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| Agenda Item | 18 |
| Report No | HC/42/21 |

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: The Highland Council

Date: 9 December 2021

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;
- welcome the creation of a specific Council Armed Forces Reservist Policy;
- welcome the Council's achievement in being awarded the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award;
- welcome the introduction of external funding to help Community Planning Partnerships to strengthen their relationship with their Armed Forces communities;
- note the introduction of the Armed Forces Bill which will establish the Covenant requirements in statute.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource implications: there are no resource implications with this report. Activities are carried out either within existing service activity or utilising confirmed external grant

funding.

- 3.2 Legal implications: there are no implications.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island) impacts: the ongoing work of the Partnership will deliver positive impacts on the Armed Forces Community in Highland addressing socio-economic impacts and ensuring they have effective access to services and support from a wide range of partners.
- 3.4 Climate change/Carbon Clever implications: there are no implications.
- 3.5 Risk implications: there are no known implications arising from this report at this time.
- 3.6 Gaelic implications: 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 can be found 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. This role is currently held by Cllr Roddy Balfour. The Highland Armed Forces & Veterans Community Covenant Partnership (HAFVCCP) continues to benefit significantly from the leadership and enthusiasm shown by the Champion particularly in the role of Chair of the HAFVCCP.

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

- 5.1 The Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership (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.

5.2 Supported by funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund, the Inverness Common Good Fund and Moray Council, a Project Development Officer was employed from 2017 to the end of 2019 to progress “Strengthening Local Government Delivery of the Covenant” strand in both Highland and Moray. The outcomes set in the funding application were largely met and the end of project report provides details of the project and how the outcomes have been achieved. The full report is available at the following link - [Highland Council's Armed Forces Community and Covenant | Armed Forces Covenant Project Report](#)

5.3 The agreed key outcomes to support the Armed Forces Community are as follows:

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

The actions to deliver against these outcomes are contained within an Action Plan (Appendix1) and the HAFVCCP continues to monitor progress at its bi-annual meetings.

5.4 The bespoke Armed Forces Covenant website for Highland and Moray can be viewed at www.armedforcesmorayandhighland.co.uk

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:

- 6.2
- 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.
 - 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.

6.3 As of 30th September 2021, there were 22 current members of the armed forces and 26 armed forces veterans on the Highland Housing Register.

7. Health

7.1 NHS Highland (NHS) received a LIBOR (London Inter-Bank Offered Rate) grant of £826,911 to develop as an Armed Forces and Veterans-aware healthcare provider and employer. The project has four principal partners; NHS Highland, Poppyscotland, Combat Stress and Crisis Counselling, and will run from February 2020 until July 2023.

Six workstreams have been designed to allow the project to deliver on these aims:

1. Develop NHS Highland as armed forces and veterans'-aware healthcare provider
2. Link armed forces and veterans' community healthcare
3. Develop NHS Highland as armed forces and veterans' aware employer
4. Deliver specialist training to Occupational Therapy and Community Psychiatric Nursing
5. Develop an armed forces and veterans' engagement model for psychological Services
6. Develop healthy transition pathway for those leaving service

Now in year two of the three year program of work, each of these workstreams are in delivery phase. The impact of COVID 19 on both NHS and partners has constrained progress on parts of this project however it as a program it remains on course to deliver the objectives set out. The Project Manager will be responsible for the development and delivery of NHS Highland's approach to increase public and staff knowledge of the NHS Armed Forces Covenant using a wide range of media

and ensuring future sustainability around information platforms.

- 7.2 In July 2021 Poppyscotland announced the closure of its welfare centre in Inverness. This was part of a UK-wide review conducted in parallel with Poppyscotland's parent company the Royal British Legion. Poppyscotland welfare staff continue to support the Armed Forces community in the Highlands and beyond although staff work from home as they have done since the onset of Covid 19 in March 2020.

8. Education

- 8.1 The Council's Development Officer Promoting Positive Relationships continues to be the Link Officer for Forces Families (Education) and sits on 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) monies to continue the Operational Post as Co-ordinator for Forces Families (Education) until July 2022.

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 service delivery. Some work has not progressed 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, Poppyscotland 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 share with other authorities. The MLG is key to embedding the work into Highland Council core business 'Getting It Right for Forces Families'.
- 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.
- 8.5 Initial engagement with the Community Planning Partnerships has 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 has 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, four 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.

9.2 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. Most of the actions contained in the current Action Plan that underpins the work of the HAFVCCP have been completed and were reviewed by partners in September 2021. A refreshed Action Plan will be presented to the March 2022 meeting with the opportunity for partners to set new priorities.

9.3 The close working relationship which has been developing over recent years has seen more efficient service delivery across a number of areas, including handling of welfare cases with the support of the appropriate organisations. This has been particularly challenging over the past two years, but all partners have focussed and flexed service delivery to ensure the most vulnerable and isolated are not forgotten.

9.4 The Department for Work and Pensions' now have an Armed Forces Champion in each Jobcentre Plus district to offer tailored support for former services personnel as well as their families. In Scotland, the network is made up of six district Champions, and two Leaders, who will support veterans to retrain and apply for work as well as make new benefit claims.

9.5 Armed Forces Champions will deliver employment support and benefits advice to serving and former servicemen and women, and their families, and will have the opportunity to raise awareness of particular issues faced by veterans and their families to Ministers.

9.6 The University of the Highlands and Islands is fully engaged with the HAFVCCP and the Head of Careers and Employability now sits on the partnership. Part of the UHI's support for the Armed Forces community will create a network of Armed Forces Champions across the 13 university campuses. The UHI hopes to collaborate on future projects with the recently established employability group, Highland Council's transition officer and RCET.

9.7 A programme of awareness training was delivered in May 2019 by Forces Connect,

an organisation that received funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to develop and deliver the programme to local authorities across the UK. The target audience for the 3 levels were:

- Councillors and senior council executives
- Service champions, creating focal points for the delivery of in-house training
- Customer support and front-of-house roles

9.8 This training is being refreshed by Forces Connect and Highland Council will again take part in the development and delivery of this awareness training. Training on the Armed Forces Covenant will be part of the training programme for Councillors for the local government elections in May 2022.

10. Events

10.1 Physical commemorative events have largely been suspended over the past two years. In November 2020 a virtual two-minute silence was held for Highland Council staff. This was warmly welcomed and well-attended with the Armed Forces and Veterans' Champion reading Binyon's Lines with all present having the opportunity to say someone's name who they wished to remember. This was successfully repeated in 2021. Poppyscotland also hosted a virtual launch of the Poppy Appeal which was very successful. November 2021 saw the welcome return of Remembrance Day parades and wreath laying at War Memorials.

10.2 2022 marks the 80th anniversary of the formation of the Royal Marine Commandos and events will be held to mark this at the Commando Memorial. A refurbishment of the whole site will begin in early Spring.

11. Armed Forces Covenant and Community Planning

11.1 It is recognised that the military family are very important to the Highland community. As Community Planning Partnerships (CPP) continue to develop their local plans and priorities, engagement and support through the HAFVCCP will be encouraged to ensure the Armed Forces community are represented and considered in the plans.

11.2 In order to strengthen and develop the relationship between Community Partnerships and the Armed Forces community a successful funding bid for £25,000 was made to the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund for a project which will see a suite of information and training materials being developed to ensure that all CPP partners are aware of the specific challenges which face armed forces families. These materials will be developed recognising good practice in training materials and will require close liaison not just with CPPs, but also with military colleagues to ensure the subject matter is relevant. This work is being carried out again in partnership with Moray Council and is being fully funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund.

12. Future Priorities

12.1 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.

- 12.2 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.
- 12.3 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.
- 12.4 The HAFVCCP will consider future priorities at its meeting in March 2022 and will continue to deliver identified improvements in support for the local Armed Forces community.

13. Defence Employer Recognition Scheme and The Highland Council

- 13.1 The Highland Council signed the Armed Forces Covenant as a major employer in November 2018.
- 13.2 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. In 2015 the Highland Council was awarded a Silver Award and was encouraged by the Highland Reserves Forces' and Cadets' Association to apply for the Gold Award in 2019. A bid was successfully submitted in 2021 and the Council was awarded Gold status earlier this year. Last month Cllr Roddy Balfour collected the award on behalf of the Council at a ceremony in Edinburgh Castle.
- 13.3 The award recognised the significant work carried out by the Council in developing an Armed Forces Reservist Policy which guarantees special leave for training and mobilisation and ensures Reserves are not at any disadvantage. The Council recognises the valuable contribution that Reservists make to the UK Armed Forces, their communities and the civilian workplace.
- 13.4 The establishment of an Armed Forces Staff Network was also a key factor – this network has been formed to support the council to communicate and work directly with veterans, reservists and families. Members of the network understand through shared experience the difficulties colleagues may be going through, and some have trained as mentors to work closely with colleagues who require support.

14. Armed Forces Covenant Legislation

- 14.1 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.
- 14.2 The Armed Forces 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.
- 14.3 The proposed new duty for the Armed Forces Covenant will require local authorities and other public bodies to consider the Armed Forces Community when developing policy, procedures and making decisions in the specified policy areas ie housing, education and healthcare, as well as take 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.
- 14.4 The proposed legislation is also to be 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.
- 14.5 The Bill is currently at Report stage in the House of Lords.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Communities and Place

Date: 12 November 2021

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