

CABINET – 16 MARCH 2020

ARMED FORCES SUPPORT

Report by Corporate Director for Communities

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:
 - a) note the development and progress of actions to strengthen the Oxfordshire Armed Forces Covenant commitments; and
 - b) agree the application in pursuit of a gold award in the national Employer Recognition Scheme.

Executive Summary

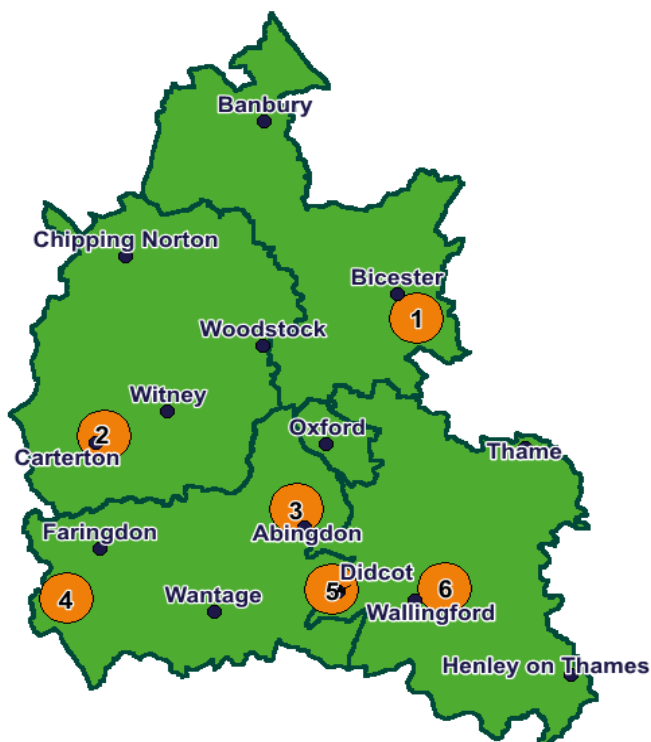
2. Oxfordshire County Council was the first local authority to sign a local Armed Forces Covenant in 2011; committing, alongside our partners to ensuring members of the Armed Forces community are treated fairly and not disadvantaged in their day-to-day lives. In partnership, we re-signed a refreshed covenant in June 2018 and in August of 2019, the Council's senior officers agreed an approach to re-energise our commitment. The work supports delivery of the Council's 'Thriving Communities' vision; due to the size and nature of our armed forces in Oxfordshire, the work cuts across the themes of thriving communities, people and economy.
3. The approach improves how we work in partnership on armed forces issues, service delivery for armed forces families and how armed forces friendly Oxfordshire County Council is as an employer.
4. This report highlights the main achievements over the period September 2019 to March 2020. It contains an Annex (A) with the detail of progress being made against all actions. It also sets out the headlines that we intend to submit in our bid for a gold award in the MoD's Employer Recognition Scheme and includes a letter of endorsement (Annex B) submitted by Col Simon Browne, Deputy Commander of 11th Infantry Brigade (Army Headquarters for the South East).

Background and key issues

Armed Forces in Oxfordshire

5. There are more than 11,000 military personnel and their families alongside contractors in Oxfordshire. Two thirds of these are members from the Royal Air Force (RAF) which has expanded since the growth of RAF Brize Norton (this has become UK's primary RAF station). 21% of the country's RAF personnel are located in Oxfordshire. In March 2018 there were 6,536 residents in Oxfordshire Armed Forces Pension, War pension and Armed forces compensation scheme. We therefore have a significant armed forces community in the county.

Bases in Oxfordshire



- 1) Bicester Garrison
- 2) RAF Brize Norton
- 3) Abingdon Station
- 4) Shrivenham Station
- 5) Vauxhall Barracks
- 6) RAF Benson

6. The armed forces community is different from the rest of society in that they are often required to move around the country/abroad and often at short notice, making local knowledge, connection and integration more challenging. This also means that service families are often isolated from their support networks; living at a distance from family and friends. The location of service stations mean that military bases are often geographically isolated and even if they are within an urban area, the nature of the security means that there is a physical barrier between the armed forces and civilian communities.

7. The nature of organisational cultures within the armed forces means that service personnel have a strong sense of pride and often do not want to ask for help. This combined with the fact that service families often get many of their services (e.g. medical, housing) provided through the Ministry of Defence, can make providing local services a challenge; particularly in helping people early. Service access is further challenged through a lack of postcode when residing on bases.

Armed Forces Covenant (AFC)

8. Having refreshed our Oxfordshire Armed Forces Covenant in 2018, we aim to deliver on the four aims outlined in the Government's covenant guidelines:
 - Community engagement
 - Community integration
 - Encouraging support
 - Recognition and remembrance

Civilian Military Partnership (CMP)

9. To deliver the commitments in our AFC we work with our partners through the Oxfordshire Civilian Military Partnership (CMP). Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) is a leading and facilitating organisation within the CMP which is currently made up of representatives of the armed forces, county Councillor Military Champions, service charities and senior officers in the Council.

Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS)

10. The Ministry of Defence (MoD), through the Defence Relationship Management (DRM) arm, partners with employers throughout the UK. It runs an Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) which awards a status of bronze, silver or gold depending upon how armed forces friendly employers are. Oxfordshire County Council has made a commitment to work from silver, towards a gold award in 2020.

Update on progress

Partnership

11. A workshop was held with the CMP on the 12th of September 2019 which began a conversation about bringing the collective strength of partners to identifying and tackling issues within Oxfordshire. The workshop was well attended with 25 representatives, from the armed forces, service charities and Council officers. Action taken in response to the discussions at the CMP have included the following:

- a) **Convening of a Steering Group** from the members of the CMP to oversee development work. Members include;
- Corporate Director of Communities, Simon Furlong (SRO)
 - Military Champion, Cllr Dr Simon Clarke
 - Deputy Lieutenant, Lynda Atkins
 - Chair of SSAFA Oxfordshire (and VAPC representative) Ian Talbot
- b) **Conduct of an Armed Forces Needs Assessment** to give a better understanding of the armed forces profile and lived-experience in the county. Some key messages from this are:
- There is scope to improve the availability of data on the armed forces community which could better inform identification of priorities.
 - The majority of service personnel and their families transition relatively well into civilian life, however those that do require help often have complex, multiple needs. A co-ordinated approach for support services is needed, with targeted support to those with multiple needs.
 - It is extremely difficult to accurately predict unit movements into and out of the county. Timelier communication by Armed Forces on movements to local public services would benefit military families and service providers by enhancing planning and preparation.
 - There is expected to be an increase in the number of Ghurkha and soldiers with Nepalese heritage in the county. Further work is needed to understand the needs of this particular group including translating signposting and information material.
 - Lobbying is needed to ensure unit moves are better communicated to service providers. Lobbying is also needed to increase the transition period for ex-service personnel from one to four years in accessing specialist mental health services. Work is also needed to understand and raise awareness of the impact the MoD's 'Future Accommodation Model'¹ would have in Oxfordshire.
- c) **Expansion and refocus of the CMP.** The CMP needs to expand and refocus to involve all relevant partners in addressing priorities for Oxfordshire. A meeting of the CMP was held on the 2nd of March 2020 with an expanded set of partners. The partners considered messages from the Needs Assessment and worked to identify appropriate actions (including NHS, District Councils, Thames Valley Police). The outputs of this will inform a revised Terms of Reference, membership and work programme for the CMP.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-accommodation-model-what-you-need-to-know>

Service delivery

12. Oxfordshire County Council delivers a number of services which influence the experience of service families when navigating the unique circumstances created by service life. This includes for example school admissions and education services. By re-energising our commitment to ensuring those in the armed forces community are not disadvantaged in accessing services, we have:
- Updated the role description for Armed Forces Member Champions to clarify the representative role Councillors play for our armed forces community.
 - Introduced Armed Forces Service Champions to provide a liaison and promotion role across the Council's services and employees
 - Provided Armed Forces Awareness Training for more than 60 staff and Councillors
 - Consulted on ensuring the needs of service children are prioritised through our school admissions process
 - Producing a guide to assist service families in understanding the school admissions process and where it diverts for service families
 - Uploaded contact information for support services in Oxfordshire on the 'Forces Connect' app, to signpost any member of the armed forces community
 - Planned the introduction of a question in Safe and Well visits to identify whether a person has served, to enable signposting to support services.

Armed Forces Employer Recognition Scheme

13. The Council has held a silver award in the MoD's ERS for its armed forces friendly approach to employment for a number of years. The ambition was set to enhance the Council's commitment and strive for gold. A 'Gold Project Group' with HR, Organisational Development, Communications and Policy representation has overseen this work.
14. The Project Group has drawn in advice from our nominated Regional Employer Engagement Director and from other gold award holders. It has been clear that advocacy and promotion of armed forces employment will be a key part of the assessment of our application. All activity in pursuit of gold has been logged to create the evidence base and we have sought endorsement of our application from the Lord Lieutenant and local senior military figures. The first endorsement letter received is included in Annex B, from Col Simon Browne, Deputy Commander of 11th Infantry Brigade (Army HQ in the South east); more letters of its kind are anticipated.
15. An application for a gold award requires basic criteria to be met (such as having paid leave for reservists); Oxfordshire County Council meets all basic criteria, but our application will be judged on the extent to which our support and advocacy for the armed forces is 'above and beyond'.

16. Cabinet are asked to **AGREE** the following points for inclusion in our gold application:

Section 1: Examples of how Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) supports Defence and the Armed Forces community and advocates for others to do the same (500 word limit).

- a) HR policies support staff across the armed forces community. Our 'Armed Forces Employment Offer' includes paid leave and support for reservist deployments, guaranteed interview scheme for leavers and veterans (that meet essential criteria), work experience for service leavers, paid leave for Cadet Force Adult Volunteers and flexible working for military spouses. With the addition of the AFC logo, we promote this through our Manager network, intranet, staff magazine, external website, recruitment portal, through the Career Transition Partnership and Forces Families Jobs.
- b) A network of 14 staff are armed forces 'buddies'. They offer support and advice to veterans, service leavers, spouses and/or the children of service personnel to assist with integration into the civilian workforce. We also have 'Wellbeing Champions' who are trained to offer peer to peer support for staff in the armed forces.
- c) Make exceptions for service spouses to repay Discretionary Maternity Pay when a return to work is prevented by a service posting.
- d) Offer work experience placements to service leavers in the transition process.
- e) Trained 61 staff, champions and Councillors from OCC, the NHS, district and third-sector partners in Armed Forces Awareness (delivered by Forces Connect South East).
- f) Promote the AFC and ERS through our 4,500 strong supply chain. We have written to all suppliers to encourage them to sign up to the AFC. We use a statement of AFC support and promotion of ERS on our website, use of case studies and through encouragement in our tender documentation.
- g) Promote the benefits of being a reservist through armed forces 'Lunch and Learn' events. RAF and Army reserve units outline opportunities and OCC armed forces staff give examples of skills they have gained. First event attended by 16 staff. Reserve units stated: *'I would be very happy with my employer's support if I lived in Oxford and worked for the County Council'*. Events are scheduled for more OCC locations and will be annual.
- h) Promoted the AFC through all our partner networks, towns and parishes, schools, our Local Enterprise Partnership and local 'Peace Groups and through a media campaign, both internal and external.
- i) Elected Military Champions are attached to each of our six military stations. They have a new role description which includes the responsibility to: 'raise the profile and needs of the Armed Forces community and 'Champion the Oxfordshire AFC and ERS and encourage organisations to sign up and support these'.

Section 2: Additional information (250 word limit).

- a) 10 years promotion of Armed Forces and Reserves Day through an annual flag raising event. Reservists, local dignitaries and senior military officers attend. The parade is conducted by 3 Regiment Royal Logistics Core (based at Dalton Barracks, Abingdon) which draws in more than 100 members of the public.
- b) Partnered with Headteachers to hold a first Service Children's Conference in September 2019, where 150 students and 50 Heads and Governors focused on how to improve support for service children. Included promotion of support for employees from the armed forces community. Now an annual event and has resulted in grant bids for schools Covenant projects (e.g a dedicated space and military-inspired learning programmes).
- c) Brokering opportunities for schools to get support with STEM subjects from defence suppliers (e.g. funding, use of the conference facilities and careers day in national science week).
- d) Responded to the identified need from armed forces families and Federations to prioritise service children in the school admission process and produced a guide for service families to navigate the process.
- e) Signpost to 70 Oxfordshire-based services which support the armed forces community through the free app 'Forces Connect'.
- f) Completed a comprehensive Armed Forces Needs Assessment to identify local need around housing, health, education, employment and welfare. Re-focused and expanded the Civilian Military Partnership to respond to need.
- g) Created a high-impact campaign for the armistice centenary. With the Woodland Trust we distributed 300+ tree saplings and commemorative plaques to towns and parishes. Held a beacon lighting event and had 1000 primary children involved in an aerial photograph of a giant poppy

Next steps

17. The timeline for submission of the gold application and anticipated assessments and results are as follows.
 - i. Gold nomination deadline- 25th of March 2020.
 - ii. Initial desk- shift in the week commencing 4th May 2020. This will be a competitive process, with applications benchmarked against one another.
 - iii. One star board (a week later) meets to make initial make judgements.
 - iv. Two star board (two weeks later) meets for a final review and decision.
18. The outcome of the application process is anticipated in August 2020.

Implications

19. **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.** The Armed Forces Covenant work is a strand of equality, diversity and inclusion. There are no legislative requirements or duties related to the armed forces; it is a voluntary commitment to ensure the community is not disadvantaged because of the nature of service life.
20. **Resources.** The activity highlighted in this report has been delivered within the existing policy budgets and with existing staff resource. If in future, the pace or scale of activity is increased significantly, additional budget may be required and the pressure identified as part of the Service and Resource Planning process.

Supporting documents

ANNEX A: Armed Forces Covenant Development Programme Plan

ANNEX B: Letter of endorsement from 11th Infantry Brigade

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