

Agenda Item	21
Report No	HC/51/22

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Date: 8 December 2022

Report Title: HIGHLAND ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY COVENANT UPDATE

Report By: Executive Chief Officer – Communities and Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines the work carried out by the Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership and sets out future priorities and actions.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- note the considerable progress made with partners across a range of activities which support the Armed Forces Community Covenant;
- agree to the appointment of Councillor Leslie-Anne Niven as Armed Forces and Veterans' Champion on an interim basis.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource:** there are no resource implications, as activities are carried out either within existing service activity or utilising confirmed external grant funding.
- 3.2 **Legal:** there are no implications
- 3.3 **Community** (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island): the ongoing work of the Partnership will deliver positive impacts on the Armed Forces community in Highland ensuring they have effective access to services and support from a wide range of partners.
- 3.4 **Climate change/Carbon Clever:** there are no implications.
- 3.5 **Risk implications:** there are no known implications arising from this report at this time.
- 3.6 **Gaelic:** no implications.

4. Introduction

- 4.1 In October 2012 The Highland Council signed the Highland Armed Forces Community Covenant along with twelve other partners – the Armed Forces Community; Highlands and Islands Enterprise; Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service (*Scottish Fire and Rescue Service*); Highland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association; Highland Third Sector Interface; Job Centre Plus; NHS Highland; Northern Constabulary (*Police Scotland*); Royal British Legion Scotland; Scottish Natural Heritage; SSAFA (Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Families Association) Forces Help; University of the Highlands and Islands.
- 4.2 The Covenant is a statement of support between the Armed Forces and the civilian community. The aim is to encourage support for the service community in a local area and raise awareness of issues affecting service personnel. A copy of the Highland Covenant is at

http://www.highland.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/4566/armed_forces_community_covenant_for_highland
- 4.3 Highland Council has demonstrated its support to the Armed Forces Covenant with the appointment of an Armed Forces and Veterans' Champion - Councillor Sarah Rawlings. The Highland Armed Forces & Veterans Community Covenant Partnership (HAFVCCP) will continue to benefit from the leadership this role brings and the HAFVCCP looks forward to welcoming Councillor Rawlings as Chair of the partnership.
- 4.4 Unfortunately, Cllr Rawlings is experiencing a period of ill-health and as a result has not been able to actively take up this role. It is consequently proposed that Councillor Leslie-Anne Niven should be appointed on an interim basis until Cllr Rawlings returns. Cllr Rawlings has indicated she would be very supportive of the position being taken forward on a temporary basis so that the work related to this important role can be progressed.

5. Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership Activity

- 5.1 The HAFVCCP ensures effective cross sector cooperation and partnership working. Representation on the Partnership is taken from a wide variety of agencies and includes:
- Highland Council - representatives from Communities and Place, Property and Housing and Education and Learning
 - NHS Highland
 - Police Scotland
 - Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
 - Highlands and Islands Enterprise
 - DWP/Job Centre Plus
 - University of the Highlands and Islands
 - NatureScot
 - Service Personnel and Veterans Agency
 - Services representatives from the Army (Regular and Reserve forces), RAF and Cadets
 - Service Charities: Veterans Scotland, RBLs, Combat Stress, SSAFA,

Poppyscotland, Royal Caledonian Educational Trust, Armed Services Advice Project etc.

- Other third sector organisations as appropriate.

5.3 The HAVFCCP is working to a set of agreed key outcomes to support the Armed Forces Community namely:

- The Economy
- Children and Young People
- Caring Communities
- Housing
- Empowering Communities

The actions to deliver against these outcomes are contained within its Action Plan (Appendix1). The Action Plan has been subject to review by the HAVCCP and will see further refinement and development as the partnership achieves outcomes and sets new priorities.

5.4 The bespoke Armed Forces Covenant website for Highland and Moray can be viewed at www.armedforcesmorayandhighland.co.uk. The website has been recently updated and provides a wealth of information to serving armed forces personnel, veterans and their families. It also provides useful information and resources to those working with the Armed Forces community.

6. Housing

6.1 The Council continues to work with partners to improve information and advice on housing options to forces personnel and veterans. Specific areas of activity are as follows:

- The Council and other landlords who are part of the Highland Housing Register continue to subscribe to the MoD Referral Scheme, which helps people leaving the forces find social rented housing.
- The Highland Council now has a dedicated webpage which informs visitors of Armed Forces specific housing options information.
- Partners are continuing to work with colleagues in the Armed Forces to ensure provision of targeted housing information and advice to service personnel to help them consider and plan for their future housing needs as early as possible.
- The Council already ensures that Armed Forces personnel are treated on an equal basis to other housing applicants under the Housing Allocation Policy. This means that Force's personnel or veterans receive the same priority for housing as other applicants with the same housing needs.
- Armed Forces personnel automatically receive 'need to reside' points in housing allocations and homelessness policies. Applicants also receive insecure tenure points where they are housed in Forces' accommodation.

- As part of the Highland Housing Register's review of its allocations policy, a consultation open to members of the public and key stakeholders was undertaken in early 2020. It was used to identify how the particular housing needs of this and other groups can be met in Highland.

As of 4th of November 2022, there were 25 current members of the armed forces and 27 armed forces veterans on the Highland Housing Register.

7. Health

- 7.1 NHS Highland (NHS) - The aim of the 42 month long Armed Forces and Veterans (AF&V) Project, which began in February 2020, is to develop the organisation as a more AF&V-aware healthcare provider and employer. It covers primary, secondary, tertiary and community healthcare.

There has been significant progress over the past 12 months:

- Contribution to the development of Scottish Government's GP Armed Forces and Veterans' Recognition Scheme.
- Contribution to the development of the Scottish Government's Mental Health Action Plan.
- Development and delivery of training and supporting resources to GPs in training across Northern and Southern Scotland via NHS Education for Scotland
- Development and delivery of training and supporting resources to Occupational Therapists across NHS.
- Development of training and supporting resources to Mental Health professionals such as Community Psychiatric Nurses, Psychologists etc (ongoing).
- Development of a pathway into mental health services (ongoing).
- Development of toolkits for key staff; for example, Community Link Workers (ongoing).
- Collaboration with Surrey County Council to include Highland and Argyll & Bute on Forces Connect app.
- Liaison with Army Welfare Services and Moray Council to include Moray on Forces Connect app (ongoing).
- Contribution to virtual and in-person employer engagement events via Careers Transition Partnership.
- Contribution to virtual employer engagement events via Officers Association Scotland.
- Contribution to spousal employment programme via Barclays and Naval Families Federation.
- Development of a draft Armed Forces and Veterans' webpage on new NHS website (ongoing).

8. Education

- 8.1 The Council's Development Officer for Promoting Positive Relationships who previously was the Link Officer for Forces Families (Education), has recently retired. As an interim measure, the Principal Educational Psychologist will link with various groups including the National Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) Ministry of Defence (MOD) group. Funding has been secured from MOD

Education Support Fund (ESF) to continue the Operational Post as Co-ordinator for Forces Families (Education) until July 2023.

This funded post has been instrumental in carrying out operational work with the Armed Forces families.

- 8.2 COVID has, as with most services, impacted on the services delivery. Some work has not moved on as much as anticipated however service provision has been creatively delivered using remote technologies.
- 8.3 The Military Liaison Group (MLG) is central to this work and has proved itself during COVID. The MLG strives to ensure equity and equality within an educational context for Children and Young People of Forces Families. It is the education arm of Highland Council's Armed Forces Covenant. The core members are the Operational Co-ordinator (Chair and Lead), 3SCOTS, 7SCOTS, Poppy Scotland representing Veteran/Ex-Serving, Army Welfare Service, Army Family Federations (Tri-Services), Skills Development Scotland, Forces Children Scotland, Early Years, Primary and Secondary school representation and the key partners - the Children and Young People. The MLG partnership has grown significantly and has been cited as a model of good practice and shared with other authorities. The MLG is key to embedding the work into Highland Council core business 'Getting It Right for Forces Families'; building relationships and working in partnership with the Armed Forces community, raising awareness and understanding across HC services of being from an Armed Forces family and delivering training as required, encouraging identification of the Armed Forces community, creating resources to meet needs of both families and HC services, connect and promote working relationships between the Armed Forces community with HC services, provide regular information/updates through HC platforms and MLG Newsletters.
- 8.4 Work on data collection continues to ensure that it is robust and as accurate as possible enabling it to be analysed in a meaningful way, helping to direct support where needed. The Council is working nationally with this through ADES MOD and other working groups across the authorities. Permission has recently been provided to the ADES National Transitions Officer share a short video and training resource created in Highland, across other authorities in Scotland, to illustrate how we record and analyse information on the education database SEEMIS.
- 8.5 Initial engagement with the Community Planning Partnerships stalled slightly during COVID but is very much on the current agenda to re-engage. This work in understanding and awareness raising, delivering training, creating and developing resources and guidance, keeping the website current, producing newsletters, working collaboratively with both local and national partners continued throughout Covid restrictions. The Council has responded to need as required especially at times of planned and unplanned deployments. The voice of the child continues to be central to this work and they are actively involved in the development and the carrying out of service delivery.
- 8.6 Information is regularly highlighted and shared through the Highland Council Armed Forces website, school hubs and social media platforms. Awareness is raised during the Promoting Positive Relations Training that is delivered across Highland.

The team continues to plan, monitor, and evaluate work through the improvement plan which is a detailed account of work carried out. It is core to the Military Liaison Group who are accountable for the plan delivery, development and success.

9. Other Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership Activity

- 9.1 Since the last report, two Partners' meetings have been held virtually and continue to be very well attended with an increasing representation from a range of supporting organisations. These meetings present an opportunity for all partners to share information and updates and to identify opportunities for joint working. Regular updates from the Armed Forces help agencies and partners to identify issues which may develop over the next 1-3 years and beyond, allowing preparation time for relevant actions to be put in place.
- 9.2 HIE have reaffirmed their commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, signing up to it in August 2021. HIE were subsequently eligible to apply for the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme bronze award which they received over the summer of 2022.

10. Armed Forces Covenant and Community Planning

- 10.1 It is recognised that the military family are very important to the Highland community. As Community Planning Partnerships (CPP) continue to develop their Locality Plans, engagement and support through the HAFVCCP will be encouraged to ensure the Armed Forces community is represented and considered in the plans.
- 10.2 In order to strengthen and develop the relationship between Community Planning Partnerships and the Armed Forces community a successful funding bid for £25,000 was made to the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund in 2021 for a project which has seen the development of a suite of information and training materials to ensure that all CPP partners are aware of the specific challenges which face armed forces families. This work has been carried out in partnership with Moray Council and has been fully funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund.

The on-line training materials can be viewed on the Moray and Highland Armed Forces website at:

<https://ew-moraycouncil.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/MorayHighlandCouncilArmedForcesCovenant/index.html#/page/62431233f5c4c2203dbf74c6>

and are also available on the Highland Council's Learning Management System which both staff and Members can access.

11. Future Priorities

- 11.1 The Highland Council area continues to be viewed by the military in Scotland as one of the leading Local Authorities in the implementation of the Armed Forces Community Covenant and its close linkages and collaboration with Moray Council is particularly noted.

- 11.2 The Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership will continue to monitor the changing situations with regard to its Armed Forces community. Actions to mitigate any negative change will be identified and any necessary support instigated through the Partnership and working groups, underpinned by a relevant and up-to-date action plan that is reviewed and monitored regularly.
- 11.3 It is considered that there is an opportunity for closer engagement with the private sector who could be invited to send a representative to Partnership meetings. This would help to develop further areas of work around eg employability, work placements etc. This is a key activity within the Action Plan.
- 11.4 The HAFVCCP will consider future priorities at its meeting in March 2023 and will continue to deliver identified improvements in support for the local Armed Forces community.

12. Armed Forces Covenant and The Highland Council

- 12.1 The Highland Council signed the Armed Forces Covenant as a major employer in November 2018.
- 12.2 The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (DERS) encourages employers to support defence and inspire others to do the same. The scheme encompasses bronze, silver and gold awards for employer organisations that pledge, demonstrate or advocate support to defence and the Armed Forces community, and align their values with the Armed Forces Covenant. Having been awarded 'Gold' status in 2021, the Council remains committed to ensuring that it continues to value staff members who are part of the Armed Forces community and will encourage other employers to do this as well.

13. Armed Forces Covenant Legislation

- 13.1 The Armed Forces Covenant was created in 2011 and is essentially a promise by the nation to ensure that those who serve or who have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, are treated fairly, and will not be disadvantaged in accessing public services due to their military service.
- 13.2 The Covenant legislation is specifically to prevent disadvantage by increasing awareness of the unique obligations facing the Armed Forces Community across the UK, and the unique nature of the service. In addition, it is intended to increase understanding of how these can affect the way in which the Armed Forces Community accesses public services, and how their circumstances and requirements may differ from those of their local civilian counterparts where this doesn't already exist.
- 13.3 The new duty for the Armed Forces Covenant requires local authorities and other public bodies to consider the Armed Forces Community when developing policy, procedures and making decisions in the specified policy areas i.e. housing, education and healthcare, as well as taking the following three principles into consideration for specified public services to have due regard to:
- the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the Armed Forces;

- the principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for service people from membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces; and
- the principle that special provisions for Service People may be justified by the effect on such people of membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces.

13.4 The legislation is also future proofed, with powers delegated to the Secretary of State for Defence so that further policy areas, and associated public bodies and functions, can be added to the legislation in the future, provided consultation has taken place with relevant stakeholders.

13.5 The new Armed Forces Covenant Duty came into force on 22 November 2022. From this date, the public bodies affected are legally obliged to have due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when exercising specific functions. More information about this Duty is provided in the [Statutory Guidance](#)

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Communities and Place

Date: 11 November 2022

Author: Dot Ferguson, Senior Ward Manager, Ross, Skye and Lochaber