

7. ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY COVENANT PROGRESS REPORT 2018

REPORT OF: HEAD OF CORPORATE RESOURCES
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Wards Affected: All
Key Decision: No
Report to: Council – 31 January 2018

Purpose of Report

1. This report provides Members with an update on progress of the Council's work to support the Armed Forces Community Covenant which was endorsed at the Scrutiny Committee for Community, Housing and Planning on 14 November 2017.

Recommendations

- 2. Council accepts the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme Bronze Award.**

Background

3. The Armed Forces Community Covenant was signed in September 2014. The Covenant pledges the Council's support for the Armed Forces Community in the local area and encourages the Armed Forces Community and the Local Community to support each other.
4. As part of the Community Covenant, the Council:
 - Marks the annual Armed Forces Day.
 - Continues to fulfil its housing function with due regard to the needs of Ex-Service personnel, through its Housing Allocation Scheme, including exemption rules on local connection and additional priority to armed forces personnel rules from 1 April 2017.
 - Encourages local businesses to participate in the national "Heroes Welcome" Scheme. We currently have 12 local businesses signed up to the scheme, which provides discounts for ex-services personnel.
 - Promotes grant applications to the Government's Community Covenant Fund.
 - Participates in the West Sussex Community Civilian Partnership and reports on progress.
5. The Council's Armed Forces Member Champion and the Community Development Officer attend meetings of the West Sussex Civilian Military Partnership where joint working and initiatives for supporting the Armed Forces Community are shared between the County Council and other District and Borough Councils.

Further work to support the Armed Forces Community

6. Work has been recently undertaken to raise the profile of the Covenant. In the past year the Armed Forces Covenant pages of the Council's website have been updated and staff marked Remembrance Day by gathering around the flag on campus at 11.00 am. The Council also marked Armed Forces Day 2016 by supporting events held by East Grinstead Town Council. The 2017 Remembrance Day was marked with District Councilors attending local church services and wreath laying ceremonies. Nineteen wreaths were laid across the District and it is hoped this number will increase year on year.
7. There are a number of areas where the support for the armed forces community could be developed. This should be seen in the context of establishing a proportionate approach for Mid Sussex, given that the district does not include a military base. These areas are:
 - Raising awareness of the Covenant with staff.
 - Improve data collection to allow the Council to monitor the take up of services by the Armed Forces Community.
 - Join the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme and gain the bronze level award.
 - Reporting to Members on progress with the Community Covenant.

Raising staff awareness of the Covenant

8. This could be achieved through the provision of additional publicity through the Wire at key dates in the year such as Armed Forces Day on 24 June and Remembrance Day on 11 November. As well as this, an on-line training module for staff could be developed and included as one of the Mandatory modules. Crawley Borough Council is planning to deliver an e-learning course to front line officers. In addition to this, they organise Armed Forces Champion Training in partnership with Sussex Armed Forces Network. Officers who complete the training go on to be Champions within their organisations and are responsible for raising awareness.

Data Collection

9. There is a gap in accessibility data for the Armed Forces Community with regards to the extent they can access our Services. The Council has signed up to the 'Count Them In' campaign to add new questions to the 2021 census to identify the Armed Forces Community. But at present, only the application form to join the Housing Register asks about membership of the Armed Forces Community to assess eligibility for the exemptions from local connection requirements. The Council will be incorporating questions on armed forces service in job application forms to assist with the changes to HR recruitment policies.

Defence Employer Recognition Scheme

10. The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme is another strand of support for the Armed Services Personnel, which is connected to the Covenant. The scheme recognises organisations that pledge, demonstrate or advocate support to Defence and the Armed Forces community and align their support with the Covenant. There are three levels of award, gold, silver and bronze. The Council's existing commitment to the Community Covenant qualifies us for the bronze award.
11. West Sussex County Council and Horsham District Council both hold the bronze

level award and Crawley Borough Council will shortly. Once achieved, the award does not require reassessment. To qualify for a silver award under the Defence Employment Recognition Scheme, the Council would be required to employ at least one member of the Armed Forces Community. WSCC are currently working towards the silver award and are surveying their workforce to find out if they employ an ex-member of the armed forces or reservists.

12. As part of the process of gaining the Bronze Award, the Council, in partnership with WSCC, held a meet and greet event for staff members who have an ex-armed forces background or have a spouse or family member in the armed forces. One staff member attended the event held in Haywards Heath and one emailed feedback.
13. The MoD has approved the Council's application for the Bronze Award and once adopted this becomes a lifetime award.

Guaranteed Interview Scheme/Reservist's HR Policies

14. WSCC, Horsham, Worthing and Chichester District Councils and Crawley Borough Council all have HR policies that support reservists who are mobilised for active duty, allowing them time off. Also some Councils have adopted a policy of guaranteeing an interview to a member of the Armed Forces Community who is suitably qualified for the job. WSCC, Horsham District Council and Crawley Borough Council all have a Guaranteed Interview Scheme for veterans who meet the essential criteria.
15. The Council has now adopted the Guaranteed Interview Scheme policy as part of its recruitment process. Further work is being done to introduce a policy that supports employees who are members of the Reserve Forces and the support that should be in place in the event of mobilisation.

Policy Context

16. The delivery of these objectives will make a major contribution to the priorities set out in the Corporate Plan.

Other Options Considered

17. The options considered here have been judged to be proportionate for Mid Sussex which does not have a military base. The options are in line with the work undertaken by other councils in neighbouring districts and boroughs.

Financial Implications

18. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Risk Management Implications

19. The proposed development of the Council's work to support the Armed Forces Community Covenant helps the Council to continue to demonstrate its commitment to the Covenant which aims to ensure that members of the armed forces community are not disadvantaged and have equal access to services which is in line with the public sector equalities duty under the Equality Act. The proposed actions will help to strengthen the credibility of the Councils commitment to the armed forces community.

Equalities and Customer Services Implications

20. Customer service and ensuring equality of access are of continuing importance, especially with regard to meeting the needs of those who are vulnerable or may find it difficult to access our services. The report sets out steps to meet the needs and address the barriers of the armed forces community in Mid Sussex.

Other Material Implications

None.

Background Papers

Scrutiny report to Scrutiny Committee for Community Housing and Planning on 14th November 2017.