

**TITLE OF REPORT:** Delivering the Armed Forces Covenant in Gateshead

**REPORT OF:** Mike Barker, Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance

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### **Purpose of the report**

1. To seek approval for the Council to offer veterans a guaranteed interview where they meet the essential criteria for the post.
2. To seek approval for the Council to provide uniformed Adult Cadet Forces Volunteers for the Army Cadet Force, Sea Cadet Corps and Air Training Corps with two weeks paid leave to attend their annual summer training camp.

### **Proposals**

3. Evidence from the national veterans charity SSAFA indicates that veterans as a group are suffering particular disadvantage in gaining access to employment as a result of their service, as a significant number of employers are reticent to offer them employment due to concerns around their mental health (Appendix 1).
4. In the UK a military veteran is defined as anyone who has drawn one day's pay from the Armed Forces. This means all personnel, male or female, who have served for one day or more, in any occupation in the Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, or the Army, including Reservists and National Service personnel, and the Merchant Navy if involved in a conflict.
5. The Council has built an outstanding reputation in supporting its armed forces community and a key focus of its work has been to address disadvantage and any health inequalities arising from serving in the armed forces.
6. By offering guaranteed interviews to those leaving the armed forces the Council, as a leading employer within the public sector locally, could have a positive impact on individuals, set a positive example to other employers in the area and help remove barriers to employment. It could also support improvements in health and wellbeing, which is aligned to the Thrive commitment to tackle inequality so people have a fair chance, and support the aims of the new Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Gateshead.
7. Adopting a guaranteed interview scheme would also align with local authority practice across the LA7 and the direction of travel of other key partners within the region.
8. Providing such as scheme would also tie in with the direction of travel nationally as central government has now introduced its own guaranteed interview scheme for veterans in any public sector role where they meet the

minimum job requirements and is providing employers with the incentive of a one year national insurance holiday for any veteran employed from April 2021.

9. The Council's Leave of Absence scheme provides employees who are volunteers in the Reserve Forces with two weeks' paid leave to attend Reserve Forces Summer Camps.
10. Although not part of the Reserve Forces, Cadet Forces Adult Volunteers play an important role within the armed forces community.
11. A Cadet Force Adult Volunteer (CFAV) is someone who helps instruct and advise Sea, Army or Air Cadets at their weekly training sessions with a view to developing life and leadership skills. They will also be involved in some weekend activities and an Annual Summer Camp. They work with other adult volunteers to deliver a programme of activities for young cadets aged 10 to 20 years.
12. Although all CFAVs are civilians some are uniformed volunteer instructors and some non-uniformed. All uniformed adult volunteers are entitled to claim a 'Volunteer Allowance' commensurate to the rank they hold in the cadet force for their annual training and other training courses. Non-uniformed instructors receive no remuneration and do not have a commitment to attend annual training.
13. Providing uniformed Adult Cadet Forces Volunteers for the Army Cadet Force, Sea Cadet Corps and Air Training Corps with two weeks' paid leave to attend their annual summer training camps would, in addition to supporting the Armed Forces Covenant, also support the volunteering agenda in Gateshead. It would also support the aims of the new Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Gateshead by enabling all children and young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives. An independent study by Northampton University has highlighted the huge positive impact Cadet Forces have on social inclusion, improved school attendance, mobility and mental wellbeing in young people <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/news/university-of-northampton-report-finds-cadet-forces-increase-social-mobility/>

## Recommendations

14. Cabinet is recommended to:
  - i. Agree to the Council offering veterans a guaranteed interview scheme where they meet the essential criteria for the post.
  - ii. Agree to the Council providing uniformed Adult Cadet Forces Volunteers for the Army Cadet Force, Sea Cadet Corps and Air Training Corps with two weeks paid leave to attend their annual summer training camps.
15. For the following reasons:
  - i. To support the delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant in Gateshead
  - ii. To support the Thrive Agenda and the aims of the new Health and Wellbeing Strategy, as outlined in the report and Appendix 1.

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### Policy Context

1. The Armed Forces Covenant is an agreement between the people of the United Kingdom, the Government and all those who serve or have served in the armed forces and their families. The Covenant has two key principles:
  - 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 the most, such as the injured and the bereaved.
2. All councils in England have signed the Covenant, making a commitment to uphold the two key principles. It is up to each council to decide how it delivers its Covenant commitments.
3. The Government has also produced non-statutory guidance for councils to help with implementation. The guidance defines the armed forces community as: “All serving personnel (regular and reserves) veterans and their families. Children of armed forces personnel – no matter the marital status of their parents – should always be considered part of the community whilst still dependent.”
4. The Council has recently reaffirmed its commitment to its armed forces community and re-signed its armed forces covenant on 16 January 2020 (its original Armed Forces Community Covenant was signed by the Council and a wide range of partners on 26 January 2012).
5. In addition, veterans are included as a community of interest within the Gateshead Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA).
6. The proposals support improvements in health and wellbeing and aim to remove barriers to employment , aligned to the Thrive commitment to tackle inequality so people have a fair chance and support the aims of the new Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Gateshead by enabling all children and young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their own lives and the Council’s Volunteering agenda.
7. However, if it is agreed that uniformed Cadet Forces Adult Volunteers are offered two weeks’ paid leave per rolling year to attend their annual summer camp or relevant training activities there may need to be changes to the Council’s Volunteer Policy to indicate that this is to specifically support implementation of the armed forces covenant.

### Local Position

8. A multi-agency Gateshead Armed Forces Network (comprising a wide range of statutory and non-statutory organisations offering support to veterans) has been in operation since 2011. The Network acts as forum for consultation on actions taken forward in Gateshead to implement the Covenant and reduce any health inequalities affecting veterans and their families and sharing information and best practice.

9. Since the Network's inception a key area of focus has been to ensure that those leaving the armed forces and their spouses/partners are not disadvantaged as a result of their military service.
10. In a recent survey carried out by SSAFA, a leading armed forces charity, with representation on the above Network, it was highlighted that almost a third of recruiters are reluctant to hire someone who served in the armed forces, with many employers assuming they are more likely to struggle with mental health problems. The poll, which surveyed 250 recruiters and 2,197 workers across the UK on their attitudes towards working with former military personnel, revealed mental health remained a significant barrier in the recruitment process, and said military leavers' were the "most stigmatised" in this area. It should be noted that this survey was carried out across a range of employers and is not necessarily reflective of the Council's view.

### **Government Guaranteed Interview Scheme for Veterans for any Public Sector Role / One Year National Insurance Holiday**

11. The Government reaffirmed its commitment to protecting and supporting the armed forces in the Queens Speech and indicated that it planned to progress proposals to further incorporate the Covenant into law to mitigate any disadvantage faced by the armed forces community due to the unique nature of their military service.
12. One of the legislative priorities outlined was the introduction of a guaranteed job interview for veterans for any public sector role they apply for where they possess the minimum job requirements. This commitment was further reaffirmed in the Government's response to the national consultation on the first ever Strategy for our Veterans.
13. Government announced on 6 February that the Office for Veterans Affairs in the Cabinet Office was launching guaranteed interviews for civil service jobs as of spring this year with pilots in the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defence, the Cabinet Office and the Home Office including the UK Border Force. There will not be a time limit for those leaving the service as to when they take up the guaranteed interview offer. All applicants will need to meet the basic minimum selection criteria.
14. In March as part of the Budget announcements Government also announced that organisations employing veterans would be exempt from any national insurance liability for the first year of a veteran's salary up to the upper earnings limit from April 2021.
15. In addition to the above, the Government is currently considering a proposal to introduce a public authority duty to 'have due regard, when exercising its functions, to:
  - a) The unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the armed forces; and
  - b) The principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for service personnel from membership, or former membership, of the armed forces.'

At present this is only being considered in the fields of healthcare, education and housing.

## **Forces Friendly Employers and MoD Employer Recognition Scheme**

16. As part of their commitments to the Covenant, Councils are encouraged to be Forces Friendly Employers, acknowledging that reservists and veterans bring a variety of transferable skills and qualities to the civilian workplace. Such skills are developed throughout their military careers and being flexible to the unique situations of the wider Armed Forces Community to ensure fair treatment to all who are involved, including spouses/partners and families. The level of support provided by employers will depend on the size and nature of the organisation, but typically includes policies that: encourage reserve service; support employment of veterans and service spouses/partners.
17. The MoD Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) acknowledges employers who have provided exceptional support to the Armed Forces Community and defence by going above and beyond their Covenant pledges.
18. Gateshead has been a Gold Award holder since 2015 and is the first organisation in the North East to have its Gold Award status revalidated as of 30 July 2020. As a Gold Award Holder Gateshead is viewed as an employer who acts as an exemplar within the public sector (and possibly beyond) and the MoD have indicated that it is desirable that Gold Award employers provide additional paid leave for Cadet Forces Adult Volunteers.

## **Local Authority Practice within LA7**

19. Durham County Council, Northumberland County Council, Newcastle City Council, and North Tyneside Council are also ERS Gold Award Holders and have guaranteed interview schemes in place for veterans (reservists and spouses/ partners are not included) who meet the essential criteria for the job. Durham's scheme is only open to veterans for three years after they have left the armed forces.
20. North Tyneside Council extended its guaranteed interview scheme for veterans to cover reservists at the end of May 2019. North Tyneside Council identified that individuals who serve as reservists within the armed forces can face barriers to civilian employment such as; a misconception by some employers that a reservist may often require extended periods of leave to carry out training or deploy on operations and "reserve" commitments will impact on employment.
21. Durham County Council, Northumberland County Council, South Tyneside Council, Newcastle City Council and Sunderland City Council offer Cadet Forces Adult Volunteers two weeks' paid leave per rolling year to attend their annual summer camp or relevant training activities. Durham's scheme is only open to uniformed Cadet Forces Adult Volunteers.
22. Within the NC and NE Integrated Care system proposals are in the early stages of development for a system wide approach to veterans which includes an approach to supporting employment.

## **Consultation**

23. The Leader and Deputy Leader and the Council's Armed Forces Champion have been consulted and are supportive of the proposals.

24. Unison has indicated its support for the proposals overall.
25. GMB, whilst supportive, has indicated that any guaranteed interview scheme for veterans should clearly set out that it is subject to individuals meeting the basic minimum selection criteria and these criteria being unambiguous. This should not be an issue as all job profiles should clearly set out the essential and the desirable criteria on which to assess candidates.
26. GMB has also raised concerns that internal candidates might potentially be unfairly disadvantaged, at the shortlisting stage, as a result of offering veterans a guaranteed interview. However, this would apply equally to the guaranteed interview scheme the Council has already signed up to for disabled applicants and, to date, this has not been raised as an issue.
27. GMB is wholly supportive of the proposals for Cadet Forces Adult Volunteers.

### **Alternative Options**

28. An alternative option would be for the recommendations not to be accepted. However, it is considered that these recommendations present the best way forward to help remove identified barriers to employment for veterans and support improvements in health and wellbeing for this group as well as supporting the Council's volunteering agenda and supporting children and young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their own lives.

### **Implications of Recommended Option**

#### **29. Resources:**

- a) **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital confirms there are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
- b) **Human Resources Implications** – If it is agreed that a guaranteed interview scheme is implemented in Gateshead, there may need to be minor changes to the i-trent system to capture an applicant's declaration that they are an armed forces veteran. The Council's recruitment processes may also require minor adjustments, and managers who are responsible for recruitment will need to be briefed on the process to ensure it is properly embedded.
- c) **Property Implications** – none.

30. **Risk Management Implications** – none.

31. **Equality and Diversity Implications** – none.

32. **Crime and Disorder Implications** - none

33. **Climate Emergency and Sustainability Implications** – none.

34. **Health Implications** – Implementation of the proposals would support improvements in health and wellbeing aligned to the commitments in the

Thrive agenda and support the aims of the new Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Gateshead.

**35. Human Rights Implications** - There are no human rights implications.

**36. Area and Ward Implications** - None

**Background Information.** None