



READING HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

DATE OF MEETING:	19th Jan 2024	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 the recent introduction of new legislation and the 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 further development of the pan-Berks Civil Military Partnership
- 2.2 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 also 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 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 Covenant was launched in July 2012, 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 As part of the Armed Forces Act 2021, the Government introduced new legislation to further strengthen the statutory basis of the Covenant. The legislation has introduced 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. The new duty came into force in November 2022 and [statutory guidance](#) has been published.

4.6 In response to the new duty, the Council has added 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. Training for front-line staff to respond to the potential increase in enquires from veterans and their families has also been promoted.

Pan-Berks Civil Military Partnership

4.7 The new pan-Berks Civil Military Partnership was officially launched in July 2022, and after a brief hiatus due to staff changes, met again in October 2023 to consider the terms of reference and action plan.

4.8 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.

4.9 The Reading Armed Forces Partnership Board will continue to meet at the local level for information exchange and networking.

Update on the Covenant Action Plan

4.10 The Reading Armed Forces Covenant partnership meets on a six monthly basis, the most recent held in September 2023. Partners continue to report that the meeting is valuable.

4.11 Progress to date against the actions in the Action Plan is shown in Appendix A.

4.12 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

4.13 In particular, re GPs recording Veteran status, 395 Veterans were coded by Reading GP practices as at November 2022. In the coming year, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board are planning to:

- Promote Veterans Accreditation at our GP Protected Learning Time Sessions
- Mailout to all GP Practices and PCNs who have not signed up to the Accreditation.
- Promote via our GP Newsletter

4.14 Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust has achieved Veteran Aware status, and has also:

- Continued to build on our partnerships in the local community to improve joint working and signposting - for example we have particularly built relations with Brock Barracks who have run military recruitment events onsite and attend our Forces Forums on a regular basis, as well as Op Courage colleagues at Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.
- Been recognised for our work with our local Gurkha community - we were finalists at the prestigious HSJ Awards in the Military and Civilian Partnerships category in the 2023 Awards - we continue to support this community and now run regular health check sessions with them on a monthly basis.
- Continued to build our networks of those interested in supporting the Armed Forces through our Staff Forces Forum where we get speakers and have discussions about important issues related to patients and staff in the Armed Forces and veterans. We have recently started work to look at our Reservist policy.
- Started work to offer a Befriending Service for patients where members of the Armed Forces, both internal members of staff and volunteers from Brock Barracks would sit with patients with military backgrounds to aid in recovery. We plan to do this in collaboration with our Defence Medical Welfare Service colleagues who are able to identify patients who need support
- Work is ongoing to address the challenges with our systems to be able to flag and therefore capturing the number of Armed Forces / veteran patients we have, along with our important characteristics which will improve patient care.

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 The 'Force for Change' programme awards 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. In 2022, 28 grants were awarded, worth £268,149. Deadlines for the coming year have not yet been published.

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 www.covenantfund.org.uk