

**Report To:** County Council

**Date of Meeting:** 11 September 2012

**Lead Member:** Hugh Irving, Lead Member for Customers & Communities

**Report Author:** David Davies, Community Engagement Manager

**Title:** **Armed Services Covenant**

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### **1. What is the report about?**

All Welsh local authorities have been asked (by the WLGA and others) to sign a community covenant with the Armed Forces which seeks to establish a commitment of care to serving Service personnel, their families and veterans. The aims of the Covenant are to encourage local communities to support the Service community in their area and increase awareness and understanding amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces Community.

### **2. What is the reason for making this report?**

A decision is required Council for our formal adoption of:

- a) an Armed Forces Community Covenant
- b) and for Services to actively endorse the Covenant and its obligations.

### **3. What are the Recommendations?**

That Council endorse the Covenant and agree for arrangements to be made to formally launch the Covenant at a future Council meeting with representatives of the Armed Forces and interested representatives of the community present.

### **4. Report details.**

4.1 A Community Covenant is a voluntary statement of mutual support between a civilian community and its local armed forces community. It is intended to complement the national Armed Forces covenant which outlines the moral obligation between the nation, the government and the armed forces, at a local level.

The principle aims of a Community Covenant are to:

- ❖ encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces Community in their area
- ❖ nurture public understanding and awareness amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces Community

- ❖ recognise and remember the sacrifices faced by the Armed Forces Community
- ❖ encourage activities which help to integrate the Armed Forces Community into social life
- ❖ to encourage the Armed Forces Community to help and support the wider community, whether through participation in events and joint projects or other forms of engagement.

4.2 In November 2011 the Welsh Government published their 'Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales' with **a key principle of ensuring that they suffer no disadvantage in accessing public services in Wales.** Both the Welsh and Central Government have expectations of the public sector in addressing issues affecting the Armed Forces community including:

- **social services** (mental health, combating stress, bereavement etc),
- **education** (school catchment areas),
- **housing** (Homebuy priority status, homelessness, housing advice etc),
- **benefits and tax** (council tax discount on Forces personnel who have second homes but live in MOD accommodation etc)
- **support after service** ( e.g. Blue Badge scheme entitlement)
- **register of electors** (encouraging voting by proxy / post)

4.3 In Wales, there are estimated to be at least a quarter of a million members of the Armed Forces Community, which includes serving personnel, reservists and cadets as well as their families and ex-service personnel. To maintain a high profile, 'Champions' for veterans and Armed Forces personnel have been established in every Health Board and Trust in Wales. We are currently reviewing the role of 'Champions' within the Council so will defer any decision to appoint an 'Armed Services Champion' until the review has been concluded.

4.4 At its Council meeting on the 24th February 2012, the WLGA presented a report about a proposal for a Memorandum of Understanding between Welsh Local Government and the Armed Forces Community in Wales. The purpose of the report was to inform Members about the UK Government's Armed Forces Covenant and the Welsh Government's Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales and sought the opportunity to develop covenants. This was duly supported by Denbighshire.

The Welsh Government have also requested that each Local Service Board considers the recommendations outlined in the WLGA 'Memorandum of Understanding' and the Welsh Government 'Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales' as part of its strategic needs assessment.

4.5 If approved the Community Covenant will be a partnership agreement signed by the Chairman of the Council and a senior representative from the Services and representatives from the community i.e. Royal British Legion. A template for a Community Covenant is attached as Appendix I.

## **5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?**

The formal signing of the covenant demonstrates our commitment to 'getting closer to our community' and along with the Royal Welsh Regiment receiving the Freedom of the County, underpins our relationship with the Armed Forces community and veterans residing in Denbighshire.

## **6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?**

The ethos underpinning the Covenant is that members of the Armed Forces community and veterans do not face disadvantage in accessing school places, housing and health care and other services provided by the authority.

It is anticipated that any costs, subject to their agreement will be borne by the individual Service.

The Ministry of Defence has made available a Community Covenant Grant Scheme to deliver financial support to projects at a local level which strengthen the ties or the mutual understanding between members of the Armed Forces Community and the wider community in which they live. £30m is available from the MOD until 2015, however it is envisaged that bids will be for smaller amounts of funding to support local projects that deliver tangible benefits.

## **7. What consultations have been carried out?**

We have been in contact with neighbouring authorities and the Health Board who have either adopted the Covenant or are in the process of considering its adoption. The Council has had formal approaches from the Welsh Government and the UK Government's Welsh Affairs Select Committee seeking our endorsement. We have also responded to approaches by service organisations such as 'UK Veterans Affairs' that are monitoring local authorities approach to the adoption of a covenant.

SLT are of the view that:

- a political decision is required in endorsing the Covenant
- and that the council should adopt the principle that the armed services should not be disadvantaged when accessing our public services.

Cabinet have endorsed the principles of the Covenant with a recommendation that it be formally ratified by Council.

## **8. Chief Finance Officer Statement**

The costs associated with delivering the Covenant should be contained within existing budgets

**9. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?**

Failure to formally adopt the Covenant will reflect negatively on our commitment to 'getting closer to the community'.

**10. Power to make the Decision**

This is a decision that Cabinet have agreed should be made by full council