

READING HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

DATE OF MEETING:	xxx Jan 2021	AGENDA ITEM:	
REPORT TITLE:	READING'S ARMED FORCES COVENANT AND ACTION PLAN		
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.2 This report presents an annual update on progress against the actions outlined in the Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan, in particular the health related actions, and on the general development of the Armed Forces Covenant, including national proposals to enshrine the Covenant in law, and development of the pan-Berks Civil Military Partnership.
- 1.3 Appendix A - Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 To note the new legislation relating to the Armed Forces Covenant and duty to pay 'due regard' to the Armed Forces community
- 2.2 To note the development of the pan-Berks Civil Military Partnership
- 2.3 To note the progress against the actions set out in the Reading Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan (appendix A), in particular the section on Health and Wellbeing.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 In 2011, the Government published the Armed Forces Covenant, as a tri-Service document which expresses the enduring, general principles that should govern the relationship between the Nation, the Government and the Armed Forces community.
- 3.2 The 'Covenant for Communities' complements the Armed Forces Covenant and enables service providers to go beyond the national commitments. It allows for measures to be put in place at a local level to support the Armed Forces and encourages local communities to develop a relationship with the Service community in their area.

4. THE PROPOSAL

Background

- 4.1 The aims of the Armed Forces 'Covenant in the Community' are to:
 - encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces community in their areas

- nurture public understanding and awareness amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces community
- recognise and remember the sacrifices faced by the Armed Forces community
- encourage activities which help to integrate the Armed Forces community into local life
- to encourage the Armed Forces community to help and support the wider community, whether through participation in events and joint projects, or other forms of engagement

4.2 The Reading Armed Forces Community Covenant was launched in July 2012 and has been signed by 7 Rifles on behalf of the Armed Forces, and a range of other key partners.

4.4 Reading doesn't have a large military 'footprint', with no regular forces stationed in the town. However, Brock Barracks is the headquarters for the Territorial Army unit 7th Battalion The Rifles, and Reading is home to a large ex-Gurkha community. Reading's Armed Forces Covenant therefore focuses on Veterans and Reservists and aims to be proportionate in its scope to the size of the Armed Forces community in Reading.

New legislation

4.5 The Government is in the process of introducing legislation to further strengthen the statutory basis of the Covenant, as part of the Armed Forces Bill, currently going through Parliament. The legislation introduces a new duty on public service providers to take due regard of the Armed Forces community when writing policy and making decisions in implementing that policy in relation to healthcare, education, and housing.

4.6 Over the course of the last year, the MOD Covenant Team have run a series of regional focus groups to help develop the proposed Covenant legislation and guidance, which Reading Borough Council contributed to.

4.7 In response to the new duty, the Council is proposing to demonstrate 'due regard' by adding the Armed Forces community to those considered as part of the standard committee report paragraph on 'equality impact assessment', so that the impact on this community is considered as a matter of course. This will need to be accompanied by awareness raising and training of front-line staff to respond to the potential increase in enquires from veterans and their families.

Pan-Berks Civil Military Partnership

4.8 Following the Berks CEX Group and Berkshire Local Authority Leaders' support, a new pan-Berks Civil Military Partnership is being developed, with the first meeting held on 25th November this year. The meeting considered the proposed terms of reference for the group and action plan, with an official launch for the group to be planned for spring 2022.

4.9 The aim of the partnership is to bring about economies of scale, with shared action plans and joint initiatives, such as joint events for Armed Forces Week, joint MoD Covenant Grants, as well as wider but more focused support from the Military.

4.10 The Reading Armed Forces Partnership Board discussed the proposal at their meeting in November 2020 and are keen to continue meeting at the local level for information exchange and networking.

Update on the Covenant Action Plan

4.11 The Reading Armed Forces Covenant partnership meets on a six monthly basis, the most recent held in July 2021. Partners continue to report that the meeting is valuable.

- 4.12 Progress to date against the actions in the Action Plan is shown in Appendix A.
- 4.13 The Action Plan includes a section on health and wellbeing with the following actions:
- Feedback and input to the Health and Wellbeing Board
 - Devise protocol for GPs to register Veteran status
 - Raise awareness of and signpost to Veteran's Mental Health Service for the South Central region
 - Development of a leaflet on accessing health services to be translated into Nepalese
 - Develop and promote a discount scheme for serving personnel for arts and leisure facilities in Reading
 - Consolidation of appropriate contact/ support lists in order to provide better signposting
- 4.14 In particular, re GPs recording Veteran status, both Berkshire Healthcare and Royal Berkshire NHS trust are working towards 'Veteran Aware' accreditation, including:
- provide leaflets and posters to veterans and their families explaining what to expect
 - train relevant staff to be aware of veterans' needs and the commitments of the NHS under the Armed Forces Covenant
 - inform staff if a veteran or their GP has told the trust they have served in the armed forces
 - ensure that members of the armed forces community do not face disadvantage compared to other citizens when accessing NHS services
 - signpost to extra services that might be provided to the armed forces community by a charity or service organisation in the trust
 - look into what services are available in their locality, which patients would benefit from being referred to.

Covenant Grant Fund Trust

- 4.15 The national Covenant grant fund was launched in 2015 by the Ministry for Defence, with £10 million available every year. Since April 2018, the fund has become the independent Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust and makes grants to support members of the Armed Forces community.
- 4.16 In 2020/21, the 'Force for Change' programme awarded individual grants of up to £10,000 for community projects designed to reduce isolation and promote integration and to support post-Covid recovery in local Armed Forces communities affected by isolation.

5.0 CONTRIBUTION TO READING'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 The work on the Armed Forces covenant is in line with the overall direction of the Reading Health and Wellbeing Strategy and contributes to a number of the Strategy's eight priorities, including the following as they relate to the Veteran community, through strengthening the support provided to Veterans and service leavers:
1. Supporting people to make healthy lifestyle choices
 2. Reducing loneliness and social isolation
 3. Reducing deaths by suicide
 4. Reducing the amount of alcohol people drink to safe levels
- 5.2 The proposal recognises that plans in support of Reading's 2017-20 Health and Wellbeing Strategy should be built on three foundations - safeguarding vulnerable adults and children, recognising and supporting all carers, and high quality co-ordinated information to support wellbeing. The proposal addresses these by providing support to the Armed Forces community and their families, including Veterans.

6. COMMUNITY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- 6.1** Two of the key aims of the Armed Forces Community Covenant are to:
- encourage local communities to support the armed forces community in their areas
 - encourage the armed forces community to help and support the wider community, whether through participation in events and joint projects, or other forms of engagement

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1** The covenant is intended as a vehicle for partners across Reading to help enable Veterans or Reservists to access health services, particularly mental health services, training and employment opportunities.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1** The general power of competence, introduced as part of the Localism Act 2011, replaces the well-being power from February 2012. The Act gives local authorities the power to do anything which an individual generally may do, which they consider is likely to be of benefit (directly or indirectly) to the whole or any part of their area. It therefore gives local authorities the power to do anything they want, so long as it is not prohibited by other legislation.

- 8.2** The new legal duty to be due regard to the Armed Forces community is discussed at 4.5.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1** £30m of central government funding was allocated over four years to 2014/15 to financially support Community Covenant projects at the local level which strengthen the ties or the mutual understanding between members of the armed forces community and the wider community in which they live. Reading submitted bids in three bidding rounds. £10m per annum was made available in perpetuity from 2015/16 onwards through the new Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1** Armed Forces Covenant Fund <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covenant-fund>