

Report To: Communities Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 6 December 2012

Lead Officer: Corporate Director - Customers

Report Author: Community Engagement Manager

Title: Armed Services Covenant

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.

This Report contains a draft Covenant defining what we can offer Armed Services personnel in order to ensure they do not suffer any disadvantage when accessing public services.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

Council in September of this year unanimously endorsed Denbighshire having a community covenant with the Armed Services and asked Scrutiny to satisfy itself on the measures Denbighshire wished to adopt.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That Scrutiny discuss, comment and agree the range of Services offered to the Armed Services prior to arrangements 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.

Furthermore the following principles have been enshrined in the Armed Forces Act 2011

- recognising the unique nature of Service
- ensuring that there is no disadvantage
- allowing special treatment where justified e.g. in the case of injured personnel.

4.2 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.

5. Suggested Measures to be adopted by Denbighshire

5.1 It is important to underpin the ethos that the Armed Forces are not disadvantaged when accessing Denbighshire Services; however the Council must also be careful that we are not actively discriminating in their favour to the detriment of other groups in society unless positive discrimination is already enshrined in legislation.

5.2 The suggested Measures are as follows:

- ❖ Denbighshire County Council will offer Council Tax discount to Forces personnel who have second homes in Denbighshire but live in MOD accommodation. (We currently have no properties in this position).
- ❖ Families of UK Service personnel and other Crown Servants are subject to frequent movement within the UK and from abroad, often at relatively short notice. Denbighshire will ensure that the needs of the children of these families are taken into account and School places will be allocated to children and their families in advance of the approaching school year if accompanied by an official Ministry of Defence (MOD) or Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) letter declaring a return date.

- ❖ Service personnel who are registered to vote in Denbighshire and have a postal vote with a BPFO address will be given priority at any given election and sent en masse to the Electoral Services Department at Rushmoor Borough Council in Hampshire coordinator for all local authorities in the UK.
- ❖ Serving Armed Forces personnel will be offered discounted entry to Council operated Leisure Centres and its facilities.
- ❖ Veterans, single persons and/or families are already a priority on discharge from the forces in line with the Homelessness Act 2002. Denbighshire's Homelessness Services will prioritise decisions on ALL veterans, including those injured/disabled/NFA (No fixed abode), or disadvantaged due to relationship breakdown or inability to sustain a tenancy, or on release from hospital, or with vulnerability e.g. mental health, and enhance the service by proactively trawling local estate agents to identify a suitable property.
- ❖ Denbighshire will offer proactive housing advice and assistance with prevention deposits/bond etc payable to facilitate uptake of accommodation. We will offer support to include financial inclusion - assistance with energy efficiency, budgeting, sourcing furniture, credit union, access to training and employment through the enhanced housing options protocol.
- ❖ Denbighshire's new Allocations policy gives highest medical points for injured/disabled veterans, therefore promoting access to suitable and affordable accommodation for veterans and their families.
- ❖ Service personnel and veterans will receive priority for 'Homebuy', dependent on their individual financial circumstances and lenders borrowing rules.
- ❖ Denbighshire County Council's Partnerships and Communities Team will be the designated liaison officers with the Armed Services and the community in meeting the aims of the Covenant.
- ❖ The Council will regularly review its services in relation to the Covenant and implement improved delivery of services to the Armed Services community.

6. 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.

7. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

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.

8. 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 the Royal British Legion who are monitoring local authorities' approach to the adoption of a Covenant.

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) are of the view that the council should adopt the principle that the armed services should not be disadvantaged when accessing our public services. It also advocated that we should not actively discriminate in favour of Armed Services personnel to the detriment of other groups unless it was underpinned by legislation.

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

Council formally endorsed the Covenant at its meeting in September 2012.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

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

10. 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'.

11. Power to make the Decision

Council has requested Communities Scrutiny to discuss and agree the 'basket' of Services offered to the Armed Services Community.

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