

Full details of research undertaken by the OSCOM Armed Forces Panel

The Panel met a number of times to discuss the scope and direction of work. As part of this, the panel have hosted a number of focussed sessions on the following topics:

- Housing;
- Community engagement;
- Health;
- Education; and
- Business & transition

Three sessions were held with internal subject matter experts on housing, communities and business & transition to collect evidence and develop an understanding of the role of these services in supporting the Armed Forces community. The Panel lead also met with local partners in the health, education and military sectors, gathering evidence and reporting back to the Panel for discussion.

From these focus sessions and meetings, a detailed set of evidence has been collated, key learning points are listed below:

1. Housing

The panel spoke with Phil Turner, Head of Housing & Environmental Health to understand the internal TVBC processes for allocating housing to service leavers, veterans and spouses experiencing marital breakdown.

- 1.1 Access to housing, particularly post service is generally accepted to be an unfamiliar process to service leavers and veterans. It is possible that they have never experienced using this service before and also possible that they are seeking housing in areas that are not linked to their family and / or home town.

What's already in place?

- 1.2 Internal TVBC processes provide opportunities for residents / applicants to identify military links. The initial interview includes questions specifically designed to determine military status. Furthermore, the housing application process also establishes military links/status.
- 1.3 There are a number of complex associated issues that may be determined during the application process and interviews including additional needs such as addiction, mental health and financial difficulties. TVBC housing officers are well versed in giving advice on these associated issues, using a strengths based approach to provide support

- 1.4 TVBC processes in identifying military links and veteran status – TVBC initial interview includes questions specifically designed to determine military status. Furthermore, the housing application process also establishes military links/status. This practice currently meets the promises made under the armed Forces Community Covenant.
- 1.5 TVBC meet the requirements outlined in the Armed Forces Covenant, Housing act 1996 (as amended) and Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 – to ensure that social housing allocations, homelessness policies and local connections do not disadvantage Armed Forces personnel, veterans and families.
- 1.6 TVBC consider, as appropriate, any specific criteria relating to the Armed Forces including:
- Additional preference under housing act 1996 and the Armed Forces qualification criteria regulations 2012;
 - Identity of veterans up to 5 years post service; and
 - Providing support to service personnel or their families who are not native of Test Valley, ensuring they are not disadvantaged by the service, or where that service may have placed them.
- 1.7 The law requires the Council to give ‘reasonable preference’ to particular groups of people. Local authorities must be mindful that they do not give priority or advantage to one group, such that it results in disadvantage to other households who may fulfil categories of ‘reasonable preference’. (Another way to understand ‘reasonable preference’ is to think of it as ‘housing need as defined in law’).
- 1.8 In line with the covenant promise to not disadvantage Armed Forces, and furthermore to actively respect their service, Forces personnel who have been injured due to service or bereaved will be respected and supported accordingly.
- 1.9 TVBC are required to publish a lawful scheme of allocations setting out the way in which they prioritise and allocate homes. TVBC’s role is to administer the housing register, prioritise applications for rehousing within the parameters set out in our policy, and to nominate people from the housing register into housing association (otherwise known as “Registered Providers”) accommodation when it becomes available. TVBC are effectively the provider of a structured gateway into rented affordable housing in the local area with a view to making the best use of local affordable housing stock
- 1.10 Financial qualifying criteria - for any applicant with savings in excess of £16k and / or earnings that exceed £60k per annum, the Council will undertake an individual assessment to determine whether it is appropriate to facilitate access to the Housing Register. Where a household may have received compensation for an injury sustained while on active service in the Armed Forces, this would be disregarded for the purposes of qualifying to join the Housing Register.

- 1.11 Some additional grants have been identified, such as Disabled Facilities Grants. The Panel are aware that a number of additional grants are available for veterans, many of which applications are only available to charities and not local authorities.
- 1.12 TVBC's 'Housing Strategy Evidence Base & Review of Homelessness'¹ published in December 2019 contains a number of helpful statistics about the need and support available for housing within the Armed Forces community. Some key statistics on the support provided are listed below, full information can be found on pages 97 – 104 of the referenced document.
- 1.13 Key statistics discussed by the panel. At the time of publication:
- There were 102 Armed Forces Service households on Hampshire Home Choice registered for accommodation in Test Valley
 - 79 Armed Forces service households had been allocated social/affordable housing since 1/4/2014.
 - 46 Armed Forces families and former Service personnel had purchased homes through Help to Buy South shared ownership schemes.
 - The Council had prevented 47 Armed Forces/former Service personnel households from becoming homeless through effective casework and housing options, including assisting through the Rent Deposit Loan Scheme and securing alternative accommodation in the private rented sector.
 - Single Homelessness - 13 *Armed Forces and former Service personnel* had been assisted to access supported housing and their homelessness prevented.
 - 13 estranged spouses and families of Armed Forces personnel following relationship breakdown had been accommodated by the Council.
 - The Council provides Disabled Facilities Grants for *former Service personnel* and works with SAAFA and the British Legion to assist applicants who fail the DFG Test of Resources but have need for adaptations.
- 1.14 The following areas have been identified as potential gaps or barriers:
- Engagement with the MOD has been difficult in the past; and
 - Integration with the MOD processes – specifically linking an individual's journey from start (MOD) to finish (TVBC)
- 1.15 The following areas have been identified as opportunities for onward exploration, beyond the Panel:

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- Increased engagement with the MOD to target prevention work centred around helping to manage expectations and to provide educational support on housing options on leaving the Forces so that the right advice is reaching serving personnel at the right time;
- Establishing further links with Career Transition Partnership (CTP) and the Regular Forces Employment Association (RFEA); and
- Research into the grants available to support service leavers and veterans. Signposting to this information.

1.16 In conclusion, the panel were satisfied that the housing protocols and processes within TVBC fulfil the promises made in the Armed Forces covenant. However, there does appear to be a lack of correlation with the MOD, and it was noted that historically the engagement was notoriously difficult. This has invariably led to a general ignorance of many service leavers who may not be aware of the local authority processes, assistance & support, entitlements and practices. The support available from TVBC is not necessarily known to service leavers or the MOD representatives whose role is to assist Armed Forces personnel during their transition.

2 Community engagement

The panel spoke with Louisa Rice, Community Engagement Manager, to understand any current and historical work with Armed Forces communities in Test Valley.

- 2.1 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 removes many families from the support networks provided when living within a military community such as welfare officers and support groups.
- 2.2 There is an explicit rise in the number of families choosing not to stay in Service Family Accommodation (SFA) in order to provide one home base. Often this is to support education needs of children, work opportunities and general stability in having a 'home town'.²
- 2.3 A number of events have been recognised, (prior to the Covid crisis), including family coffee mornings, supporting Armed Forces day, Andover Vision Activities and a close and engaging relationship with our local Nepalese community.

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- 2.4 Historically, the community engagement within Test Valley has been largely reliant on pro-active and pragmatic individuals within the MOD and welfare teams. Whilst this generally viewed as a good approach, it lends itself to too much emphasis on finding the particular individual, rather than engaging with a role or military unit (made difficult by frequent changes in personnel). The success of military/civilian community engagement is further exacerbated by the number of events that can actually be organised, consequently relying on other organisations and agencies informing the council of their activities.
- 2.5 TVBC have been commended for their community engagement, including the forums such as test valley partnership, Andover Vision and our resilience groups, many of which are recognised by local partners as good practice.
- 2.6 The following areas have been identified as potential gaps or barriers:
- Successes have been linked to proactive and pragmatic engagement with certain individuals and opposed to 'roles' within the military. It is identified that the frequent movement of personnel makes it more difficult to engage. There may be a space for engagement with 'roles' as opposed to people in the future; and
 - Personnel are not always based 'behind the wire' or on patches. There is more integration of military families looking for a more permanent base within communities (as stated in the 'Living in our Shoes' report³).
- 2.7 The following areas have been identified as opportunities for onward exploration, beyond the Panel:
- Integration with the Test Valley Partnership as a platform for communication across partners. Additionally, to further support partnership working with Test Valley communities as a whole;
 - Potential to bring a larger focus to partnership working within communities. Focussing on wider community integration as opposed to targeted support for military only communities;
 - Formally link with MOD representatives with emphasis on roles rather than individuals;
 - Identify how best to advertise and market community activities; and
 - Contacts within the MOD have often been sporadic, dependent on "good will" or non – authoritative. It is therefore suggested that we formulate a comprehensive contacts list of the relevant MOD roles to ensure collaborative relationships between our communities.

3 Health

Serving personnel and their families

- 3.1 Both physical and mental health provision for service personnel is provided in service and is viewed as exemplary. However, the families, who register with the NHS, may well be disadvantaged due to referrals being disrupted, caused by postings. Mental health problems can be further compounded by extended periods of time as an “absent parent” family.
- 3.2 The panel understands that health provision is split into two main streams; physical and mental health support. They both have different referral mechanisms, based not only on clinical need, but on the knowledge, identification of symptoms and the way in which different support services operate. Therefore, it is not always expectant to rely solely on GP referral, particularly with mental health. As a local authority, dealing with our communities from all walks of life, we may be the first organisation that recognise complex needs.
- 3.3 The AF covenant provides a “promise” that Armed Forces, veterans and families are not disadvantaged due to their service. Whilst the obligation does not extend to prioritising veterans over all others or/and clinical need, it certainly does ensure priority access to care with service related health conditions.

Current provision

- 3.4 The national obligation, and widely current provision includes;
- (i) Priority for service related health conditions (not above clinical need);
 - (ii) Personalised care program for complex needs;
 - (iii) Veteran friendly accredited GP’s, who have signed the covenant and registered with the Royal College of GP’s;
 - (iv) Mental health support and referral through Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service (TILS) and Complex Treatment Service (CTS); and
 - (v) Various grants available for both LA’s and charities to claim for veteran support (including isolation)

Veterans Health Conditions

- 3.5 Veterans can find mental health conditions exacerbated as they adapt to civilian life with additional complexities surrounding the prevalence of PTSD, due to experiences during their service.
- 3.6 Whilst veterans’ health conditions might not significantly differ from anyone else’s. A few have been identified as being more prevalent amongst service veterans, including;
- (a) Physical

- (i) **Musculoskeletal** – Excess strain due to prolonged and often stressful and physically demanding training and campaigns.
 - (ii) **Hearing loss** – Due to working/operating in loud and often “explosive” environments over prolonged period of time.
- (b) Mental
- (i) **PTSD** – Whilst it is certainly not suggested that only veterans suffer from this condition, research demonstrates a greater percentage compared to civilians.
 - (ii) **Anxiety and depression** – Whilst PTSD sufferers will experience these emotions, they are not solely inclusive. Many veterans suffer anxiety and depression, particularly regarding the transition from military to civilian life and the loss of their military “identity”.
 - (iii) **Alcohol and Drug Abuse** – Whilst many sufferers remain unknown. Research suggests a significantly higher proportion of veterans suffer alcohol and drug dependency, than our civilian friends. It is implied this to be intrinsically linked to difficulties in transitioning to civilian life, loss of identity and belonging, and a pride that may prevent them seeking help.

General Observations

- 3.7 There appears a significant amount of support for veterans and families, and indeed different networks, referral pathways and grants. However, it is not clear that these are widely known either by Locals Authorities or local veteran communities.
- 3.7.1 It is recognised and understood that TVBC do not have a health remit, however, can work with partners to support their work and help our communities to access their services.
- 3.8 The following areas have been identified as potential gaps or barriers:
- No local GP’s are registered on the RCGP accredited list for veteran friendly practice;
 - Research has not provided much evidence that veterans or families are known during GP registration;
 - Veterans access to priority healthcare can sometimes be misinterpreted; and
 - Lack of signposting to the various support networks.
- 3.9 The following areas have been identified as opportunities for onward exploration, beyond the Panel:
- How are we able (or indeed authorised) to monitor local health practices;
 - Awareness of identifying mental health and complex needs, by LA’s departments (a good example of practice in this area is the TVBC housing team);

- Understand how national health referrals aligned to ensure that the care of service families is consistent through relocation;
- Work with local health services to see if registration can be supported to identify and support veterans and military families. This could perhaps be addressed with local surgeries (GP's to be conversant with READ), as well as military community being mindful to provide their veteran status. Suggestions included a "medical handover", perhaps using a similar system such as the medical passport practice in some London Boroughs.

Identified Good Practices

3.10 There are a number of other LA's with some good practices, including:

- Military Information websites for signposting – Single Point of Contact (SPOC):
- Befriending and peer support services – Particularly elderly veterans and isolated;
- Health support forums providing early support for new service leavers – In essence this is the practice of comprehensive and informative "handover" from service to NHS;
- Dedicated covenant partnership, incorporating multiple neighbour councils;
- Drop in cafes;
- Fitness, rehab and gym memberships; and
- Monthly drop in centres for service personnel and families.

4 Education

4.1 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. ⁴

4.2 The panel have explored many areas where service families may experience impact, due to their military service. The disruption caused by service life can impact many aspects of their life, and some that may not necessarily be realised by many. Not only does education provide academic development for our children, but forms many of the relationships, influences and social skills required to ensure effective development. Therefore, the well-being of our children throughout their education journey is paramount

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- 4.3 Service children experience environments that their fellow civilian pupils often do not, such as frequent relocations, extended periods of time with an absent parent, a lack of consistent friends network due to many moves and finally the inability for service parents to “pick or choose” a school for their children. Not, of course forgetting that their serving parent may one day not return, or return being a different person to the one that left. All of these issues inevitably adversely affect these children and can cause adverse disruption to the child’s development.
- 4.4 Whilst it is not suggested that any child is given priority over another, the well-being of service children and the environments they live, due to service life, must be recognised and actively supported. This further endorses the promises made under the Armed Forces Covenant, to not allow service children to be disadvantaged, due to the military service of their parents.
- 4.5 It is recognised and understood that TVBC do not have an education remit, however, can work with partners to support their work and help our communities to access their services.

Specific support for service children

- 4.6 The panel heard from education partners that service children should be prioritised for school placements when relocating however, do not always get a choice in the school they attend.
- 4.7 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.⁵
- 4.8 Given that SPP funding is allocated per pupil, schools with a high percentage of service children benefit from economies of scale enabling a greater potential for additional resources through SPP. However, this does mean that schools with a smaller percentage of service children have less opportunities to implement varied support packages.

Identified good practices

- 4.9 There are a number of other LA’s with some good practices, including:
- (a) Monitoring service children’s progress (Plymouth);
 - (b) Intervention strategies and support for their learning;
 - (c) External learning mentors, building social skills, self-esteem and positive attitudes;
 - (d) Membership of local organisations (HMS Heroes in Plymouth, military youth choirs);

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-service-pupil-premium/service-pupil-premium-what-you-need-to-know>

- (e) Extra curriculum activities, such as theatre visits “wild in the woods” (absent parent support);
- (f) Giant oil cloth, map of the world/story board. Children interact with it, service children have been found to feel inclusive; “my dad has been there”, or “where my dad comes from” (Fawley);
- (g) Dedicated member of staff responsible for the personal and academic development of service children (Plymouth);
- (h) HMS HEROES – Is a large support group for service children
- (i) Strong links with local barracks welfare officers and pastoral care (Newport);
- (j) Service children liaison mentor. Weekly out of classroom informal social sessions, talking of their experiences. Also introduced a lunchtime MESS club, where can bring a friend (Wolvey); and
- (k) Service diaries, used to register their thoughts and experiences, which can then be shared.

4.10 The following areas have been identified as potential gaps or barriers:

- There is currently no known partnership working with the council and local schools to understand how Forces children in the community can be best supported.

4.11 The following areas have been identified as opportunities for onward exploration, beyond the Panel:

- Guaranteed school places for service children – how do these work and where can we help;
- Suitable provision for dealing with service children’s unique needs – how can we support;
- Counselling within schools – understand the current provision and see if partnership working could further support it; and
- Provision of additional academic support for those service children who’s education has been disrupted – partnership working?

Business and transition

4.12 Veteran service leavers can be faced with many challenges. In addition to transitioning to a world that may be alien to them, they are more than likely seeking employment to continue providing for their family, as well as finding somewhere to live.

4.13 Many veterans may never have experienced situations that many civilian personnel take for granted, such as job interviews, CV writing or indeed distinguishing the dynamics of civilian job market, including self-employment opportunities, apprentices and starting up their own companies.

- 4.14 Our research has determined that the MOD sponsored resettlement programme is extremely efficient and beneficial. Career Transition Partnership (CTP), British Forces Resettlement Services (BFRSS), Regular Forces Employment Association (RFEA), the List UK and the veteran's gateway are just some of the many organisations assisting the resettlement of service personnel. However, the panel's research has determined that 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.
- 4.15 It is also important to recognise that the support received by these organisations varies depending on length of service and, in some cases, rank⁶. This can lead to those with a shorter length of service, or certain rank less aware of the services available to them within our communities.
- 4.16 The working group established that local apprenticeships are available for veterans and furthermore a number of local businesses actively recruit veterans. However, it is felt that more could be done in appealing to the wider business and training providers, as well as to further explore our Jobs Centre plus (as well as internal TVBC) protocols and processes in identifying and proactively supporting our veterans. As an example, some nationally recognised practices have included guaranteed interviews for service veterans, (providing of course they have the skill set).
- 4.17 Finally, the working group determined that service families can be equally impacted in their quest for employment. Contributing factors include CV's that on appearance looks sporadic and sparse, with extended periods of time relocating and the following the requirements of their spouse's service. This unfortunate consequence provides less appeal to a potential employer.
- 4.18 The following areas have been identified as potential gaps or barriers:
- The panel felt that our local authority, and in particular our business community, training establishments and community engagement could do much more in providing active assistance for resettling veterans.
- 4.19 The following areas have been identified as opportunities for onward exploration, beyond the Panel:
- Signposting and information bulletins published on a TVBC website;
 - Ensuring Jobs Centre plus have a clear process of identifying veterans and their families and actively seeking the required support; and
 - To ensure all avenues are explored in detail, and identifying what we could do to improve the veteran's experience, it is recommended that a suitable member is included on a civilian/military forum to ensure representation on this important aspect of the covenant promise.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/information-for-service-leavers>

5 Panel conclusion

- 5.1 This cross party review has been a very informative and comprehensive project, spanning over 5 months. The working group have carried out extensive research into the Armed Forces covenant, current practices both within TVBC as well as other authorities and has also worked collaboratively with the Armed Forces covenant champions over the South East of England.
- 5.2 It is important to highlight the aim of this review was not to determine all the things that could be done to support veterans and the Armed Forces community. The panel have of course, during their review, established some extremely exciting ideas from other authorities, and indeed some interesting ideas from the panel itself. However, at this stage the panel feel that the recommendations should determine the need to put in place a civilian/military forum, whose aims and objectives will be to identify and implement good practices.
- 5.3 Each topic the panel has researched have highlighted many different challenges and varied aspects of what can be legally and morally achieved, not to mention costs associated and feasibility. However, the best practices will invariably be explored by the professional and informed personnel that work in and around these topics. As a consequence, the recommendation of forming a civilian/military forum, will incorporate ensuring that appropriately qualified and authority members are engaged. It is further recommended that if this suggested forum is accepted by OSCOM and Council, it will effectively be subsumed within/under the current Test Valley Partnership.
- 5.4 As each of the main topics reviewed have different levels of authority, as well as various levels of commitment or advancement, the panel have realised a need to encapsulate current practices, potential grants and opportunities. It is the review panel's recommendation that a Single Point of Contact (SPOC), is created on TVBC website. In essence a "one stop shop", where service personnel, veterans and their families can click on a service gateway page and access all the information and assistance available to them. The panel recognise that this will require regular update, to enable community engagement events to be publicised as well as the service support information and signposting.