

Review of Armed Forces Covenant

Report of the Chairman of the Panel, Councillor Nick Matthews

Recommendation:

That the findings of the Armed Forces panel and the action plan set out in Annex 2 be endorsed.

Recommendation to Cabinet:

- 1. A Civilian/military forum is created to take forward the action plan – Subsumed and intrinsically linked to the Test Valley Partnership. The composition of which will include the various professional and authority representatives from each topic in the report below. Additionally, Army Welfare Service and garrison wellbeing officers, alongside CTP and/or RFEA, where appropriate.**
- 2. A Forces Gateway Single Point of Contact (SPOC) is created on the TVBC website - enabling all information, advice and signposting for all the applicable services, including links to housing, community engagement, health, education, business, local Forces charities and potential available grants.**

SUMMARY:

This report brings together the findings of the OSCOM Armed Forces panel review undertaken and led by Cllr Nick Matthews

1 Introduction

- 1.1** At its meeting of 11 December 2019, OSCOM reviewed and endorsed a scoping document to support a review of the Council's commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, in turn enabling the lead member for Armed Forces to work with officers to develop a forward plan for undertaking the review. As part of this scoping report, OSCOM approved the establishment of a panel group to work with the lead member on progressing this area of work.
- 1.2** The panel was chaired by Cllr Nick Matthews and also included Cllr Borg-Neal, Cllr Burley, Cllr Donnelly, Cllr C Dowden, Cllr Hamilton and Cllr Warnes. As a result of the review, the panel have developed an evidence base to support future development of the Armed Forces Covenant in Test Valley. This evidence base has led the panel to three key recommendations with an onward work plan highlighting a number of detailed ambitions.

2 Background

- 2.1 The panel has undertaken this review with an understanding of the issues facing the Armed Forces community in Test Valley.
- 2.2 Test Valley's Armed Forces, veterans and families sacrifice a great many things, due to their service of the Country. The needs and requirements of service take priority over any other aspect of their lives, and whilst the military organisation take pride in how they look after their personnel and families, many aspects of their lives are impacted due to their service. The modern day service family faces challenges that may not necessarily be understood by Test Valley's civilian communities.

3 Service Families

- 3.1 Increasingly, either by choice or by posting, military families are not residing in military communities which would typically provide a number of support facilities such as family officers, service schools/crèches or garrison/barracks support groups. Instead, these families are living amongst our civilian communities. Living within civilian communities presents a number of challenges for the military community, not least in the limited local understanding of their circumstances. These families can potentially feel isolated whilst the serving spouse/parent is away for significant amounts of time.
- 3.2 There are many, often unrealised consequences of service life which can disadvantage families and veterans. Job opportunities for service spouses are invariably affected by the constant potential of being posted, and further compounded in later life, where their CV's could look quite sparse and sporadic. Children's education and development can be disrupted with multiple postings, leaving friend networks behind each time.

4 Veterans & service leavers

- 4.1 Test Valley is also home to a number of veterans, many of whom may have served a substantial amount of their adult life in the services. Making the transition from military to civilian communities presents its own unique set of challenges.
- 4.2 Sometimes the choice to settle in Test Valley is based on recent postings and family stability, meaning that a veteran could settle some distance from their family and support network. On become a service leaver, many may find themselves making a number of big life decisions such as:
 - Somewhere to live;
 - New career; and
 - Children's schooling

- 4.3 In addition trying to understand the support available to them such as:
- Access to healthcare;
 - Local facilities;
 - Discounted services; and
 - Local support and advice groups
- 4.4 It is possible that, having joined the services early in life, service leavers may be unfamiliar with many fundamentals of civilian life such as those listed above. Having a fully integrated military support system means that some service leavers could have never experienced a job interview, creating a CV, registering with a doctor or being in charge of paying their own bills. This final act of resettlement may also require housing, which up until now has been provided by the military.
- 4.5 These are just some of the examples of issues facing service leavers which may add to their sense of apprehension as they resettle into a world they may not be so familiar with. If we further consider the increased prevalence of PTSD amongst veterans, it can be recognised how difficult this transition can often be for many veterans and their families.

5 The Armed Forces Covenant

- 5.1 The Armed Forces covenant was produced to understand and address the challenges associated with service life and ensure service personnel, veterans and families are not disadvantaged due to their service. It is a “pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or who have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives.”¹
- 5.2 As a local authority, TVBC signed the Armed Forces Community Covenant in 2012. This is intended to complement the Armed Forces Covenant, which outlines the moral obligation between the Nation, the Government and the Armed Forces, at the local level. Signalling their commitment to work together to honour, support and help the armed forces and their families, recognising the sacrifices they make and remembering that some pay the ultimate sacrifice.

6 Findings of the review

- 6.1 As part of the TVBC corporate plan ‘Growing our Potential’, OSCOM approved the panel’s scope to review the following;
- How the council’s strategic approach to community engagement guides its approach to engaging and working with military communities.

¹ <https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/about/>

- The current and future work undertaken by the council as part of the commitments outlined in the Armed Forces covenant and a reflection on what has worked well and what could be done differently.
 - Review of best practice – What other local authorities do and how military partnerships have developed in other places.
- 6.2 The working group familiarised themselves with the detailed content of the covenant and identified five main topics for exploration. This comprised:
- Housing;
 - Community Engagement;
 - Health;
 - Education; and
 - Business & Transition
- 6.3 The panel explored each of the above areas in detail, a summary of findings in each area is outlined below. Full details of findings and work undertaken are included in Annex 1.

7 Housing

- 7.1 Access to housing, particularly post service is often accepted to be unfamiliar to veterans. Not only is it something they may have never experienced, but it is also likely that they are resettling in areas that differ from their birthplace.
- 7.2 The TVBC housing team have a number of processes in place to support service leavers and veterans. Staff are trained to support any complex issues surrounding their housing needs. Additionally the housing process ensures that TVBC meet the requirements of the Housing Act 1996 and the promises made within the Armed Forces Community Covenant.
- 7.3 There is wider support available, through external organisations, such as grants and social support workers.
- 7.4 Whilst there are good practices in place to support the housing needs of service leavers and veterans, the panel found that there might be opportunities to improve communication as people may not always be aware of the services available to them.
- 7.5 The Panel felt that that there is a benefit to increasing partnership working between TVBC and the Ministry of Defence (MOD). This would help to ensure that service leavers and veterans are aware of the support available to them.
- 7.6 Through the summary above and detailed findings in Annex 1, the Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- A Single Point of Contact (SPOC) is created on TVBC website, to provide information / signposting for the military and veteran community.
- Regular and formal engagement with Career Transition Partnership (CTP), army welfare organisations and veteran's gateway.

8. Community Engagement

- 8.1 In recent years, service families have been much more embedded within Test Valley's local communities. This can be through MOD accommodation located in areas such as Picket Twenty & Augusta Park, or, choosing to privately rent/own in the local area to provide a form of stability. This is increasing and distances many families from the support networks provided when living within a military community such as welfare officers and support groups.
- 8.2 Historically, TVBC have organised and engaged in a number of events within the military community such as coffee mornings, Andover Vision events, Armed Forces Day and events with the Nepalese community. This has typically been reliant on developed relationships with individual personalities within the MOD & welfare support teams. Continued work has been challenging when these individuals leave or are reposted.
- 8.3 Community engagement is a particular strength within Test Valley and the Armed Forces community have benefited from the Council's wider community work such as community development workers and new facilities delivered through S106 funds. These activities have enabled activities around community spirit and inclusiveness in the whole community, including those linked to the Armed Forces.
- 8.4 Through the summary above and detailed findings in Annex 1, the Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- Formulate a military/civilian community forum by Spring 2021, to integrate with the Test Valley Partnership (TVP)
- Collate newly gathered military contacts list.
- Establish formal links with key military roles – Unit and garrison welfare and wellbeing officers;
 - Army HQ
 - Middle Wallop
 - Perham Down Engineers
 - Tidworth and Bulford Garrison HQ
 - RA Larkhill
- Create a TVBC military community web page. To include information bulletin boards and advertising events/activities.

9 Health

- 9.1 Primary healthcare, dental (and limited secondary healthcare) for service personnel is well catered for in service. However, their families can often be impacted due to relocations having an impact on continuity of care.
- 9.2 Mental health provision within the military has a lower tolerance level than the NHS to recognise the additional support needed for serving personnel.
- 9.3 Service leavers and veterans are responsible for ensuring their care is transferred from the MOD to the NHS. Their health records are able to be shared across, however, the onus is on the service leaver to initiate this.
- 9.4 Particular support and care for veterans is identified within the NHS. Mental health and some physical conditions are prioritised within the NHS, if they are directly related to time served.
- 9.5 Whilst TVBC do not have a health remit, there are opportunities for joined up working with the County Council and local healthcare services to ensure the Council are doing all they can to support the local military communities. There are also potential opportunities to champion some of the services provided and provide more detailed signposting.
- 9.6 Through the summary above and detailed findings in Annex 1, the Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- Formation on a Civilian Military Partnership (CMP) to support joined up working with health care providers & charities.
- Continued review of best practice to feed into the CMP
- A military page/gateway on TVBC website to have an operational, up to date single point of contact (SPOC), which will provide easy to access advice, guidance and signposting to any service personnel, veterans or/and their families.

10 Education

- 10.1 The disruption to service children's education is well known. The consequences of many relocations during a child's early years, coupled with the constant renewing of peer relationships can have a detrimental effect on the child's development. Often further compounded with extended periods of time away from one or both parents.²

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- 10.2 The panel heard from education experts, service children should be prioritised for school placements when relocating, however, do not always get a choice in the school they attend.
- 10.3 State schools, academies and free schools in England, which have children of service families in school years reception to year 11, can receive Service Pupil Premium (SPP) funding. It is designed to assist the school in providing the additional support that these children may need and is currently worth £310 per service child who meets the eligibility criteria. There are a number of examples of good practice, using SPP funding.
- 10.4 Whilst TVBC do not have an education remit, there are opportunities for joined up working with the County Council and local charities to ensure the Council are doing all they can to support the local military communities. There are also potential opportunities to support the work of our partners through community engagement and provide more detailed signposting.
- 10.5 Through the summary above and detailed findings in Annex 1, the Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- Formation on a Civilian Military Partnership (CMP) to support joined up working with education providers & charities.
- Continued review of best practice to feed into the CMP.
- A military page/gateway on TVBC website to have an operational, up to date single point of contact (SPOC), which will provide easy to access advice, guidance and signposting to any service personnel, veterans or/and their families.

11 Business & Transition

- 11.1 Service leavers and veterans can find themselves leaving the military into a world of unknowns. Often leaving behind a unique lifestyle within a protective and inclusive institution, of which they not only felt a part of, but experienced things that many outside this organisation may not understand. It is recognised that many service leavers come with a unique set of transferable skills and experience that could benefit employers in Test Valley.
- 11.2 As highlighted in paragraph 2.6, many service leavers may experience a number of key decisions for the first time, or for a long time.
- 11.3 The MOD provide a resettlement service to support service leavers in their transition to civilian life. There are a number of additional organisations who compliment this work such as Career Transition Partnership (CTP), British Forces Resettlement Services (BFRSS) and Regular Forces Employment Association (RFEA).

- 11.4 The panel's research showed there is often a lack of communication between these organisations, the veterans themselves and the local authorities and business groups within the areas they choose to reside.
- 11.5 A number of local businesses in Test Valley actively recruit veterans, and, local apprenticeships are open to veterans.
- 11.6 It is also highlighted that service families are often adversely impacted by employment opportunities with frequent relocation. A number of best practices were identified through the Panel's research for further consideration.
- 11.7 Through the summary above and detailed findings in Annex 1, the Panel has identified the following proposals for consideration:

- Formation on a Civilian Military Partnership (CMP) to support joined up working with local business, training providers & charities. Appropriate expertise from TVBC represented within this group.
- Continued review of best practice to feed into the CMP.
- A military page/gateway on TVBC website to provide local job and training opportunities.

12 Corporate Objectives and Priorities

- 12.1 Using an evidence led approach to support our communities is at the heart of the Council's current corporate plan "Growing our Potential". This review relates directly to two of the corporate priorities:
- 12.2 Priority 2 which is about reaching the potential of "Communities to be empowered, connected and able to build upon their strengths", outlines the importance of bringing local communities together and enabling them to take forward their ambitions by helping them to access resources and support.
- 12.3 Priority 3 which is about growing the potential of "People to be able to live well and fulfil their aspirations", outlines the importance of supporting vulnerable communities, enabling people to build upon their strengths and raising aspirations in skills and access to opportunities.

13 Consultations/Communications

- 13.1 The panel engaged with a variety of subject matter experts across each of the areas outlined in the report above to ensure accurate and factual information formed the evidence base. A number of partner organisations were consulted with to understand the barriers in place and the appetite for onward working in the shape of the recommendations being made.

14 Resource Implications

14.1 None directly arising from this report

15 Legal Implications

15.1 None directly arising from this report

16 Equality Issues

16.1 None directly arising from this report

17 Other Issues

17.1 Wards/Communities Affected – All

18 Conclusion

18.1 This report considers current and potential work to support the Armed Forces community within Test Valley and how TVBC meets their commitment to the Armed Forces Community Covenant. The panel considers that TVBC are currently meeting their promise made under the Armed Forces Community Covenant. However, opportunities have been identified to improve communication with partner organisations and lead on a more inclusive approach to supporting the Armed Forces communities within Test Valley. The recommendations made in this report support these findings and propose ways to start engaging in the opportunities identified.

Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)

Confidentiality

It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.

No of Annexes:

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File Ref:

Report to:

OSCOM

Date:

20 January 2021