



Annual Report of the Buckinghamshire Armed Forces Community Covenant 2017/18

Thursday 17 May 2018

Background

The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise from the nation that those who serve or have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly. It sets out the relationship between the nation, the government and the armed forces and recognises that the whole nation has a moral obligation to members of the armed forces their families and to veterans, and it establishes how they should expect to be treated. Although it had been proposed by government that the Covenant be enshrined in law, in February 2011 they decided that there was no need to make the Covenant law, proposing instead to cover it in an annual report to parliament. Buckinghamshire has always had strong and proud links with the Armed Forces. It has 2 RAF stations in Halton and Wycombe and a vibrant Reservists population (6 Reservist Regiments). There are 4000 regular military personnel serving at the stations and over 100 reservists'. In addition there are 1,800 Cadets and some 300 Cadet Officers and Adult Volunteers. The Board is conscious of the fact that RAF Halton is due to close in 2020.

Current Situation

In recognition of its commitment to the local armed forces and their families the County Council signed an agreement to honour the Community Covenant in July 2012. We have also had the support of a whole range of organisations, including our District Councils, Milton Keynes Council, military affiliated charities, Public Health including Clinical Commissioning Groups, The Royal British Legion, SSAFA the Armed Forces Charity, the emergency services, together with a number of business, Job Centre Plus, sports, cultural and arts organisations. In total we have more than 20 organisations involved, all of whom are committed to a strong partnership between the Armed Forces and civilian communities in Buckinghamshire. These organisations all come together in a Military Civilian Partnership Board who meet once per quarter. They aim to develop, maintain and deliver an action plan for a more strategic working relationship between partnership organisations, integrate service charities into these plans so that they have a proper forum to help veterans across the county, and to seek funding from MOD to help with local project delivery. The Action Plan has 6 work strands supporting the 4 key objectives of the National Armed Forces Community Covenant: Recognise; Remember; Integrate; and Support.

- Health and Wellbeing. Map and identify the needs of Service personnel (serving, veteran, reserve and families) in order to allow their needs to be better understood and, where possible, to be met. Indeed, we have recently submitted letters to the Department for Justice and Department for Work and Pensions expressing concern over resettlement of personnel leaving prison, specifically ex-armed service personnel. An example cited was where a veteran offender on release had been unable to open a bank account, to claim benefits to fund food and accommodation or register with a doctor's surgery. The Board has now asked for a meeting with Dr Philip Lee MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice to discuss these matters further. The Board is also making appropriate representations regarding the Veterans Gateway, a relatively new government scheme putting veterans and their families in touch with the organisations best placed to help with the information, advice and support they need – from healthcare and housing to employability, finances, personal relationships and more. The scheme does not appear to be working properly in Buckinghamshire where the number of referrals is well below what would be expected. Again, this will be taken up with Dr Lee MP.
- Education and Children and Young People. We promote the **Service Pupil Premium** provided by the Department for Education, to State maintained schools, Free schools and Academies in England who have children of Regular Armed Forces personnel among their pupil population to provide additional (mainly pastoral) support.
- Economy and Skills. Facilitate a sustainable pathway for Service leavers into civilian employment. We are working with the Officers Association and MOD's Career Transition Partnership to develop links so that we can, through our Board, help both veterans and those about to retire from the Armed Forces find suitable employment. We also held a Chairman's Reception in 2017 to foster closer working relationships with Buckinghamshire businesses to encourage greater support for release of employees for Reservist duties and to encourage employment of ex-servicemen who are well trained and motivated.
- Environment and Infrastructure. Develop a common understanding of infrastructure needs of the Armed Forces community, and veterans, in order to inform Local Authority planning and provision of new homes and existing housing allocation.
- Safer and Stronger Communities. Promote a common understanding and closer integration between military and civilian communities. The Veterans Gateway is a scheme which, when working properly, should help enormously in this area.
- Recognise and Remember. Support civic events that allow the community to recognise the Armed Forces and vice versa. (See Events below).

Funding

The MoD's Covenant Fund priority for the year ahead include Community Integration, Delivery of Local Services and Families in Stress and provides funding to help in these areas. The Board will continue to lend its support to appropriate bids from Buckinghamshire but, unfortunately, no bids have been successful so far this year. The Board was extremely disappointed to learn that the joint Community Impact Bucks/RAF High Wycombe Volunteering Scheme had again been turned down despite changes to the bid being made in accordance with MOD advice. We are now working to bring the MOD, CIB and RAF together to identify shortfalls to enhance the next bid in the immediate future.

Events

The County Council contributed towards Remembrance Day events held across the County last November at which our Chairman and many members were represented. A successful Armed Forces Day was held at Aylesbury Rugby Club in June 2017. A Chairman's Reception was also held on 22nd February this year for the Business Community in Buckinghamshire to celebrate the success of those who had been awarded the Queen's Award for Enterprise. In addition events are being held this year to commemorate 100 years since the formation of the RAF and to also commemorate 100 years since the end of World War One. A Civic Church Service to commemorate the formation of the RAF was held on 15th April at St Mary's Church, Chesham to which all members were invited. The RAF Regiment Band and RAF Halton's parade was truly inspiring. Planning is also well advanced for November 11th not only to remember those who lost their lives in WW1 but also to celebrate the ending of the First World War. I will fully brief members when these have been finalised. Finally, the centenary of the death of Edward Brooks VC was commemorated at St Mary's Church, Oakley on 28th April 2017.

Way Forward

The Partnership Board will continue to develop future funding bids to the MOD to support its work and will continue to promote the Community Covenant to the government, public and armed forces at large.

RECOMMENDATION

| **Council is asked to note the Annual Report**

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THE COUNTY COUNCIL'S ARMED FORCES CHAMPION

