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| Agenda Item | 10 |
| Report No | HC/29/25 |

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Meeting: The Highland Council

Date: 18 September 2025

Report Title: Armed Forces 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 update on activities undertaken by the Council to support the Armed Forces Covenant and the Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership.
- 1.2 The report sets out activities that have been undertaken in relation to policy development, communications, advocacy, reservists and cadets. It also highlights the actions that have been undertaken by the Council and NHS Highland to fulfil their legal duty under the Armed Forces Act 2021. The report also highlights that work is being undertaken to secure the revalidation of the Council's Gold Award under the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.
- 1.3 The report also proposes to establish a Cadet Grant Scheme to support cadet units across the Highland Council area.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Council is asked to: -
 - I. **note** the update on activities to support the Armed Forces Covenant; and
 - II. **approve** the establishment of a Highland Cadet Grant Scheme

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource**
Resource implications are set out in paragraph 8.1.
- 3.2 **Legal**
There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.
- 3.3 **Risk**
There are no specific risk implications arising from this report.

3.4 **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.

3.5 **Gaelic**
There are no specific implications for the Gaelic Language Plan.

4. **Impacts**

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children’s Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 An Integrated Impact Assessment screening was undertaken on 3 June 2025. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager Review and Approval. A copy of this screening is attached at **Appendix 1**.

4.4 The Screening process has concluded that there are only potential positive impacts from the establishment of a Highland Cadet Grant Scheme around children and mainland Rural and Islands.

4.5

| Impact Assessment Area | Conclusion of Screening |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Equality | no impact |
| Socio-economic | no impact |
| Human Rights | no impact |
| Children’s Rights and Well-being | positive impact |
| Island and Mainland Rural | no impact |
| Climate Change | no impact |
| Data Rights | no impact |

5. **Background**

5.1 The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise that seeks to acknowledge and understand that those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, including the bereaved, should be treated with fairness and respect.

Its two principles are that, recognising the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the Armed Forces:

- Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.
- Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

- 5.2 The Council signed the Armed Forces Covenant in 2018 and was awarded 'Gold' status in 2021 under the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme which seeks to encourage employers to support defence and inspire others to do the same.
- 5.3 The Council demonstrates its support for 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.
- 5.4 Over the past year the Council has engaged in a range of ways to support the armed forces community, and the following sections of the report highlight this positive work.

6. Policy Development and Communications

- 6.1 The Council contributed to the COSLA response to the UK Parliament's Defence Committee's enquiry into the Armed Forces Covenant which was published on 8 April 2025 and the key conclusion of the report was that the Covenant was "still not consistently implemented and as a result our society is falling short of that commitment far too often". The UK Government is currently considering the Defence Committee's report.
- 6.2 The Council also contributed to the review being undertaken by Shared Intelligence consultancy of the local authority armed forces toolkit. This is a resource to help local authorities improve the delivery of local covenant pledges.
- 6.3 As a 'Gold' employer under the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme, the Council is consequently a member of the Scottish Gold Network meetings which are arranged by the Highland Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association with the aim of promoting best practice in supporting the armed forces community.
- 6.4 The Council's corporate website has been updated to provide enhanced information about the Armed Forces Covenant as well as providing information on support available to veterans, reservists. The Council has also recently established an Armed Forces Covenant page on the internal Viva Engage platform.

7. Advocacy

- 7.1 Advocacy is essentially about promoting the Armed Forces Covenant to employers and working with the Highland Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association, the Council hosted its first employer engagement event at Inverness Town House in December 2024.
- 7.2 In June 2023, the Council agreed to developing a Highland specific 'Sustainable Procurement and Community Benefit Policy' focusing on meeting the needs of the Council, our communities, and suppliers as part of the Council's Community Wealth Building approach and strategy. As part of that policy, suppliers will be encouraged to support key Highland Council initiatives, one of which includes the Armed Forces Covenant.
- 7.3 The Council has engaged with several businesses/organisations to promote the Armed Forces Covenant, which has resulted in some having now submitted applications to sign the Covenant. This is a key workstream to develop and take forward for the coming year.

8. Reservists and Cadets

- 8.1 It is proposed that the Council establish a Cadet Grant Scheme to support cadet units located solely in the Highland Council area. This would involve providing recurring funding of £10,000 which would comprise £8,000 from the Corporate Policy Budget and £2,000 from Highlife Highland.
- 8.2 Grant funding would be open to cadet units to apply and not individuals and would be available for equipment, adventure training, transport costs and facility enhancements.
- 8.3 The rationale behind the establishment of such a scheme is that: -
- The Council has made a political commitment to support the Armed Forces Covenant
 - The Council's 'Gold' Status under the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme is due to be revalidated in 2026, and one of the essential requirements is to demonstrate what support the Council provides to cadet units.
 - This approach allows the Council to deliver a tangible, sustainable and meaningful benefit to cadet units.
 - It would leverage in both public and private sector funding as it provides a mechanism for other organisations who have signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant and the to show their support for the cadets by contributing to this fund, and
 - It is also aligned with the Council's Community Benefit Policy which has supporting the Armed Forces Covenant as one of the elements a supplier can choose, to deliver community benefit.
- 8.4 Any applications for a grant would be considered by a Review Panel comprising the following: -
- Council's Armed Forces Champion
 - Council Representative from the Highland Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association
 - Representative from the Highland Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association
 - Representative from Highlife Highland
 - Representative from Highland Armed Forces and Veterans Community Covenant Partnership
- 8.5 The Council has worked closely with Highlands and Islands Enterprise to enable cadet detachments in Highland to access to the state-of-the-art Newton Rooms in Thurso, Dingwall, Fort William, and Inverness to undertake cadet STEM sessions. It is anticipated that the first sessions will take place at the start of the academic year.
- 8.6 The Council updated its Special Leave Policy to make provision for both volunteer reserve forces and cadet force adult volunteers to attend annual training camps equal to the period which the officer attends the training camp but not exceeding 15 days.
- 8.7 The Council has advertised reservist opportunities with 7th Battalion of The Royal Regiment of Scotland on its internal staff network and had a meeting with the Commanding Officer of 215 Multi Role Medical Regiment to explore awareness raising opportunities.

9. Revalidation of Gold Award

- 9.1 The Council signed up to the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme and was granted the Gold Award in 2021. This is now due for revalidation in 2026. There are a range of criteria that must be fulfilled if the Council is to retain the “Gold Award” such as appropriate HR policies, support for reservists and cadets and advocacy.
- 9.2 The Council has been engaging closely with the Highland Reserve Forces’ and Cadets’ Association who have a key role in the assessment process and a cross-service officer group has been established to ensure the Council is best placed to achieve a successful revalidation.

10. The Armed Forces Act 2021 - Legal Duty

- 10.1 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.
- 10.2 The Act does not state what a body must do 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.
- 10.3 The following sections provide an overview of how the duty is being implemented in Highland.
- 10.4 Health – NHS Highland Armed Forces and Veterans Project was a 5 year project to develop training and resources to support staff to better understand the barriers and challenges faced by the Armed Forces and Veterans community when accessing healthcare. It was funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust and completed in March 2025.
- 10.5 NHS Highland has developed robust relationships with the key leads in education and housing to ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant is delivered holistically. The project team have also collaborated with education and housing on key training events for staff across the council.

- 10.6 Some of the training resources that were developed throughout the life of the project has been digitised and uploaded to the NHS learning platform, TURAS Learn. The training has been made accessible to anyone with a TURAS Learn account. TURAS Learn accounts are free and easy to establish. Although these training resources are focussed predominantly on those, who work within healthcare, they do provide an overview that would raise awareness in all staff.
- 10.7 Education – The Military Liaison Group (Education) co-ordinates much of the work relating to education and learning. 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 it 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 2025 Lifestyle Survey where 6% of pupils self-identified as living in Armed Forces families, and 24% identifying close family members as Veterans.
- 10.8 Pupils from Raigmore Primary School in Inverness have co-created, with the Military Liaison Group (Education) MLG (Education), a helpful online book and poster to help explain what the [Armed Forces Covenant-Education](#) is all about, what it means, what they can expect and how it can help support in their education.
- 10.9 The Military Liaison Group (Education) working with the Council and NHS Highland have produced an audio resource that outlines the Armed Forces Covenant Duty: Education, Health and Housing and the support in place for our Armed Forces Families living within our Highland Community Partnerships.
- 10.10 Housing
- Housing supports the Covenant by helping veterans and service families by:-
- providing housing options advice
 - assist in signposting to appropriate services
 - offering housing support to anyone who is struggling to maintain a tenancy
 - signpost to scheme of assistance, Handyperson and Care and Repair service to assist with issues of property maintenance and disrepair, and with disabled adaptations to aid independent living.
- 10.11 The Highland Housing Register (HHR) collects data on those who are serving and former members of the Armed Forces.
- 10.12 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.

11. Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' community Covenant Partnership

- 11.1 In October 2012, the Council along with twelve other partners signed the Highland Armed Forces Community Covenant. The aim of the Community Covenant is to encourage support for the Armed Forces Community and raise awareness of issues affecting them.
- 11.2 The Council's Armed Forces and Veterans Champion chairs the Highland Armed Forces and Veterans' Community Covenant Partnership which meets twice a year whose objective is to ensure effective cross sector cooperation and partnership working.
- 11.3 During the past year, the Partnership updated reviewed its key measures, membership and governance arrangements to ensure they remained relevant and meaningful. The Partnership also had presentations from external organisations including Veterans Housing Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans.
- 11.4 It also reviewed an initiative co-ordinated by SSAFA to provide a multi-agency veterans drop-in clinic in Inverness Library which was launched in May 2024. It was decided that in view of the very small number of people attending this clinic that it would be discontinued. However, the Council, through its Income Maximisation Team are exploring the possibility of undertaking money advice sessions to the wider armed forces community.
- 11.5 The Partnership are currently reviewing their action plan for 2025-2030 and at the next meeting will have presentations from the Council's Income Maximisation Team and NHS Highland.

Designation: Policy Manager

Date: 28 August 2025

Author: Gordon Morrison

Integrated Impact Assessment Screening

About proposal

What does this proposal relate to? Introduction of a new service

Proposal name: Cadet Grant Scheme

High level summary of the proposal: It is proposed that the Council establish a Cadet Grant Scheme to support cadet units located solely in the Highland Council area. This would involve providing recurring funding of £10,000 which would comprise £8,000 from the Corporate Policy Budget and £2,000 from Highlife Highland.

Who may be affected by the proposal? Cadet units in Highland

Start date of proposal: 03/06/2025

End date of proposal: 01/08/2025

Does this proposal result in a change or impact to one or more Council service? No

Does this relate to an existing proposal? No

Author details

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Sign off date: 2025-06-03

Equalities, poverty, and human rights

Protected characteristics

Select what impact the proposal will have on the following protected characteristics:

Sex: No impact

Age: No impact

Disability: No impact

Religion or belief: No impact

Race: No impact

Sexual orientation: No impact

Gender reassignment: No impact

Pregnancy and maternity: No impact

Marriage and civil partnership: No impact

Protected characteristics impact details: This is about establishing a grant scheme for Cadet Units across Highland

Poverty and socio-economic

What impact is the proposal likely to have on the following?

Prospects and opportunities: Positive

Places: Positive

Financial: Positive

Poverty and socio-economic impact details: The grant scheme could help cadet units with travel costs to attend camps and/or the provision of equipment.

Human rights

Which of the below human rights will be affected by this proposal?No human rights will be affected

What impact do you consider this proposal to have on the human rights of people?No impact

Human rights impact details: No Human rights are affected by the establishment of a grant fund

Equalities, poverty and human rights screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to equalities, poverty and human rights? Positive impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Children's rights and wellbeing

What likely impact will the proposal have on children and young people? It will have a positive impact on young people who attend the Cadets and may encourage others to join

Which of the below children's rights will be affected by the proposal? No children's rights will be affected

Explain how the children's rights selected above will be affected: There are no negative impacts on Children's rights.

Children's rights and wellbeing screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to children's rights and wellbeing? Positive impact

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Data protection

Will your proposal involve processing personal data? No

Data protection screening assessment

What change will there be to the way personal data is processed? No personal data will be processed

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Island and mainland rural communities

Does your proposal impact island and mainland rural communities? No

Island and mainland rural communities screening assessment

What impact do you think there will be to island and mainland rural communities? Minor differences

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No

Climate change

Does the proposal involve activities that could impact on greenhouse gas emissions (CO₂e)? No

Does the proposal have the potential to affect the environment, wildlife or biodiversity? No

Does the proposal have the potential to influence resilience to extreme weather or changing

climate? No

Provide information regarding your selection above:

Climate change screening assessment

Have you identified potential impact for any of the areas above or marked any as not known? No

Is a Full Impact Assessment required? No