

Agenda Item	<b>16</b>
Report No	<b>HC/24/24</b>

## THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Meeting:** The Highland Council

**Date:** 27 June 2024

**Report Title:** Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Annual Report

**Report By:** Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an annual update on the activities of the Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership.

### 2. Recommendations

2.1 The Council is asked to note the report.

### 3. Implications

#### 3.1 Resource

There are no specific resource implications arising from this report.

#### 3.2 Legal

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

#### 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)

There are no specific Community implications arising from this report.

#### 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever

There are no specific climate change/carbon clever implications arising from this report.

#### 3.5 Risk

There are no specific risk implications arising from this report.

#### 3.6 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)

There are no specific Health and Safety implications arising from this report.

#### 3.7 Gaelic

There are no specific implications for the Gaelic Language Plan.

## **4. Introduction**

- 4.1 In October 2012, the Highland Council signed the Highland Armed Forces Community Covenant along with twelve other partners. 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.
- 4.2 The Council has demonstrated its support to the Armed Forces Covenant with the appointment of an Armed Forces and Veterans Champion with the post currently being held by Cllr Leslie-Anne Niven who was appointed to this post on 29 June 2023.
- 4.3 Armed Forces Day takes place on the last Saturday each June, falling this year on 29 June. This provides an opportunity to show support for the Armed Forces community from currently serving personnel to Service families, veterans and cadets. It marks the culmination of a week of celebrations, beginning on Monday 24 June. It also includes Reserves Day (26 June). The Council supports Armed Forces Day with a flag raising ceremony at the Town House which will take place on Monday 24 June.
- 4.4 The Armed Forces and Veterans Champion chairs the Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership (HAFVCCP) whose objective is to ensure effective cross sector cooperation and partnership working. Representation on the Partnership comprises a number of organisations and includes:
- Highland Council (representatives from Housing, Education and employability)
  - NHS Highland
  - Police Scotland
  - Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
  - Highlands and Islands Enterprise
  - High Life Highland
  - DWP/Job Centre Plus
  - University of the Highlands and Islands
  - Services representatives from the Army (Regular and Reserve forces)
  - Highland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association
  - Veterans Advisory Pensions Committee
  - Citizens Advice
  - Royal British Legion Scotland
  - Combat Stress
  - SSAFA
- 4.5 The HAFVCCP is working to a set of agreed key outcomes to support the Armed Forces Community and these are grouped under the following themes: -
- Partnership Development – Promotion of Covenant
  - Business Engagement – Raise awareness of the Armed Forces community and the Covenant amongst local businesses.
  - Employability – highlight employment and educational opportunities,
  - Education and Families – improved educational support
  - Health – improved data about location of veteran population.
  - Housing - provide improved experience in relation to housing options.

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

- 5.1 The HAFVCCP resumed in-person meetings in 2023 and has re-established connection with partners and external organisations. At the last meeting the Scottish Veterans Commissioner attended and provided a presentation on her role which was focused on three workstreams around, improving outcomes for veterans in Scotland, being an ambassador for veterans in Scotland, and helping public services focus on veterans' experience. There was also a presentation from the Royal British Legion Scotland on the work of the Highland based Veterans Community Support Service which has three main areas of activity around befriending, comradeship and practical help.
- 5.2 Education, Health and Housing colleagues continue to engage connection and engagement with community partnerships to raise awareness and understanding of the Armed Forces Covenant and the needs and challenges of the Armed Forces community as well as the support that is available. This is ongoing and continues to be progressed.
- 5.3 Representatives from the HAFVCCP are supporting a new initiative co-ordinated by SSAFA which was launched in May 2024 to provide a multi-agency veterans drop-in clinic in Inverness Library. The aim of this service is to bring relevant agencies together to provide veterans with a one-stop-shop for advice and assistance in relation to benefits, housing, income maximisation and other support services. This project is being supported by several organisations including DWP, Armed Services Advice Project High Life Highland and the Council's housing and welfare teams.

## **6. Future Priorities for the HAFVCCP**

- 6.1 During 2024, it is intended that the HAFVCCP will review its action plan to establish priorities for 2025-2027. In addition, it is intended to invite representatives from national bodies to future meetings of the Partnership to highlight their work and to encourage better engagement with local organisations in Highland. Representative organisations from the HAFVCCP will also explore other opportunities to highlight the work of the Armed Forces Covenant with a particular focus on promoting the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme among the business community.

## **7. Armed Forces Covenant and the Highland Council**

- 7.1 The Highland Council signed the Armed Forces Covenant as a major employer in November 2018.
- 7.2 The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme 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. The Council was awarded 'Gold' status in 2021 and 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.
- 7.3 High Life Highland achieved "Gold" status in 2020 and offers Armed Forces families (including Reservists and Cadet Force Instructors) access to their facilities and activities through a special highlife card whereby they receive a 50% discount on annual and monthly subscription to the highlife scheme. Both the Council and High Life Highland have registered with Career Transition Partnership to promote vacancies.

## **8. The Armed Forces Act 2021 – Legal Duty**

- 8.1 The Armed Forces Act 2021 amended the Armed Forces Act 2006 to place a legal duty on specified public persons and bodies, to have due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when exercising certain statutory functions in the fields of healthcare, education and housing.

When a specified body exercises a relevant function, it must have due regard to:

- a) the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the Armed Forces;
- b) the principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for Service people from membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces, and
- c) the principle that special provision for Service people may be justified by the effects on such people of membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces.

- 8.2 The Act does not state what a body must do in order to have due regard. How a body meets the Covenant Duty, and how the Duty is reflected in relevant policies or procedures, are therefore matters for the body in question. It is about informed decision making and means that specified bodies should think about and place an appropriate amount of weight on the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when they consider all the factors relevant to how they carry out relevant functions.

## **9. Implementing the Duty in Highland**

- 9.1 The following sections provide an overview of how the duty is being implemented in Highland.

### **10. Health**

- 10.1 Planning and Policy - Formal guidance on the Armed Forces Covenant for those amending or writing any policies, guidance or standard operating procedures has been disseminated to ensure that NHS Highland consistently pays due regard to the AF&V community when planning, funding and delivering services.
- 10.2 Identification of the AF&V community - The Armed Forces Champion's project team are working closely with GP surgeries and clusters to identify and code the AF&V community using a simplified set of codes. This will allow the primary care teams to consider the specific needs of this population in both the delivery of their care and in the referrals made to NHS Highland secondary services. Support is provided to help clinicians better understand the barriers, challenges and experiences that their patients may have faced, and enable surgery staff to signpost and support patients towards AF&V-specific support services out with NHS Highland services.
- 10.3 Training and Resources - Training and resources have been developed to support NHS Highland staff to better understand and support the AF&V community. Priority has been given to those staff most likely to be in frequent contact with the AF&V community; for example, GPs in training, primary care staff and mental health services, but the training programme will be rolled out across all staff. ELearning resources are also being developed to ensure training can be maintained and is sustainable.

10.4 Collaboration with key stakeholders - The Armed Forces Champion's project team have developed a network of partners with whom they have collaborated on the development of training, resources and services such as the Highland Council Combat Stress, Forces Children Scotland, Veterans Welfare Services, DWP and Armed Services Advice Project (CAB service).

## 11. Education

11.1 Much of the work relating to Education and Learning in Highland is co-ordinated through the Military Liaison Group (Education) (MLG) which is a tri-service partnership supported by representation from a number of local, statutory and charitable organisations. It is the operational education arm of Highlands Armed Forces & Veterans Community Covenant Partnership. The MLG work is informed by Children and Young People from Armed Forces families and are committed to ensure that they thrive and are empowered to be their best within their educational environment whether from a Regular, Reservist or Veteran family. This work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC).

11.2 Foundational to the work of MLG is to increase identification of armed forces children as this will underpin successful responses to these issues" within Education: Admissions, Educational attainment and curriculum, Child wellbeing, Transport, Attendance, Additional Support Needs. A significant amount of work has gone into ensuring Children are identified as living within Armed Forces families at the point of Enrolment to School. Currently there are 939 Children identified and while this is a lower reported number than expected but is increasing on an annual basis (824 in 2017 and 913 in 2021) demonstrating better identification in Schools. A more accurate figure was provided in the 2023 Lifestyle Survey where 6% of pupils self-identified as living in Armed Forces families, and 26% identifying close family members as Veterans.

11.3 MLG's work around increasing identification continues to enable:

- Getting the right targeted support to the child at the right time if needed and provide information, support and resources to Schools and early learning settings;
- Listening to, understand and acting on the voices of children and young people and their lived experiences. Working together to co-produce resources and learning materials to create a positive difference and change;
- Working co-operatively with identified Children and Young People learning direct from their lived experiences, and how we can work together to make a difference together for them;
- Helping families navigate and understand the Scottish Education system, year groups and enrolment process to enable a smooth transition into Highland;
- Promoting early engagement to ensure Children and Young People with Additional Support Needs transition into Highland and continue with the same level of support and resources needed to meet their needs;
- Getting the right information to support families or education setting enquiries or signposting direct to the person who can help;
- Sharing and developing resources to support needs as identified by families and education & Learning teams;
- Providing training to meet the needs of Educationalist and Practitioners; and
- Supporting and promoting awareness and understanding of being a Child or Young Person from an Armed Forces families and challenges that may be faced. For example: interrupted education due to mobility, emotional distress in

relation to deployment and separation, wellbeing in relation to disrupted social experiences, attendance due to being a Young Carer of a Veteran parent etc.

- 11.4 The MLG continues to build on the progress it is making through its collaborative partnership that meets with representatives from Regular, Reservist and Veterans communities, Armed Forces Specialist Providers, experts within this field, cross sector education representatives, specialist teams and most importantly the Children and Young People themselves.
- 11.5 MLG provides regular updates via its quarterly MLG Newsletter, regular blogs, dedicated Armed Forces Families Highland website, sharing across Armed Forces networks to gain a wide reach to families and Educationalists and Practitioners within Highland and beyond.
- 11.6 Information from the MOD regarding deployments etc are shared with Head Teachers, and relevant colleagues to ensure those working with Children and Young People are aware of current circumstances that may be unsettling and cause impact in relation to wellbeing and potentially attendance and engagement.

## **12. Housing**

- 12.1 The Highland Housing Register (HHR) collects data on those who are serving and former members of the Armed Forces. The HHR also provides additional priority to those who are leaving or just left the Armed Forces and they are awarded Need to Reside points for anywhere in the Highlands. In all other circumstances, these points are reserved for those who have a connection to the local area e.g. work or already live there.
- 12.2 Training has been given to staff on Housing Options available to members of the Armed Forces and Housing issues common to members of the Armed Forces. The Homelessness service has also established a relationship with the resident battalion at Fort George and provided them with the contact details of the Inverness homeless team who would be contacted if a member of the armed forces has housing options concerns or is at risk of homelessness.
- 12.3 The Council has amended its housing application to ensure they can better identify veterans and those who have been given notice to leave armed forces accommodation.
- 12.4 The Council offers a [Scheme of Assistance](#), [Handyperson](#) and a [Care and Repair service](#) which can assist owners and private sector tenants with issues of property maintenance and disrepair, and with disabled adaptations to aid independent living. They offer assistance with adapting and repairing homes to make it more suitable for someone who has been adversely affected by age, impairment, ill health, or traumatic injury.

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