are looking for accommodation as well as other initiatives.
- 5.2 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) provide initiatives that support current and former armed forces personnel and their families access to Jobcentre Plus services. In Stockport representatives from the DWP attend a weekly armed forces community breakfast club at Stockport's Produce Hall. This is instrumental to supporting the community with employment related support.
- 5.3 The Council is committed to working towards gold status for the Ministry of Defence (MOD) Employer Recognition Scheme, in recognition of the Council's support to defence and the armed forces community. Gold award holders must provide significant support of their forces friendly credentials throughout their organisation

such as recruitment and selection and generally provide a positive environment for Reservists by ensuring that positive policies in support of Reservists within the workforce are communicated to line managers. The Council is committed to working towards gold status and plans to submit a nomination to the MOD for the gold award when the application process opens in January 2024, the majority of the criteria for the award having already been met.

5.4 The council is working with the GMCA who are leading on developing a GM Armed Forces Strategy with an action plan. The strategy will seek to demonstrate a roadmap that takes all partners on a five-year journey to move Covenant delivery across all sectors to the next level. Workshops have since taken place to create a Local Standards Framework that drives action plans in the following areas: Housing and homelessness, health, education for service children, collaboration and partnership, employment, skills and finance, criminal justice system partnership.

5.5 More recently, the council have supported a GM Armed Forces community guide, which will provide useful and practical information to service leavers and their families about the GM Borough's offer, including information relating to advice, guidance and support. The council are currently submitting information for the 2023/2024 GM Guide.

## **5.6 Priority 2: Connecting the armed forces community to available support**

5.7 A sub-group comprising representatives from the council, Stockport Veterans Breakfast Club, MODE Rehabilitation, Disability Stockport, Stockport Homes, the Veterans Food Company and the Greater Manchester Armed Forces Lead, met throughout 2021- 2022 to oversee and develop a directory of services of approved organisations which is now available on the council's armed forces covenant webpage: [www.stockport.gov.uk/support-from-charities-and-other-organisations](http://www.stockport.gov.uk/support-from-charities-and-other-organisations).

5.8 In the summer of 2022, the Council embarked on a new programme of work, to improve the way we engage with, and support communities of identity in Stockport by developing a range of networks. This was in recognition that these communities often find it harder to access and be heard by statutory services; and are more likely to experience socio-economic disadvantage. To further formalise and strengthen the voice of the armed forces community, local organisations, businesses, residents and partners came together to see the Stockport Armed Forces Community Organisation (SAFCO) develop. This network will be instrumental to develop and implement initiatives that will benefit Stockport's armed forces community and has recently been formally constituted.

## **5.9 Priority 3: Promoting and celebrating our armed forces community**

### **5.10 Armistice Day, Friday 11 November 2022**

5.11 The council helped to organise some of the commemorative services and events in the borough on Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday.

5.12 All were welcome to attend and observe the two-minute silence on Armistice Day, Friday 11 November 2022. At 11am, and as per long-standing tradition, the then Mayor of Stockport, Councillor David Wilson, along with members of the armed forces, veterans, civic dignitaries and Stockport's residents observed the silence on

the steps of Stockport War Memorial Art Gallery. To mark the beginning and end of the silence, maroon rockets were launched from the civic complex.



Photo credit: James Birch, photographer and resident of Stockport

#### 5.13 Remembrance Sunday services, Sunday 13 November 2022

5.14 On Remembrance Sunday, the then Mayor of Stockport, Councillor David Wilson, led the borough in paying respects at the Stockport Civic Act of Remembrance on the steps of Stockport War Memorial Art Gallery. A two-minute silence was held at 11am, beginning with the Last Post and ending with the Reveille. Prayers, hymns and reflections from Stockport's communities followed, and wreaths were laid on the steps of the War Memorial. Residents were also able to support the Royal British Legion's annual Poppy Appeal at the event. Feedback was that the service was well-received by veterans and by all.

5.15 The Stockport service also marked the 60th consecutive time that Lt Mike Greaves, long-serving bugler and representative of the Sea Cadet Corps, played the Last Post on the bugle. Lt Greaves was recognised with an award in the Coronation Awards 2022, hosted by the Mayor of Stockport, for his services to the borough.

5.16 On Remembrance Sunday, and in addition to the Stockport Civic Act of Remembrance held in the town centre, 17 services took place throughout the borough. This enabled Stockport's residents to reflect and remember with their local communities.

5.17 Planning for the 2023 commemorative services and events is well underway.

#### 5.18 'Droppin Well' Ballykelly bombing local commemoration event, 6 December 2022

5.19 Tuesday 6 December 2022 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of those who were killed in the 'Droppin Well' Ballykelly bombing. A local commemoration event to mark the anniversary and pay tribute to those who lost their lives took place at 2pm on 6 December in the Hall of Memory (Stockport War Memorial Art Gallery). The service

was arranged by Janice Willis, sister of Lance Corporal Clinton Collins who tragically lost his life in the bombing, supported by the council. As part of the commemoration, readings were given, and candles were lit as tribute to the four soldiers of the Cheshire Regiment and Stockport residents who tragically lost their lives - Lance Corporal Clinton Collins, Lance Corporal David Stitt, Private David Murray, and Private Shaw Williamson. The service enabled family members and friends of those who lost their lives, an opportunity to remember them, on this important anniversary.



#### 5.20 Armed Forces Day 2023, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2023

5.21 Armed Forces Day 2023 brought together various organisations and community members to support and celebrate the armed forces community in Stockport. The event showcased the commitment of the local community to recognise and honour the contributions of servicemen and women, veterans, and their families

5.22 A notable achievement of the event was the significant increase in footfall at the Market Hall, indicating heightened public interest and participation in the importance of marking Armed Forces Day. Compared to the previous year, footfall at the Market Hall increased by 40%. Moreover, the event saw a 34% increase in attendance compared to the prior three Saturdays, demonstrating the growing enthusiasm for celebrating Armed Forces Day.

5.23 The success of Armed Forces Day can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of various organisations, including SAFCO, local businesses, charities, and the council. By working together, they created a vibrant and engaging event that resonated with the community and demonstrated the importance of supporting the armed forces community. Planning for Armed Forces Day 2024 has already started.

#### 5.24 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of S.S Stockport & Exhibition



- 5.25 The council worked closely with the Stockport branch of the Royal Naval Association to raise awareness of the sinking of the S.S Stockport, a rescue ship that was sunk during the second world war, tragically killing all aboard.
- 5.26 The Royal Naval Association previously commemorated the anniversary of this event with an annual parade through Hazel Grove, However, to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a larger event held by the RNA supported by council funding brought members of the RNA, local community and descendants of those aboard together in celebration and remembrance. The event included a memorial service in full parade dress followed by a meal and tombola.
- 5.27 Further to the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary event, the RNA wished to share the story of the S.S Stockport more broadly within the community as an opportunity to educate future generations on WW2 as well as raise awareness of the sacrifices made by our armed forces historically and up to the present day.
- 5.28 Over the course of the last year, the RNA, Stockport Sea cadets and Stockport council's armed forces project officers and library & museums teams have all worked to put together an exhibition to the S.S Stockport which is proudly displayed at Staircase House. The exhibit was officially opened on Armed Forces Day 2023 by representatives from the RNA, Sea Cadets, the Mayor and the Lord Lieutenant. The exhibit includes a replica of the ships bell, regimental shields, a roll of honour as well as a scale model of the ship and supporting historical information.
- 5.29 Perspectives of Colonised Peoples on World War One – An exhibition by Southern Voices
- 5.30 The Council and the Stockport Army Reservist Unit jointly worked with Southern Voices to exhibit their World War One Project 'Perspectives of Colonised Peoples on World War' to coincide with Black History Month and Remembrance Sunday 2022. The exhibition ran from the 13<sup>th</sup> October 2022 to the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2022 at the Stockport War Memorial Art Gallery. The exhibition centres on the involvement and experience of people from a number of British colonies- the West Indies, East Africa, Nigeria and India. It looks at the contribution from colonies into the war and the Army Reservist Unit lent the War Memorial and Art Gallery some artefacts from the War to strengthen the exhibition.
- 5.31 **Priority 4: Leadership and advocacy**
- 5.32 Armed Forces Statutory Duty
- 5.33 The council has worked with the GMCA, relevant services and partners to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Armed Forces Act 2021. The Act enshrines the Armed Forces Covenant in law and helps prevent service personnel and veterans being disadvantaged when accessing services. The Act states that a public authority must, when exercising its public functions in relation to healthcare, education, and housing, have 'due regard to the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the armed forces, and the principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for service personnel from membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces'. Due regard means that in making decisions, as well as in operational activity, a body subject to the duty must consciously consider

the obligations previously stated. It is not prescriptive about the actions specified bodies should take in order to comply with their legal obligations, and it does not mandate specific public service delivery outcomes.

- 5.34 During the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2021 the Government resisted calls by opposition parties and military charities to expand this requirement to every area of public policy and to apply it to national government and devolved administrations. Statutory guidance was laid in secondary legislation (the Armed Forces (Covenant) Regulations 2022) and was published on 8 November 2022. The Government will review the operation of the new duty across the UK in its 2023 Covenant annual report which has not yet been published.
- 5.35 The requirements of the Act are incorporated into the Stockport Covenant; and the council's procurement service worked with STAR Procurement (a shared service with Tameside, Trafford and Rochdale), to ensure that the requirements of the Act are incorporated into all of the council's contracts. Through the council's procurement process, we are able to direct suppliers/ contractors and commissioned services to sign up to the armed forces covenant through their Social Value commitment. We have created tools to enable suppliers to commit to Social Value objectives that are aligned to SMBC's council priorities, of which veterans are one.
- 5.36 Stockport County FC signing of their Armed Forces Covenant
- 5.37 Whilst leadership and advocacy are instrumental for succeeding in a gold award for the Employer Recognition scheme, the council and partners were instrumental in supporting Stockport County FC to sign up to their own Armed Forces Covenant. Stockport County's ongoing support of the local armed forces community has seen them provide a range of resources, most notably their contributions to Armed Forces Day 2023. Signing up represents the clubs ongoing commitment to the Armed forces community, solidifying and formalising an already strong relationship.



## **6 Recommendations**

- 6.1 The Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the report and provide any comments prior to the report progressing through the governance process.

## Background Papers

There are none.

Anyone requiring further information should contact Vicki Bates by email [vicki.bates@stockport.gov.uk](mailto:vicki.bates@stockport.gov.uk).