

Committee: **Council**

Date of Meeting: **23rd November, 2023**

Report Subject: **Committing to the Armed Forces Covenant**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Stephen Thomas, Leader/Cabinet Member – Corporate Overview & Performance**

Councillor Derrick Bevan, Armed Forces Champion

Report Submitted by: **Sarah King, Head of Democratic Services, Governance and Partnerships**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	02/11/23						23/11/23	Armed Forces Steering Group

1. Purpose of the Report

To propose the re-signing of the Armed Forces Covenant by Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council.

2. Scope and Background

Blaenau Gwent Council signed the Armed Forces Community Covenant on 8th February, 2014 alongside a wide range of partner organisations and military representatives. Since then, the council has hosted the Blaenau Gwent Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group, which includes a range of public and voluntary sector partners and armed forces representatives. This Steering Group is chaired by the council's Armed Forces Champion.

The Armed Forces Covenant reflects our moral obligation to those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families. By signing organisations commit to ensuring that members of the Armed Forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.

The Covenant has been strengthened with the introduction in November 2022 of the Covenant Legal Duty to the Armed Forces Act 2021, which places a legal obligation on certain public bodies, including local authorities, to have due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when carrying out certain functions in healthcare, education and housing. As an organisation, we have worked to ensure that we are paying due regard to the Armed Forces community across all our services by strengthening understanding through training and including the armed forces community in

our organisational Integrated Impact Assessments process to strengthen decision-making.

The need to re-sign the Armed Forces Covenant is the result of a change in the signing process. Previously, there was a community covenant in each local authority area with numerous signatures, now the expectation is that each organisation is requested to sign a single national Armed Forces Covenant, with signatures submitted to the Ministry of Defence for approval.

As a result, current practice is not to organise a local signing in Blaenau Gwent, as was done in 2014. However, we can work through existing Blaenau Gwent Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group to encourage partners to re-sign, and the Chair intends to host such an opportunity to mark any re-signing with partners via the established steering group in the spring of 2024 (the next meeting).

The proposed 2024 Armed Forces Covenant Document for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council is provided at Appendix 1, is in-line with Statutory Guidance on the Armed Forces Covenant Duty from the Ministry of Defence.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1

- Council commits to the Armed Forces Covenant, which is signed by Councillor Derek Bevan, as the Armed Forces Champion.
- Council decides not to re-sign Armed Forces Covenant.

4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

Re-signing the Armed Forces Covenant demonstrates our commitment to meeting out statutory duties to pay due regard to the Armed Forces Community functions in healthcare, education and housing.

The Armed Forces Covenant supports the Corporate Plan objective 'empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient' and the Gwent Well-being Plan objective 'we want to create a fairer, more equitable and inclusive Gwent for all.'

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

No direct budget implications in relation to this report.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

There is a reputational risk to the Council of not being up-to-date with legislative expectations associated to the Armed Forces Act 2021. To mitigate this is proposed to re-affirm the appropriate commitments outlined above.

5.3 **Legal**

The Armed Forces Act 2021 has strengthened obligations for relevant bodies, including local authorities to have due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when carrying out certain functions in healthcare, education and housing.

In exercising these functions, we 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.

When considering 'due regard' this duty is about informed decision-making and means that we should think about and place an appropriate amount of weight on the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when considering all the factors relevant to how we carry out relevant functions. It is not prescriptive about the actions we should take to comply with this legal obligation, and it does not mandate specific outcomes.

5.4 **Human Resources**

An on-going programme of training on Armed Forces Covenant is available to council staff. To date, 179 staff have completed this training from the council, specifically targeted at relevant services whereby the due regard principles are most relevant (e.g. Social Services, Education and Housing).

5.5 **Health and Safety**

No direct health and safety implications.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

2% of the population in Wales (385,000) are members of the Armed Forces Community, which includes families and ex-Service personnel. 3,230 military and civilian personnel are based in Wales, and in 2018 approximately 3,000 people left the Armed Forces and settled in Wales.

The 2021 census showed that the numbers in Blaenau Gwent are:

- Previously served in regular UK armed forces – 1,643 (3.0%)
- Previously served in UK reserve armed forces – 424 (0.8%)
- Previously served in any UK armed forces -72 (0.1%)
- **Total – 2,139 (3.9%)**

The proportion of people in Blaenau Gwent who are part of the Armed Forces Community will be higher as it also includes immediate family members.

- 6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***
Reiterating the commitments and strengthening service provision around the new duties, as well as the continuation of existing work supporting Armed Forces Community.
- 6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***
Promote Armed Forces Covenant and raise public awareness via the steering group.
- 6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***
Armed Forces Covenant reflects long-term ongoing commitment of council to support Armed Forces community.
- 6.5 ***Preventative focus***
Increasing awareness of Armed Forces community and ensure that we are asking people if they are part of that community to anticipate any potential issues or needs when accessing our services.
- 6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***
Encourage partners to sign/re-sign Armed Forces Covenant and continue work of Blaenau Gwent Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group.
- 6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***
Due regard to the Armed Forces community has been integrated into policies across the authority, including housing and school admissions policies.
- 6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***
Not applicable.
- 6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)***
Not applicable.
7. **Monitoring Arrangements**
- 7.1 Continue to monitor work via Blaenau Gwent Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

Appendix 1 - Armed Forces Covenant Signatory Document