

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

5 JULY 2017

REPORT OF THE ARMED FORCES CHAMPION

As part of its responsibilities under the Armed Forces Community Covenant, a report to Council is required to update members on some of the positive work that has been carried out to support the Armed Forces, Veterans and reservists and their families in the County.

The report demonstrates the Council's commitment to ensuring that those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families are treated fairly.

Northumberland County Council launched its Armed Forces (AF) Forum in 2012 following the signing of the AF Community Covenant in May of that year. The Council is now recognised as one of the most forward leaning authorities and AF Forum Networks within the North East, if not the country. It proactively supports the AF Community and Defence and is a true advocate for the Reserve Services. The Forum has a dedicated remit and acts as a mechanism to review the actions taken by the Council and partners to implement the Covenant objectives. Co-Chaired by Dave Ledger and Lt. Col Jules Smith, Queen's Own Yeomanry and supported by the Democratic Services Manager as the dedicated Armed Forces support officer, the Forum has gone from strength to strength over the years. This is supported by an informative website.

Through frontline services, local authorities seek to deliver the Covenant aims and objectives. The Covenant does not mean extra services or preferential treatment for anyone, but more raising awareness on all sides and working together to ensure a successful transition from the forces into into civilian life.

As far as Northumberland is concerned, we have a record of providing excellent support. The Armed Forces Community has a very important presence in the Northumberland: The 3RHA Regiment based at Albemarle in the west is due to expand with another Royal Artillery Regiment as part of the 2020 refine; RAF Boulmer in the north and 101 Regiment RA and 5RRF (reservists) based in the south-east. Northumberland has a thriving Cadet Force comprising Army, Navy and Air Cadets across Northumberland. Nearby Catterick Garrison, the largest in the country, is due to become even

bigger given the Army's plans for estate transformation including the transformation of Otterburn Training Area.

Northumberland is proud of its close working relationship with the Armed Forces and the positive work carried out to date, including.

- Councillor Gordon Castle has been appointed Veteran's Champion.
- The Freedom of Northumberland has been awarded to a number of services over recent years
- Our Council policies are being revised across all services in recognition of their responsibilities under the Armed Forces Community Covenant..
- The Council currently employ ex-service personnel, Reservists and Cadet Instructors so we have an inclusive HR Policy offering Reservists and Cadet Instructors up to 2 weeks additional paid holiday for training.
- All job vacancies now carry the Armed Forces Covenant logo and NCC offer guaranteed interviews to all Armed Forces personnel or veterans if they meet the initial criteria.
- Our unique partnership with Northumbria Healthcare NHS Trust promotes the Armed Forces Attachment Programme: 'Step into Health' which offers work shadow placements across the two organisations with the view of Service leavers acquiring appropriate employment once they leave.
- We regularly enter teams in the RFCA Exercise Executive Stretch to promote reservists in the workplace.
- Our contract for the substance misuse service identifies the armed forces veterans and their carers as a vulnerable group who should be prioritised within the service
- Our Suicide Prevention Plan identifies the armed forces veterans as being a vulnerable group.
- We have asked Active Northumberland to consider membership concessions covering all Northumberland leisure facilities, for service personnel returning from deployments or who are on home for local leave. This is to aid integration into local communities and support overall health and well-being.
- The Council has a discretion under the legislation to disregard for benefit assessment purposes the income received by War Widows and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme payments. Council policy does now disregard this income.
- Army families who have their own property which is empty whilst they live in MOD property receive a 50% reduction in liability.
- Council Tax relief is paid by the MOD to service personnel who are abroad on operational tours
- Our Housing allocations Policy has been changed to provide additional priority for AF personnel and veterans
- We have recently adopted an e-learning package for Armed Forces awareness which will not only become mandatory learning for all staff but also all Councillors in order to equip them with the knowledge and

awareness necessary for supporting the Armed Forces community within their service or within the Member's Wards.

- Following a joint bid, Northumberland and Durham have been awarded £260,000 Covenant Grant support for employment of two Outreach Workers in each County, following the extremely successful Gateshead and Tyneside Outreach Service. Each worker will each provide a single point of contact for queries / requests to access services from the Armed Forces Community. As part of the service, links will also continue between the Outreach Workers and the Personnel Recovery Centre at Catterick Garrison with a view to effectively supporting those medically discharged from the armed forces and returning to Northumberland.
- We have been successful in bidding for funding from the Community Covenant Grant Scheme for a number of schemes including the purchase of a minibus for the local school at Albemarle to enable service and civilian children to jointly take part in after school events.
- The Council is also seeking to work with the Combined Cadet Force CCF contingent at Bedlingtonshire Community High School, approved by the MOD in May 2016, to raise aspirations, awareness and inclusion.
- We are also beginning to work with Northumberland College's Military Academy at Kirkley Hall College and become more involved in the work they do.
- We have an active Commemoration Group which is a subgroup of the County Council's Armed Forces Forum. It was formed in 2014 to ensure that significant anniversaries during the World War One Centenary period and other significant dates are appropriately marked.
- The group has also partnered with local groups such as the Blyth Battery to mark significant dates during the centenary period, these have included a ceremony to mark the outbreak of war at Hexham Abbey and a ceremony at St Cuthbert's Church in Bedlington to mark the first day of the Somme.
- The group has also been successful in securing £80,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund for an education project which will provide access to a remarkable set of World War One practice trenches, hidden in a remote part of the County near Rothbury. The project will give every child in Northumberland the opportunity to visit these trenches, learn about WW1 and understand the sacrifice of ordinary people from their own communities made.
- The AF Champion and Lead Officer were awarded the Chronicle Champion's Award in 2016 for support work to the Armed Forces.
- The Council was awarded the MOD Employer's Recognition Silver Award in 2015 and are working towards Gold this year.
- The Council, its partners and Network continues, at a regional level, to progress the NE Regional Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee's recommendations around veteran data gathering / information sharing formerly led by the Association of North East Councils (ANEC), but now led by ourselves.

As the largest recruiting area, the armed forces community has a very important presence in the North East. With pro-active forums across the region and dedicated member and officer champions, we share best practice and with our partners and provide excellent support in spite of the current financial climate and increased demands for services.

Northumberland and the North East are confident and committed that our Armed Forces personnel, reservists, cadets, and their families will be given every support possible.

Dave Ledger

Armed Forces Champion

Gordon Castle

Veterans' Champion