

Information Briefing

Report
from:

Councillor Mike Sharpe, Armed Forces
Champion

Date:

31st October 2019

Report to:

Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

Update on Armed Forces Covenant

1. SUMMARY

Armed Forces serving personnel, veterans and their families are valued members of our communities. The Council demonstrated its commitment to the Armed Forces community by jointly drafting and signing with partners the Armed Forces Covenant in February 2012. The Armed forces Covenant is a commitment by the nation to ensure that those who serve or who have served in the Armed Forces and their families are treated fairly.

The council has appointed an Armed Forces Champion, councillor Mike Sharpe, who has been representing the council at various partner events, promoting the work already underway. Additionally, the Armed Forces Covenant is supported and promoted by the Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities.

Strategic direction and oversight are provided by the relaunched the Armed Forces Covenant Steering group, chaired by the council's Armed Forces Champion, with council and partner representation from the relevant spheres of expertise and influence.

Progress is being made to deliver the commitments set out in the Armed Forces Community Covenant across a range of council services, including health, housing, education, employment. The council works with partner organisations, including the Ministry of Defence, The Royal British Legion and voluntary and community organisations to provide a range of support and services to serving personnel and their families. We also work with our partners to help serving personnel and their families adjust to civilian life.

The key challenge has been identifying veterans. More information about the number and movements of our veterans will help better plan our services and ensure they are the right services.

Delivering the Covenant commitments against a changing social landscape of growing needs and managing the pressure on local services creates additional challenges.

2. Background

The Armed Forces Covenant is a national agreement which sets out the relationship between the nation, the state and the Armed Forces. It applies to both current and ex-Forces and their families and establishes how they should expect to be treated.

Birmingham City Council and its partners signed the Armed Forces Covenant in February 2012, setting out a commitment to honouring our obligation to the Armed Forces community. We committed our support to help serving and ex-service personnel and their families to have the same access to public services as the civilian community in areas such as housing provision, employment opportunities, welfare and education.

In many cases, councils are the first port of call for veterans who have left active service and their families. There will be veterans with more complex needs related to housing, financial issues and health challenges, these interconnected needs require joined up responses. The Council can play a key role, ensuring that these complex needs are identified in the round and that wrap around support is put in place by working with our partners across the public, private and voluntary and community sectors.

Our approach to delivering the right responses is to work closely with our partners, sharing information, intelligence and resources. In June 2019, we re-established our Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group chaired by the Armed Forces Champion. This group consists mainly of City Council officers, representatives from the Ministry of Defence and the Army Covenant team, the Royal British Legion and other forces charities, the local health authority and other invited speakers. The aim is to work in partnership to oversee the delivery of the Birmingham Armed Forces Community Covenant.

3. Highlights of Covenant work supporting the Armed Forces community

3.1 The Armed Forces population and needs assessment

One of our key challenges in identifying and targeting our support is the limited information we have on our veteran community. Veterans are not included as a distinct category in national and local data collect.

The British Legion is challenging this lack of data collection, calling on Government to add new questions to the 2021 census. In December 2018, the Cabinet Office

confirmed the Government's intention to recommend to Parliament the inclusion of a question on the Armed Forces Community in the next census.

In the absence of available data to effectively identify and address the needs of veterans, the Health and Wellbeing Board has asked for veterans to be included in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment process. The Board has identified veterans as one of the first deep dive areas in the 2019/20 programme.

The Council's Public Health team is in the process of undertaking deep dives into the needs of veterans. These deep dives are in-depth analysis of key areas relating to health and wellbeing of veterans. They will be used to determine actions the council, the local NHS and other partners need to take to meet health and social care needs and to address the wider determinants that impact on health and wellbeing.

To capture views and experience of veterans, the council is commissioning local Armed Forces organisations to run small focus groups. The invitation to quote is currently being prepared and it is expected to go out to tender in mid-November 2019. The initial draft key findings from the deep dive are:

- A lack of reliable data relating to veterans due to the question not being asked or not identifying with the term veteran, particularly for younger veterans who prefer the term ex-service man or woman
- Armed Forces service is unique and often misunderstood on return to civilian life creating difficulties. However most make a successful transition to civilian life.
- There is some evidence to suggest greater need amongst Early Service Leavers and female veterans, but more work is required to better understand these groups.

Furthermore, Northumbria and Chester University is currently developing the Map of Need project to identify the welfare needs of veterans and their families across the UK. The Council's Armed Forces Covenant Steering group is keen to learn how Birmingham can benefit from this project.

3.2 Housing support

We know from evidence that access to decent housing is a prevalent issue affecting veterans. We believe that members of the Armed Forces community should have the same access to social housing and other housing schemes as any other citizen, and not be disadvantaged by the requirement for mobility in service.

Rising demand for social housing is putting pressure on an already limited Council housing stock, despite this challenge, the Council remains committed to supporting veterans with housing needs. The Council's housing Allocation Scheme includes priority considerations to be given Armed Forces community who are:

- Former members of Her Majesty's regular armed forces.
- Serving and former members of Her Majesty's regular armed forces who need to move because they are suffering from a serious injury, illness or disability which is attributable (wholly or partly) to their military service

- Bereaved spouses or civil partners of members of Her Majesty's regular forces who have left or will be leaving services accommodation provided by the Ministry of Defence following the death of their spouse or civil partner and whose death was attributable (wholly or partly) to their military service.

In addition, any ex-service personnel applicants who have served in the Armed Forces and lived in Birmingham for at least 6 months immediately prior to enlisting will automatically qualify for a Band 4 award.

At a strategic level, the Council is also working with the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership to co-ordinate better housing support across the city.

3.3 Education support

Service Pupil Premium is available to state schools, academies and free schools, which have children of service families in school years Reception to year 11, can receive Service Pupil Funding. This funding assists the school in providing the additional support that children need and is an allocation of £300 per child. We will continue to promote the take-up of this fund.

3.4 Financial advice and support

Members of the Armed Forces community can fall into financial difficulties and we want to ensure that they get the right support and advice to help alleviate any financial pressures. The Council's Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service (NAIS) provides support with income maximisation and access to welfare benefits entitlements, including:

- NAIS advisors will provide personal budgeting support and refer for detailed debt advice.
- help register an application for accommodation in Birmingham, NAIS advisors can assist or, if homeless, refer on to the Newtown Home Options Team.
- Neighbourhood advisors may be able to assist ex-forces personnel or their immediate families with application to funding charities, such as via SSAFA

We will continue to promote the Veteran's Gateway, as a first point of contact for veterans seeking support. The Gateway has been set up to put veterans and their families in touch with the organisations best placed to help with information, advice and support they need from across a range of providers.

3.5 Employer engagement support

As an employer, the Council is committed to supporting our employees from the Armed Forces community. We recognise that the lived realities of our staff from the armed Forces community can help provide valuable insights to deliver our Armed Forces Covenant. An Armed Forces council staff network has recently been established to ensure that we capture insights, understand the challenges faced by staff and promote the Armed Forces Covenant across the Council and the city.

The Council would like to raise awareness and understanding of the Armed Forces community across all council staff. To do this, we are looking to introduce an e-Learning programme, like the programme being delivered by Warwickshire Council.

The Council's Corporate Leadership Team has established a corporate Armed Forces champion, drawn from the council's senior management, with specific responsibilities to raise awareness of employee issues and promote good practice.

3.6 Community and Partner engagement

The council has nominated an elected member as its Armed Forces Champion. The role includes having strategic oversight and delivery of the Armed forces Covenant, attending relevant meetings, celebration and commemorative events, and championing and supporting the Armed Forces community in Birmingham.

The Council has played an active role in supporting and attending key events that recognise the sacrifices of our Armed Forces.

A successful bid developed in partnership with the British Legion, British Futures and council, has resulted in Birmingham being selected to host a 'Remember Together' event that recognises the contributions and sacrifices of our Commonwealth veterans and serving personnel. This event will reach out to veterans and descendants of Commonwealth & Allied friends to share Remembrance in 2020. It will shine a light on the unheard stories of the many contributions made by our communities from the across the Commonwealth; it will also be an opportunity for communities across Birmingham to come together in collaboration and Remembrance.

We continue to attend local and regional meetings with The Royal British Legion, West Midlands Reserve forces and Cadets Associations and the Armed forces Engagement team, to share learning across sectors and explore opportunities for joint working.

4. Next Steps

The delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant remains a cross-Council commitment to ensure those who serve and have served, and their families, are not disadvantaged. An ambition of the Armed Forces covenant Steering Group is to promote support for the Armed Forces community across our strategies and plans to respond effectively to specific needs. Therefore, the Steering Group will be refreshing the Birmingham Armed Forces Covenant.

The Steering Group represents a re-energising of the Council's engagement with regional and local partner statutory and Voluntary and Community Services agencies on this agenda, and it is important for this momentum to continue.

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