

Armed Forces Community Covenant

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

This paper reports on action by local authorities and the LGA in support of the Armed Forces Community Covenant.

Dr Heather McNaughton, Head of Service and Veterans' Welfare at the Ministry of Defence, and Manjeet Gill, Chief Executive of West Lindsey District Council, will attend the meeting.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note and comment on the update.

Action

LGA Officers to proceed as directed.

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Background

1. On 16 May 2011 the Coalition Government published the Armed Forces Covenant which outlines the moral obligation between the nation, the Government and the Armed Forces. The Community Covenant, as a voluntary statement of mutual support between a civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community is intended to complement the Armed Forces Covenant at local level.
2. The aim of the Community Covenant is to encourage local communities to support the Forces community in their area in a tangible way, nurture understanding and awareness amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces community and ensure that they are not disadvantaged as a consequence of being a member of it.
3. The LGA and its member councils have proudly supported the introduction of the Community Covenant. This builds on the strong foundation of work already carried out by local councils, charities and voluntary groups to support the armed forces, veterans and their families.
4. Community Covenants are already in place in over 200 Unitary, County and District Councils (**Appendix A**). Whilst the relationship within the Community Covenant is with the local Armed Forces community the Brigade Commander would formally enter into the Covenant with the Local Authority and partners.
5. There are many positive examples of where local government and the armed forces can come together. These range from priority housing, free leisure membership, shopping discounts. A number of local authorities are already actively asking those accessing Council services whether they have an Armed Forces background and are collecting this information to map their Armed Forces population, monitor demand for specific services and handle calls more appropriately and efficiently. Several councils have joined forces with the Royal British Legion to enhance the support they provide to current and former members of the armed forces, whether it is offering advice, financial assistance or help finding a home.
6. The Ministry of Defence have put in place a fund of up to £30 million over four years to support the Community Covenant scheme.
7. Councillor Keith Mitchell CBE (Oxfordshire CC) represents the LGA on the Community Covenant Reference Group.
8. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his speech at the Conservative party conference on 8 October, a further £35 million of funding for the Armed Forces Covenant. This money comes from fines levied on banks for attempting to manipulate

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the LIBOR interest rate. It will be available in 2012-13. The fund will be allocated by the Community Covenant Reference Group.

Key issues for the Armed Forces community

9. Housing is the primary concern for some Service leavers and their families who, when they leave service, lose their military accommodation and find that they are in need of affordable housing. The very mobile nature of their work can put them at a serious disadvantage when it comes to accessing social housing, as their mobility conflicts with the weight that is often applied to local connection.
10. As a result of the Armed Forces Covenant, guidance from DCLG was issued to local authorities in England in June 2012. This advises of new statutory provisions that mean that, members of the Armed Forces and former Service personnel, bereaved spouses and civil partners and serving or former members of the Reserve Forces, cannot be barred from social housing waiting lists on the grounds that they do not have a local connection.
11. A number of local authorities are already using the discretion available to them to address the disadvantage faced by the Armed Forces community when framing their allocation schemes
12. Those with an Armed Forces background often have considerable transferable skills which they can bring to a civilian job. Such skills include technical qualifications, communication skills, people management and leadership.
13. A number of local authorities have signed up to the national 'Heroes Welcome' scheme. The scheme launched in 2008 in Scarborough as a way for the community to demonstrate support for the Armed Forces. Businesses who display the badges are indicating their support for the Armed Forces, and many offer a discount or enhanced service as part of it. The scheme has been adopted by around 60 towns, cities, counties and districts.
14. Due to the mobility inherent in Service life, families can be posted to new areas at very short notice. This has massive implications for the schooling of Service children, as they may be coming to a new area halfway through the school year and may have missed application deadlines.
15. Integration is a key part of transforming the relationship between local communities and serving and reservist Armed Forces personnel, veterans and their families, for the benefit of both communities. Members of the Armed Forces and their families, particularly those who live "behind the wire" in Armed Forces accommodation, may sometimes have limited interaction with civilian society. A number of local authorities are making great strides in bringing the two groups together.

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Conclusion and next steps

16. Last year Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell chaired a very successful event aimed at raising awareness of the Armed Forces Community Covenant, this year the LGA is also working closely with the Ministry of Defence on the second national event to be held at the MOD Building, Whitehall on 6 November.
17. Councillor Sir Merrick Cockell met with Chris Simpkins, Director General at the Royal British Legion (RBL) on 1 October 2012 to discuss ways that the LGA and the RBL could work collectively to raise awareness of the Community Covenant amongst member councils and opportunities for greater collaboration.
18. Officers have also been working with the Royal British Legion on a joint toolkit to the Community covenant and this was launched at the three main party conferences and then distributed to each local authority leader thereafter.

Financial Implications

19. None.