

**Councillor
ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL**

COUNCILLOR FEEDBACK REPORT FROM OUTSIDE BODIES

Report to Housing & Wellbeing Committee – 23 November 2023

Name of Meeting:	Armed Forces Covenant in the Community Conference in Newcastle
Date of Meeting:	Thursday 15 September 2023
Report by:	Councillor Mark Turner MBE Armed Forces Champion

INTRODUCTION

- 1) Background. The Office for Veterans Affairs (OVA) is part of the Cabinet office and in conjunction with the Armed Forces Covenant Team from the Ministry of Defence sponsored the “Armed Forces Covenant in the Community Conference” in Newcastle.
- 2) Date and Place. The Conference was held in the conference suite at St James Park, Newcastle on Thursday 15 September 2023.
- 3) Attendance. There were more than 250 delegates drawn from numerous public bodies around the United Kingdom including Central Government, Local Authorities, Local Government Association, Charities, Housing Associations, Service Providers, and the National Health Service.
- 4) Programme. There was an extensive programme of briefs, presentations and seminars including a keynote address from the Rt Hon Andrew Murrison MP, Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families. Much of the conference was centred on presentations and discussions relating to the impact of the Armed Forces Act 2021.

PURPOSE

- 5) Purpose of the Report. This report is to provide committee members with an update on the Armed Forces Covenant and related matters as discussed at the Conference and attended by the Arun District Armed Forces Champion (Cllr Mark Turner MBE).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6) The Housing and Wellbeing Committee is asked to:
 - a) Note the contents of the report particularly the “legal obligation” now on specified¹ public bodies² shown at Para 10 below.

¹ Specified bodies that are subject to the Covenant Duty are listed in sections 343AA(3), 343AB(3), 343AC(3) and 343AD(3) of the Act.

² Including Arun District Council.

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- b) Agree to the publication of the report on the Council's website member area.
- c) Agree to continue to receive reports and updates on the Armed Forces Covenant.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 7) The Strategy for our Veterans. The OVA is committed to delivering the Strategy for our Veterans³. Their priorities include:
 - a) Transforming Services for veterans and their families to ensure they work better for those who need them and ensuring a high standard of support across the UK.
 - b) Recognising the contribution all veterans have made and address the historic disadvantage that some have experienced.
 - c) Ensuring better data for understanding and supporting the veteran community.
- 8) Delivery. The OVA's aim is to deliver on these priorities via the Veterans Strategy Action Plan and its second iteration, which will run up to 2028, as well as through being responsive to emerging issues and opportunities.
- 9) The Armed Forces Covenant. The Armed Forces Covenant⁴ is a promise⁵ by the nation that the Armed Forces Community should be treated fairly and face no disadvantage when accessing public and commercial services, with special provision made in appropriate cases for those who have sacrificed the most. The Covenant was established in its current form in 2011 and since then, thousands of different organisations – including businesses, local authorities, universities, and charities – have chosen to sign a pledge to honour the Covenant and support their Armed Forces Community. As a result of this there have been many examples around the UK of good practice to remove, mitigate, or prevent incidents of disadvantage from occurring.
- 10) The Armed Forces Covenant Duty. Building on this good progress, the Armed Forces Act 2021 amended the Armed Forces Act 2006 to create a legal obligation on specified bodies (see Footnote 1) in all four home nations of the UK. This legal obligation applies to specified bodies whether or not they have signed the Covenant Pledge. Specified bodies that are subject to the Covenant Duty are those responsible for providing local services in the areas of healthcare, education, and housing. Such as local authorities, governing bodies of schools, and NHS bodies. This is the Armed Forces Covenant Duty. When a specified body exercises a relevant function, **it must have due regard** to:
 - a) The unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the Armed Forces.

³ Office for Veterans Affairs "Veterans Strategy Action Plan 2022-2024" ISBN 978-1-5286-3024-5

⁴ Signed by Arun District Council on 13 Jan 2016 and West Sussex County Council on 20 Oct 2017.

⁵ www.armedforcescovenant.co.uk

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- b) The principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising from Service people from their membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces.
- c) The principle that special provision for Service people may be justified by the effects on such people by their membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces.

DETAIL

11) Relevant Functions in Scope of the `Covenant Duty. The relevant functions in scope of the Duty are functions under or by virtue of the legislative provision listed in the Act are summarised below:

- a) In the settings of NHS Primary Care, NHS Secondary Care, and local authority-delivered healthcare services, the following functions:
 - i) provision of services;
 - ii) planning and funding;
 - iii) co-operation between bodies and professionals.
- b) In compulsory education settings, the following functions:
 - i) admissions;
 - ii) educational attainment and curriculum;
 - iii) child well being;
 - iv) transport;
 - v) attendance;
 - vi) additional needs support;
 - vii) use of Service Pupil Premium funding (England only).
- c) The following housing functions.
 - i) allocations policy for social housing;
 - ii) tenancy strategies (England only);
 - iii) homelessness;
 - iv) disabled facilities grants.

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- 12) What is “Due Regard”? The Covenant Duty is about informed decision making and means that specified bodies should think about and place an appropriate amount of weight on the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when they consider all the factors relevant to how they carry out relevant functions. It is not prescriptive about the actions specified bodies should take in order to comply with their legal obligations, and it does not mandate specific public service delivery outcomes. Bodies might wish to draw on their experience and practice in complying with similar due regard duties.
- 13) Unique Obligations and Sacrifices. These include danger; geographical mobility, separation, Service Law and rights; unfamiliarity with civilian life; hours of work; and stress.
- 14) Removing Disadvantages. A disadvantage is when the level of access a member of the Armed Forces Community has to goods and services, or the support they receive, is comparatively lower than that of someone in a similar position who is not a member of the Armed Forces Community, and this difference arises from one (or more) of the unique obligations and sacrifices of Service life listed at Para 13 above. For particular relevance to Arun District Council is removing disadvantage in housing where veterans, Service personnel leaving Service, and service families might lack knowledge about housing services, have not built up sufficient “local connection”, not be prioritised to receive social housing, experience a lack of available social housing, find it more difficult to communicate with housing bodies, be reluctant to seek early help, or require adaptations to be made to their home when they re-locate.
- 15) Special Provision. Special provision is the taking of actions that go beyond the support provided to reduce or remove disadvantage. Special provision may be justified by the effects of the unique obligations and sacrifices of Service life, especially for those that have sacrificed the most, such as the bereaved and the injured (whether that injury is physical or mental).
- 16) Service People. The people who benefit from the Duty are defined collectively as “Service People” in the Act⁶, comprising: currently serving members of the UK regular and reserve forces; currently serving members of British Overseas Territories’ Armed Forces who are subject to UK Service Law; former members of the UK regular and reserve forces and British Overseas Territory Forces, who are ordinarily resident in the UK (“Veterans”) and the relevant family members’ of people in these groups.
- 17) HM Armed Forces Veterans’ Identity Cards (ID) Update. A new ID card for armed forces veterans, which will help them access specialist support and services, has started to be issued to service leavers. All those who have left military service since December 2018 will automatically be given one of the new ID cards as part of Phase 1), which will allow them to maintain a tangible link to their career in the forces. The cards allow veterans to easily verify their service to the NHS, their local authority, and charities, helping them to access support and services where needed. Phase 2 will extend the scheme to existing veterans

⁶ Section 343B(1) of the Act.

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and this is due to commence at the end of 2023 as this roll-out had to be future-proofed, against a backdrop of mainly diverse paper records, to ensure that only those with verified service were able to get a card in order to guard against fraudulent use in accessing an increasing number of benefits and services.

18) Covenant Initiatives. There are an huge number of positive support initiatives in place which are sponsored and supported by various charities, agencies and government bodies or by partnerships between these groups. The following four initiatives are amongst the highest profile:

- a) **Op FORTITUDE**. Op FORTITUDE is the pathway for veterans at risk of or experiencing homelessness into supported housing or to keep them in their current home. At the centre of this initiative is a team dedicated to creating a pathway from the veteran at risk or experiencing homelessness to veteran supported housing or an organisation that can support them to keep their current home and avoid becoming homeless in the first place, as well as other unsupported veteran housing. Online referral form is at <https://riv.org.uk/opfortitude> or by Freephone to 0800 9520774.
- b) **Op COURAGE**. Op COURAGE is the Veterans Mental Health and Well Being Service providing specialist care and support for Service leavers, reservists, veterans and their families. The first call for help takes courage. If you or someone you know is struggling with their mental health or wellbeing, expert help is available from Op COURAGE. Visit the NHS website www.nhs.uk/opcourage or for services in Sussex call 020 3317 6818.
- c) **Op RESTORE**. Op RESTORE is the Veterans' Physical Health and Well Being Service (and replaces the Veterans Trauma Network) and is an NHS service that supports individuals who have served in, or are leaving, the UK Armed Forces and have continuing, physical health injuries and related medical problems attributed to their time in the Armed Forces. Working together with military and civilian medical professionals, along with Armed Forces charities, Op RESTORE teams understand military life and the longer-term care and support that may be required for veterans, Service leavers, reservists, families, and carers. For help your GP can get a referral by emailing imperial.oprestore@nhs.net and for more information visit nhs.uk/armedforceshealth
- d) **Op NOVA**. Op NOVA, delivered by the Forces Employment Charity and commissioned by NHS England, provides support for veterans who are in contact with the social justice system. The shift into non-military life can bring challenges that can lead to veterans feeling detached and in between military and civilian worlds. The reality for many is that this can potentially lead to housing problems, debt, health issues, PTSD, or drug, and alcohol misuse. Which can in turn lead to some veterans being at risk of offending. Op NOVA's specialist team is drawn from those who have served in the Armed Forces, as well as partners, children, and parents of those who serve or have served. Other members of the team have worked in the police, probation, prisons or charity sector. Op NOVA works across all needs and delivers practical and emotional support engaging veterans with healthcare including

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GP registration and for those with mental health needs rereferrals into the specialist mental health provision – Op COURAGE (see above).

- 19) Arun District Council Training. There are several training opportunities (both on Teams and Face to Face) for Council Members and Staff provided either by the NHS or through specialist provision organised by ADC. These courses are very worthwhile for both decision makers and those providing service delivery daily. The next internal ADC Course is on 28 February 2024. For details please contact Cathryn French of the Safeguarding Team at safeguarding@arun.gov.uk.
- 20) Points of Contact; Some key points of contact are:
- a) Veterans' Gateway. The first point of contact for veterans requiring support at www.veteransgateway.org.uk
 - b) Drop in Centres. Association of Service Drop-In Centres (ASDIC) supporting veterans in the community across the UK. www.asdic.org.uk
 - c) Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club. Meet with other veterans over a friendly cup of tea and breakfast sandwich. Every Weds & Sat 1000-1200. @ Café 72 High St, Littlehampton. littlehamptonafbvc@gmail.com
 - d) Armed Forces Outreach Service (AFOS). Provides advice on housing, employment, accessing services, debt management, benefits and military pension, mental health referrals (Op COURAGE) and other local authority services. Tel 0191 433 5444 and www.armedforcesoutreachservice.org
 - e) Armed Forces Network. Tel 01273 403693
 - f) Soldiers' Sailors' & Airmans' Families Association (SSAFA). SSAFA South East Regional Hub Tel 020 4566 9126 or www.ssafa.org
 - g) Forces Connect. Download the FORCES CONNECT mobile App. The App signposts users to help and support in just four clicks and it's completely free.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

2024 Exact Date, Location and Attendance to be confirmed.