

Report for:	Shadow Executive
Meeting Date:	3 December 2019

Title of Report:	Supporting the Armed Forces Covenant in the new Buckinghamshire Council authority
Shadow Portfolio Holder:	Cllr Martin Tett
Responsible Officer or Relevant Member:	Sophie Payne / Joe Bradshaw
Officer Contact:	Lizzie Wright Tel: 01296 382376 Email: lizziewright@buckscc.gov.uk
Recommendations:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To agree to add an agenda item to the first ordinary full Buckinghamshire Council meeting, seeking the new Council's agreement to sign the Armed Forces Covenant. (para. 2.13) 2. To agree the proposed number of Armed Forces Champions and role description. (para 2.19)
Corporate Implications:	Whilst it is not a legal requirement to sign the Armed Forces Covenant, not doing so could significantly impact the business reputation with partners and the local community.
Options: (If any)	An alternative option is to consider Armed Forces later down the line however this could have a number of impacts, i.e. reputational, Employer Recognition Scheme award achievement and maintaining good levels of support to the Armed Forces community.
Reason: (Executive only)	Agreeing to the recommendations would ensure the new authority continues the supportive standard that the current five councils have developed and embedded in their respective organisations.

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 This report provides background information about the Armed Forces Covenant, the current setup for the district and county councils and a recommended approach for the new Buckinghamshire Council.

1.2 Feedback on the report has been provided by the chair of the Buckinghamshire Civilian-Military Partnership Board (Bill Bendyshe-Brown) as well as the Surrey CC Civilian-Military Liaison Adviser and Armed Forces Champion for 11 Infantry Brigade SE (Canon Peter Bruinvelds) and the South East Regional Employer Engagement Director for Bucks (Kate Lole).

2. Content of Report

About the Covenant:

2.1 The Armed Forces Covenant is a pledge to show our support to those who serve, or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, to recognise the sacrifice they have made and ensure they are treated fairly.

2.2 The Covenant's two principles are that:

- The Armed Forces Community should not face disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services in the area where they live;
- Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

2.3 Support is provided in a number of areas including education, family well-being, housing, employment and careers, healthcare and young service carers, financial assistance and discounted services.

Why sign the Armed Forces Covenant:

2.4 Signing the Covenant, means we are displaying the fact that we are an 'Armed Forces Friendly' employer, by supporting our employees as reservists, ex-service personnel and veterans.

2.5 By becoming an 'Armed Forces Friendly' employer we can benefit from the wide range of unique skills and experiences that reservists and veterans can bring to the organisation. Employing Armed Forces Community members can help diversify the talent in our workforce.

2.6 Local authorities should encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces Community, including promoting understanding and awareness.

2.7 We deliver the Covenant through the many mandatory services we provide anyway but in addition, we can set out how we are an 'Armed Forces Friendly' employer through a range of tailored pledges, including

- Promoting the fact we are an Armed Forces-friendly organisation;
- Supporting the employment of ex-service personnel, veterans, military spouses and service leavers;
- Offering flexibility in leave for service spouses and partners before, during and after deployment;
- Supporting reservist employees, allowing leave for training and deployment, accommodating mobilisation if required and recognising the benefits of employing reservists;
- Promoting discount services to members of the Armed Forces Community and encouraging businesses to register discounts.

Opportunities for Grant Funding:

2.8 The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust manages grants funded by the Covenant Fund which are given to projects that will benefit the Armed Forces and the wider community.

2.9 The Covenant Fund has four broad funding themes: removing barriers to family life; extra support after service for those that need help; measures to integrate military and civilian



communities and allow the armed forces community to participate as citizens; and non-core healthcare services for veterans.

2.10 In recent years there has been limited success from local organisations in securing grant funding, so supporting bids more comprehensively could be an area for development for the new council in due course.

Buckinghamshire Covenant:

2.11 In 2012, all five councils in Buckinghamshire signed the Armed Forces Covenant along with local partners including representatives from the NHS, Clinical Commissioning Groups, Emergency Services, Business Community organisations, Voluntary Community organisations and Armed Forces charities. **See Appendix A for a copy of the current signed Covenant.*

2.12 A new version of the covenant has recently been developed to be more relevant to public bodies that tend to play a slightly different role in supporting the Armed Forces Community than private companies, due to the services they provide. **See Appendix B for a copy of the new Covenant template.*

2.13 Therefore we recommend that the first full ordinary Council meeting of Buckinghamshire Council includes an agenda item for the authority to agree to sign the new covenant. If agreed, contact will need to be made with South East Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (SERFCA) to make necessary arrangements with the Ministry of Defence.

2.14 Since the signing in 2012, some organisations have gone on to sign more recent iterations of the covenant and pledge their own commitments individually. Contact will need to be made with the other remaining organisations to advise that they may also wish to re-sign individually and pledge their own commitment to the Armed Forces Community in Buckinghamshire. This could be done at the second full Council meeting or as a separate event.

Defence Employer Recognition Scheme:

2.15 The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) acknowledges employers who have provided exceptional support to the Armed Forces Community and defence by going above and beyond their covenant pledges, including through their HR policies. The County Council achieved Silver in 2015. **See Appendix C for ERS Silver criteria*

2.16 The ERS website provides a very straight forward list of criteria for each award. The HR&OD workstream have confirmed that the proposed HR policies for the new Council will be supportive of the Armed Forces Community and will be appropriately publicised. The new authority will continue to offer an interview guarantee scheme and additional and flexible leave arrangements for members of the Armed Forces Community.

2.17 Confirmation has been received from the South East Regional Employer Engagement Director that Silver award status will be retained, provided the following actions are achieved: signing the new version of the Covenant early in the tenure of Buckinghamshire Council (via agreement to do so at the first ordinary Council meeting); identification of an Armed Forces Champion for the new Council; and having the HR policy in place that supports the community, in particular Reservists. All these actions are in hand.

Armed Forces Champion:

2.18 Each Council has in the past nominated an Armed Forces Champion (AFC) who attends the quarterly Civilian-Military Partnership Board meetings, currently chaired by the County Council AFC. The main role of an AFC is to raise the profile and needs of the Armed Forces Community



(serving personnel, both regular and reserve, their families, ex-personnel and veterans and Cadets), both internally and externally within the council. The AFC presents an annual report to full Council for debate, usually during the AGM in May.

2.19 The recommendation for the new authority is to appoint a single AFC, with a nominated Deputy to provide additional capacity to cover the range of events across the county.

2.20 If agreed, it is recommended that there is a role description to provide Members with clarity around the role of the AFC in the new authority. It is anticipated that the AFC and deputy would in turn agree specific elements of the role description to be split between them. **See Appendix D for the AFC role description.*

2.21 There is potential that some of the existing AFCs may not be standing in the elections in May, therefore having an approach and role description agreed in advance will be important to support candidates being put forward for the roles.

Officer Support:

2.21 Armed Forces support spans a wide range of services, and because of this, there are officers who currently provide part-time support to the AFCs in a variety of ways:

- Civic & Lieutenancy Officer: provides support to the Chairman and AFC which includes guidance and direction on ceremonial military matters. This includes the organisation of the ceremonial activities as part of the “Recognise and Remember” elements of the covenant; the organisation of events on behalf of the council such as plans for VE75 celebrations and the coordination of the annual Remembrance Day wreath laying arrangements.
- Policy Officer: provides support to the County Council AFC which includes monitoring the action plan, liaising with external partners to provide updates, attending relevant events and any additional administrative support that may be required. A small level of support has also been provided for grant fund applications which are in development.
- Communities Officers: across the District Councils provide support to respective AFCs, through arrangements for and promotion of events, updating web pages, identifying areas for improvement, championing the covenant guidelines to ensure all areas of the business takes into account the needs of the Armed Forces community, plus supporting service families so they are more integrated into the wider community.
- Executive Assistant: provides support which involves scheduling meetings and liaising with speakers, setting agendas, taking minutes and circulating papers or additional relevant articles to board members.

2.22 In addition, the county council has historically provided the organisation of sponsorship, events management and publicity to deliver the Bucks and Milton Keynes Armed Forces Day on a biannual basis. This is a significant event in the Buckinghamshire events calendar.

2.23 Given the varying support functions, there will need to be consideration of where Armed Forces support best fits as the structures for the new Council continue to develop. In addition, best practice would be for each directorate to have a nominated officer who would champion the Armed Forces Covenant for their area. This will be for the new Senior Leadership Team to discuss and agree in due course.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 Whilst signing the covenant is an intention, it does not commit the authority to any specific spending. There are currently no known dedicated budgets assigned to the AFCs, however, the new Council may wish to consider a small allocation being accommodated within future budgets,



as historically there have been some queries e.g. around funding for Members to provide wreaths for Remembrance Day, and/or donations to remembrance events.

4. Legal Implications

4.1 There is no legal requirement to sign the Armed Forces Covenant in advance of vesting day/at the first full ordinary Buckinghamshire Council meeting.

5. Other Key Risks - None

6. Dependencies

6.1 Retaining the Silver ERS award will depend on HR policies providing the same level of support as the current County Council level.

7. Consultation - Not Applicable

8. Communications Plan - Not Applicable

9. Equalities Implications

9.1 Supporting the Armed Forces is all about improving access to support and removing any disadvantage to those who serve or have served, and their families. Its aim is to make a positive impact on the existing service provision; therefore no one should be negatively affected.

10. Data Privacy Implications

10.1 No access to, or sharing of, data will be required in relation to this report.

11. Next Steps

- Continue to link in with HR to discuss recruitment policy implications.
- Continue to progress the existing AFC Action Plan to ensure continuity.

Background Papers	Appendix A The current signed Armed Forces Covenant Appendix B A new Covenant template Appendix C Employer Recognition Scheme Silver Reward Criteria Appendix D Armed Forces Champion Role Description
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