

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL23 October 2024Report by Director of Business Operations & PartnershipsARMED FORCES COVENANT AND SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. To advise the Council of the engagement and work being carried out in support of the Armed Forces Covenant to support serving personnel, regulars and reserve, veterans, their partners and dependent children in East Renfrewshire.
2. To update the Council on the work towards gaining Gold accreditation from the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS).

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. It is recommended that Council:
 - a. note the progress that has been made by the Council, Health and Social Care Partnership and East Renfrewshire Culture and Leisure Trust in supporting our armed forces community and implementing our Armed Forces Covenant duties;
 - b. note the work of the Veterans Support Officer (VSO) in supporting service personnel and all the activities in this area; and
 - c. recognise the work to pursue the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold recognition award.

BACKGROUND

4. The Armed Forces Act 2021 created a legal obligation on specified bodies in all four home nations of the UK to implement the Armed Forces Covenant. These are the bodies responsible for providing local services in the areas of healthcare, education, and housing, such as local authorities, governing bodies of schools, and NHS bodies.
5. The Armed Forces Covenant Duty contains the following legal obligation: 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, in the armed forces.
6. In 2012, East Renfrewshire Council signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant. The terms of the Covenant require the Council to acknowledge and understand that those who serve, or who have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect. The Covenant focuses on enabling members of the

Armed Forces community to have the same access to government, commercial services, and products as any other citizen and ensures that they suffer no disadvantage as a result of their service.

7. East Renfrewshire Council has also signed a Community Covenant with the Armed Forces and Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire to build on the good relations between the Armed Forces Community and its partner organisations. This is a voluntary statement of mutual support that recognises and remembers the sacrifices made by members of the community, including those currently serving as well as their families.
8. The main objectives are to:
 - a. ensure that service personnel are known to their health provider and can access specialist advice services through NHS Scotland;
 - b. improve overall health and wellbeing and offer guidance on specific health concerns including advice with mental and physical recovery;
 - c. coordinate access to council services such as housing, mental health and addictions services;
 - d. signpost the Veterans Welfare Service, Ministry of Defence 'Supporting Services Through Life' for help or advice on pay, pensions, compensation and Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) benefit assistance;
 - e. signpost to ex-service organisations, volunteering services and treatment and support to those suffering from mental ill-health as a result of their service career; and,
 - f. access employability services and our employability team through Work EastRen.
9. To support the delivery of this work, the Council employs a Veterans' Support Officer (VSO). This officer works across East Renfrewshire, Renfrewshire, and Inverclyde Council areas. The VSO has served 22 years in the armed forces which proves to be crucial by bringing a depth of knowledge of this community and experience to the councils to support their efforts to ensuring the Armed Forces Covenant commitments are met. This post is based within the Money Advice and Rights Team (MART) in ERC and has a close relationship with advice services across all three council areas.
10. One of the elements of the Covenant is that each local authority should appoint an elected member to be the local Armed Forces Champion, to be an advocate for local service personnel and their families. At a Council meeting on 7 September 2022 Councillor Campbell was nominated and then selected to the role as local Armed Forces Champion.
11. The Armed Forces Champion role has a range of responsibilities including advocacy; liaising and communicating with different bodies; raising awareness of the role; and building up relationships with partners and organisations across the local authority. In addition, the role allows for scrutiny to ensure the Council are delivering in their obligations as set out in the Covenant.
12. The Council has an Armed Forces steering group comprised of representatives from Housing, Education, Money Advice and Rights Team (MART), Employability Team (WorkEastRen), HSCP, HR, and East Renfrewshire Culture and Leisure Trust (ERCLT).
13. The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) encourages employers to support the armed forces and acknowledges employers that provide exceptional

support to the Armed Forces community and Defence by going above and beyond their Covenant pledges. The scheme encompasses Bronze, Silver, and Gold awards for employer organisations that pledge, demonstrate, and advocate support for defence and the armed forces community, and align their values with the Armed Forces Covenant.

14. East Renfrewshire Council was awarded a Silver award in 2017 and recredited in 2022. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde were awarded a Gold award in 2023.
15. The Chief Officer (CO) of East Renfrewshire's Health and Social Care Partnership is also the Greater Glasgow and Clyde Health Board Armed Forces and Veterans Champion. In her role as Champion, the CO is leading a proactive strategy to improve health outcomes and healthcare experiences for members of the Armed Forces Community in East Renfrewshire and across the whole of the health board area.
16. A key element of this is a partnership with Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS), which since April 2022 has been providing welfare support to veterans and other members of the Armed Forces Community on a medical pathway. DMWS Welfare Officers provide non-clinical emotional and practical support, finding solutions to improve wellbeing, support sustainable recovery, a timely and smooth transition from inpatient services to home, with continued support where needed in the community to live an independent and fulfilling life. Made possible with new funding from the Greater Glasgow and Clyde Healthcare Charity and with input from Glasgow's Helping Heroes, this service has recently been extended to provide wraparound peer support for veterans with mental health problems. Since mid-2022 the service has supported 326 patients across the health board and indirectly benefited 570 family members/carers and 258 NHS staff.

REPORT

17. With regards to our Covenant duties, the Veterans Support Officer (VSO) has delivered briefings to teams and departments across the Council to highlight our duties and raise awareness with further briefings planned this year.
18. The VSO has worked alongside ERCLT to provide the Health for Heroes programme, which allows free fitness membership and support to veterans whose mental health would be improved by physical activity. This project is unique to Local Authorities/ Leisure Trusts in Scotland. There are 50 free places available in East Renfrewshire, with 46 veterans currently being supported. This free gym membership was the first of its kind in the UK.
19. In addition to fitness membership, a Veterans' Breakfast Club, financially supported by the British Royal Legion, is held each quarter in Barrhead Foundry. Feedback has shown that this has had a positive effect on veterans' mental health and return to civilian life. Attendance has been improving through increased engagement with Health for Heroes members with 14 members attending the last session. The aim is to build upon this success and the team are working to attract funding for additional capacity to support this work.
20. The VSO continues to work with individual service personnel and their families, signposting to other services, advocating on their behalf, and offering bespoke assistance to return to civilian life.

21. The Education Department monitors the number of school children from armed forces households that attend East Renfrewshire schools. The schools are made aware of the children and can monitor and support their well-being and identify any issues that may be linked with being an armed forces family member. There are circa 100 armed forces children currently in the East Renfrewshire school population.
22. As a member of the Scottish Government's Veterans' Support Fund Board, the VSO has obtained over £500,000 in funding for charities and services across the three council areas. This funding is awarded to mainly major national and local charities which local residents can access, including Erskine, Scotland's Bravest Manufacturing Company, Fares 4 Free, and Bravehound.
23. The Council has strong relationships with the veteran community and hosts a number of events in support of Armed Forces. The Armed Forces' Champion, supported by officers and Elected Members, represents the Council at events such as flag raising ceremonies, Edinburgh Military Tattoo, armed forces days, associated events and continues to be an advocate for our service personnel and families. In addition, the Armed Forces' Champion engages with veterans at the Health for Heroes Breakfast Club and attends the ERC Armed Forces Oversight Group.
24. HSCP and the Council supported the Royal British Legion's Insult to Injury Campaign, ensuring that military compensation is exempt from financial assessments for social care charges.
25. There has been a strong focus on the mental health of veterans. HSCP and the Council have worked together to develop East Renfrewshire Council's suicide prevention policy and to support mental health recovery.
26. The Royal British Legion are purchasing a house in Newton Mearns to be leased by veterans, this will be administered by Barrhead Housing Association. The Council has assisted both organisations with this provision.

PLANS

27. The Council and HSCP has started working towards the ERS Gold award. The Armed Forces Oversight Group will monitor progress at the quarterly meetings and will share a report on activity to the Armed Forces' Champion, who will attend twice per year. The Armed Forces' Champion will keep elected members and the local MSPs and MP apprised of any issues affecting the armed forces community.
28. The Council's Guaranteed Interview Scheme for vacancies has been extended to cover veterans who meet essential vacancy criteria, guaranteeing suitable candidates an interview with the Council.
29. To raise awareness of the support given to veterans as employees there are plans to:
 - highlight the support that is offered to the armed service community and reservists within our employee groups;
 - review the current volunteer and special leave policies for employees to ensure there is clarity that reservists and adult cadet volunteers are supported; and
 - feature work with the armed forces community in internal communications to raise awareness.

30. A survey is underway among Council employees to find out how many reservists, Adult Cadet Volunteers, spouses/partners and service families are employed. The survey is also an opportunity for employees to express interest in joining a network of veterans' champions within the Council.
31. In addition, we continue to explore charity applications to support an extension in the number of Health for Heroes places available and additional capacity to support growth in the programme.
32. We will also continue to share information about East Renfrewshire's annual Remembrance and other related events on the Council website, on social media and in the local media.

CONCLUSION

33. The Council, HSCP and ERCLT continue to support serving personnel, regulars and reserve, veterans, their partners and dependent children in the area and looks to develop this support further by taking steps to gain the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold recognition award.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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 - c. Recognise the work to pursue the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold recognition award.

October 2024

REPORT AUTHOR

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

East Renfrewshire Council, Council Paper, 7 September 2022, Report by Direct of Business Operations and Partnerships, Nomination of a Veterans' Champion
East Renfrewshire Council Cabinet Paper 1 October 2015, Report by Chief Officer HSCP and Deputy Chief Executive, Veterans Support Advisors Role.

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