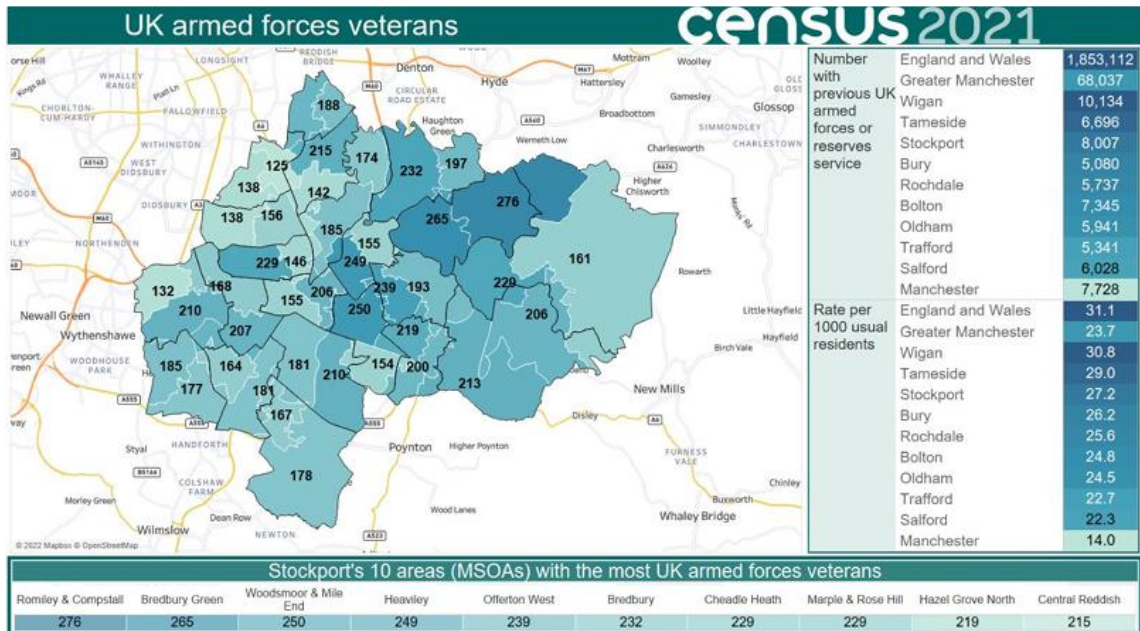


ANNUAL REPORT - ARMED FORCES COVENANT 2023/24

Report of the Assistant Director for Legal & Democratic Governance

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The is the council's annual report on the work and support undertaken during the municipal year 2023/24 in furtherance of the Armed Forces Covenant.
- 1.2 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.*'
- 1.3 In Stockport, we originally produced our local Stockport Armed Forces Covenant in 2012 and have committed to refreshing our priorities every three years. The priorities set in 2021 are due for re-fresh at the end of 2024. The re-fresh will be led by members of the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group ensuring consultation with a wide range of stakeholders already engaged and committed to supporting our ex-armed forces and current armed forces community.
- 1.4 Following the release of census data in 2021 it is estimated that there are 8,007 members of the ex- Armed Forces community living within the borough of Stockport. However, this figure may well be higher as residents may not have responded to the census. The census asked if people aged 16 years or over had previously served in the regular or reserve UK armed forces, or both. Current serving members of the Armed Forces community were advised to select "no" as the question was designed to capture data on those who no longer served. Taking in account the direct family relationships of the 8007 residents (e.g. spouses, children) who completed the survey, the ex-Armed Forces community living within the borough is likely to be more than 20,000 residents.
- 1.5 The graphic below shows the number of ex-Armed Forces residents who completed the census by Ward. The graphic also compares Stockport's ex-Armed Forces population in relation to the wider Greater Manchester picture. According to the census data Stockport has the second highest proportion of ex-Armed Forces among the GM boroughs. In terms of Wards, the way the data is collected and displayed does not exactly accord with our Warding patterns, but the graphic below gives a good indication of the number of ex-Armed Forces within the different areas with the borough.



2. THE COUNCIL'S ARMED FORCES COVENANT PRIORITIES

2.1 During the summer of 2021, the Stockport Armed Forces Covenant Steering 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:

“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”.

2.2 The following four priorities were developed to respond to the issues and opportunities raised by the engagement:

2.2.1 **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.

2.2.2 **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.

2.2.3 **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.

2.2.4 **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.

3. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS 2023/24 IN LINE WITH THOSE PRIORITIES

3.1 STOCKPORT ARMED FORCES COVENANT STEERING GROUP

3.1.1 **Membership** - The steering group has refreshed its membership by reaching out to organisations, councillors and council officers previously not in the steering group, in order to enhance its reach and impact. The membership and breadth of experience of the steering group has benefitted as a result with new business organisations joining (e.g. KNDS and Groundwork), new colleagues joining who are either ex-Armed Forces experienced or involved in the Cadets, together with several councillors who were not previously involved in the group. We are also widening the group reach with health partners, such as GPs, Dentists, Stepping Hill and Pennine Care and will continue to strengthen these key relationship in the coming year.

3.1.2 **Gold Award** - During the municipal year 2023/24 council officers, together with members of the steering group and our link contact with the Ministry of Defence worked on the council's submission for the Ministry of Defence's Gold Award in its Employer Recognition scheme, having previously achieved both Bronze and Silver. In late summer 2024 we were delighted when it was confirmed that the council had been awarded the Gold status. The council and SAFCO are encouraging and supporting other local organisations to apply for the recognition scheme, which in turn supported our own application for the Gold Award.

The list of organisations that have obtained the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards across the country can be found here:-

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-employer-recognition-scheme>

Other members of the Steering Group have achieved the following awards:-

Groundwork – Gold 2022
Project Recce – Gold 2023

KNDS – Gold 2024
Mode Rehabilitation – Silver 2024

3.1.3 **Greater Manchester** – we have continued to work with and benefit from the GM approach to Armed Forces and in particular the new GMCA Road Map for Armed Forces Covenant work. A particular area of focus for this, the steering group and SAFCO going forward is to work with the MoD to improve transition and settlement back into civilian life.

3.1.4 **Stockport Armed Forces Community Organisation (SAFCO)** – we have continued to work closely with SAFCO in supporting them in their growth of their ambitions for the borough’s ex-Armed Forces Community as they move into their second year as a formal organisation. See further section below on SAFCO. SAFCO have inputted significantly into the steering group and have introduced new member organisations to the group as referred to above. SAFCO and its members bring a huge amount of value to the steering group and their impact on, and support for the community is growing month on month. We will continue to support SAFCO with their strategy to provide a sustainable support offer in as many wards as possible for the ex-armed forces community. This will be designed to have maximum reach by complementing existing offers from the other members of the steering group such as Disability Stockport, Mode Rehabilitation, Stockport County FC Community Organisation, Project Recce and the Veteran’s Food Company. We will adopt a neighbourhoods approach to this strategy building on our existing family hubs, libraries and community centres.

3.1.5 **Events in support of the Armed Forces Community** – we continue to support Armed Forces Day as a council although the organisation of the event is led by SAFCO. Armed Forces Day 2024 was a huge success seeing a larger representation and attendance by groups related to the Armed Forces than last year, (23 stalls and 11 fixed displays plus Strawberry Radio mobile unit), with the event stretching from the Marketplace down to the Underbanks and Merseyway. The event in turn supported the local economy, with footfall that day in the areas where the events were held estimated to be 27,000 in total attending the event. Over 7,500 attended the Marketplace and footfall in the Market Hall was 23% higher than on an average Saturday. A link to the video from the day can be found at this link <https://youtu.be/8AB9tewEO0s>

The council also supported the 80th commemoration of D-Day held in the War Memorial Art Gallery which was a beautiful service organised by the Stockport Normandy Veteran Association.

The council continue to arrange services for Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday.

2025 will see several very important events linked to the 100th anniversary of the War Memorial Art Gallery and the 80th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day which will be supported by the council.

The council has agreed with SAFCO and the steering group that it will recognise and/or celebrate and/or commemorate the following six events each year:-

- a. **SS Stockport Memorial** – nearest Sunday to 23rd February
- b. **D-Day** – 6th June
- c. **St. Julien** – nearest Sunday to 31st July
- d. **Battle of Britain** – nearest Sunday to 15th September
- e. **Trafalgar Day** – nearest Saturday (dinner) and Sunday (parade) to 21st October
- f. **Remembrance** - 11th November and nearest Sunday

3.2 STOCKPORT ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY ORGANISATION (SAFCO)

- 3.2.1 SAFCO has been in operation now for just over a year. SAFCO and the council worked together to enable it to become a community organisation. £28,000 of the £100,000 Cabinet Reserve referred to below has been ringfenced for use by SAFCO to facilitate its creation as a sustainable community support offer.
- 3.2.2 SAFCO has 45 member organisations from across the borough. It is a community organisation working to bring together a network of existing support offers and create new sustainable offers.
- 3.2.3 SAFCO are continuing to engage with North West AF Wellbeing Collective to become a partner organisation and representative for Stockport, promoting consultation across the network and participating in online consultation events to shape future services across the North West. This will help support and influence the outreach work with health partners referred to above.
- 3.2.4 SAFCO and the council have been working together to try to provide access to the fields and river near Pear Mill for all three cadet forces to undertake fieldcraft training on the field and to re-introduce the capability of having on-water training. At present all the cadets have to travel outside of the borough to undertake this training. This has been an objective of the ex-Armed Forces Community and the Sea Cadets for many years. The council is working to make this happen during 2025. The vision for this project is that it will encourage the engagement of younger ex-Armed Forces in the community to consider supporting the cadet forces with instructors and mentoring, creating sustainability, as well as providing enhanced training for the cadets.
- 3.2.5 Although this relates to achievements during 2024/25, it is worth noting that SAFCO recently opened the first SAFCO Armed Forces Community Hub in Hazel Grove, delivering companionship, refreshments and board games on a weekly basis in the Civic Community Centre each Tuesday between 11:00 and 14:00. Discussions are underway to open two more hubs, in Brinnington and Marple to enhance the existing local offers to the Armed Forces Community.
- 3.2.6 In terms of sustainability for the years to come once the ringfenced monies have been utilised, SAFCO is creating a strategic plan based on the objectives and key priorities agreed with its member organisations which the council will offer to provide support and guidance on together with other key partners such as Sector3.

4. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 In February 2022 the Cabinet awarded the sum of £100,000 to the Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group to be spent over the following 3 financial years, 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/2025). The breakdown of the intended allocation of this grant is as follows:

<u>Event/Project</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Armed Forces Day event support	£6,000

funding	
Establishment of a regular face to face drop in for veterans in Stockport Town Centre (Breakfast clubs)	£9,000
Development of a constituted partnership- SAFCO (to be spent over 3 years)	£28,000 (fully committed)
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
Total	£100,000

4.2 The below table sets out the amounts spent to date from the investment of £100,000. All requests for funding 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. The £28,000 committed to SAFCO has not yet been fully committed by the community organisation but is accounted for below.

Financial Year 2022 to 2023		
Beneficiary	Amount	Comments
Disability Stockport Ltd	£500	
Friends of Stockport NVA	£500	
Project Recce CIO	£500	
Mode Rehabilitation	£500	
The Veterans Food Co	£500	
The Veterans Food Co	£2,250	Q1 Payment for delivery of Veterans Breakfast Club
The Veterans Food Co	£2,250	Q2 Payment for delivery of Veterans Breakfast Club
The Veterans Food Co	£2,250	Q3 Payment for delivery of Veterans Breakfast Club
Royal Navy Association	£500	
Mayor's reception	£226	
Total	£9976	
Financial Year 2023 to 2024		
Armed Forces Day Artist	£1,000	
Veterans Food Company	£2,250	Q4 Payment for delivery of Veterans Breakfast Club

Armed Forces Day printing	£450	
Veterans Food Company	£11,000	Veterans Morning @The Produce Hall 2023-2024, Christmas at the Produce Hall
Veterans Food Company	£800	Sea Cadet Veterans Event 2024
Veterans Food Company	£3,900	Monthly Meals at The Armoury 2024
Ensign Flag Co Ltd	£903	New branch standard for Hazel Grove RNA
Royal Navy Association	£500	Catering for commemorative event
Total	£20,803	
Financial Year 2024 to 2025		
Newton Flags & Banners	£62	Official D-Day 80th Flag of Peace
SAFCO	£2,500	SAFCO Veterans Network Payment 2024/25
SAFCO	£2,500	SAFCO Veterans Network Payment 2024/25
Total	£35,841	
Balance	£64,159	
Less £23,000 already committed to SAFCO	-£23,000	
Total remaining to be invested	£41,159	

4.3 As referred to above, the council and partners will continue to support the Armed Forces Community with the planning of the strategy to create a sustainable offer going forward from all of the hard work and commitments given so far by those involved.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 The Annual Report demonstrates the continued growth of the support and commitment to the ex-Armed Forces Community by key stakeholders and partners within the borough, the positive impact of which is being experienced by the community. This success will continue to be built on and developed so that the support for our ex-Armed Forces Community has as wide a reach as possible ensuring that our ex-Armed Forces Community are treated fairly and equitably and not disadvantaged by their service.

5.2 Communities and Transport Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Vicki Bates

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