

SCRUTINY PANEL A

Virtual Meeting held on Thursday, 19th November, 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Dave Shaw in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Trevor Locke,
Warren Nuttall, John Smallridge and
David Walters.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Lauren Mitchell.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy, Gillian Welch and
Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Councillor Dale Grounds.
Mark Leek (Operations Manager for Forces
within the Community Charity).

SA.20 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests.

Councillor Jim Blagden, Councillor David Walters and Gillian Welch all declared Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests in relation to their previous service within the Armed Forces.

SA.21 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 22 September 2020, be received and approved as a correct record.

SA.22 Scrutiny Review: Veterans and Service Personnel

The Scrutiny Research Officer introduced the report and reminded the Panel that at the last meeting it had been agreed to commence work on an Armed Forces Welcome Pack. Contained in the report were some key sections and information that would be included in the Welcome Pack for Members to consider as required.

The report also highlighted case studies from Wrexham Borough Council and the City of York and some e-learning opportunities as developed by the Coventry, Solihull, and Warwickshire Armed Forces Covenant partnership in the form of two modules focused on the Armed Forces Covenant, Housing and Homelessness targeting particular audiences and needs.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services welcomed the Council's Senior Community Engagement Officer, Gillian Welch, to the

meeting and advised that the work of the Panel would be building on all the previous work undertaken by Gillian, to form relationships with the local Armed Forces community and for the Council to sign up to the Armed Forces Covenant.

Work had been undertaken to raise the profile of the Armed Forces Covenant amongst the Council's employees which had included a previous questionnaire to establish any potential links with the Armed Forces through such employees and any serving relatives.

Discussions had been held at the last meeting with Mark Leek, the founder of the Kirkby in Ashfield Veterans Breakfast Club, to see how the Council might assist leavers, ex-servicemen and veterans as they adapt to civilian life. Caution was expressed however that expectations needed to be managed for both the Panel and ex-servicemen in relation to what could realistically be achieved by the Council and what value could be positively added to any transition into civilian life.

The Council's financial budgets continued to be restrained and therefore any recommendations from the Panel to Cabinet would be better focussed on ensuring employees were well trained and able to offer knowledgeable support as required. It was also paramount that the Council continued to commit to good practice as developed by the Senior Community Engagement Officer and as recommended through the Armed Forces Covenant.

The Senior Community Engagement Officer took the opportunity to address the Panel and firstly explained the concept of the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) as a formal pledge to ensure that those who serve, or have served in the Armed Forces and their families, were treated fairly which involved government, local authorities, businesses and charities alike.

Organisations were asked to sign the AFC to confirm publicly that they recognised the value that serving personnel, Regular and Reservists, Veterans and military families contributed to our country. Ashfield District Council signed the AFC alongside all Nottinghamshire authorities in November 2018.

This then opened up an opportunity for the Council to apply for the Bronze Award (Intent) from the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) which was successfully awarded to the Council on 3 April 2019. Attendance by the Senior Community Engagement Officer at the 'Bringing the Armed Forces to Life' officer training on 4 April 2019, then led to the Council achieving the Silver (Demonstrate) Award on 1 August 2019.

A webpage was also developed on the Council's website highlighting the Council's commitment to the AFC and Defence Employment Recognition Scheme (ERS) and also the support available to ex-servicemen for signposting to key organisations. A case study demonstrating how the Council achieved the ERS Silver award was also highlighted on the webpage.

The Defence Employment Recognition Scheme recognised commitment and support from UK employers for Defence Personnel. The scheme comprised bronze, silver and gold awards for employers who support those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces and their families.

The Council was currently working towards achieving the Gold award and it was hoped that a nomination might be forthcoming in early 2021. To achieve the Gold award the Council had to demonstrate the following:

- must have signed the Armed Forces Covenant;
- employers must have an existing relationship with their National Account Manager/REED/appropriate defence representative;
- the employer should already be demonstrating support by receiving an ERS Silver Award;
- the employer must proactively demonstrate their forces-friendly credentials as part of their recruiting and selection processes. Where possible, they should be engaged with Career Transition Partnership (CTP) in the recruitment of service leavers and have registered for the Forces Families Job (FFJ) portal;
- employers must employ at least one individual from the armed forces community category that the nomination emphasises. For example, an employer nominated for support to the Reserves must employ at least one Reservist;
- the employer must actively ensure that their workforce is aware of their positive policies towards defence people issues. For example, an employer nominated for support to the Reserves must have an internally publicised and positive human resources policy on Reserves;
- the employer must be an exemplar within their market sector, advocating support to defence people issues to partner organisations, suppliers and customers with tangible positive results;
- within the context of Reserves the employer must have demonstrated support to mobilisations or have a framework in place. They must provide at least 10 days' additional leave for training, fully paid, to the Reservist employee;
- the employer must not have been the subject of any negative public relations or media activity'.

The Council was well on its way to achieving, or had achieved, many of the above criteria and the Council's Human Resources Team were currently working on a draft Reservist's Policy having liaised with union representatives as appropriate.

Many Forces events were funded and arranged by the Council (i.e. D-Day 75th Anniversary 6 June 2020, Armed Forces Week and Reserves Day, Merchant Navy Day - 80 years since start of WWII 3 September 2020, VE Day, VJ 75 Day, Addison Act Homes for Heroes 100 years' Hucknall celebration) and its case study has been profiled by Charnwood, Melton and Rushcliffe Borough Councils.

To conclude, it was suggested that a positive next step might be to designate and train Armed Forces representatives within each section of the Council. This would then increase the expertise and support available across the Council, thus ensuring that the knowledge and workload was not left to one Lead Officer as per current arrangements.

Members took the opportunity to debate the issue and commented that the Armed Forces Welcome Pack would be a welcome addition to the support being offered to ex-servicemen and their families within Ashfield.

It was however acknowledged by the Panel that the Council were already undertaking some excellent programmes of support for ex-servicemen and that this should be commended. There was clear and helpful information available on the Council's website particularly in relation to housing requirements and opportunities.

Following a question from a Panel Member in relation to how other local neighbouring authorities were offering support to the Armed Forces, the Senior Community Engagement Officer advised that most were at much the same stage as Ashfield District Council although Bassetlaw had produced an excellent 'Support for the Armed Forces Community' Welcome Pack that was well worth a look.

Mark Leek, in attendance at the meeting, spoke to the Panel and thanked the Senior Community Engagement Officer for her ongoing commitment towards the Armed Forces and its members. The Welcome Pack was an excellent step forward for the Council and ongoing partnership working was the key to ensuring the necessary support and guidance was available to ex-servicemen making their way back into civilian life.

The Chairman took the opportunity to thank Gillian Welch and Mark Leek for being in attendance at the meeting and for their insightful contributions towards the review.

To draw the meeting and debate to a conclusion, the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services made some suggestions for possible recommendations to Cabinet as follows:

- to further explore the possibility of expanding the e-training modules regarding the Armed Forces Covenant, Housing and Homelessness for frontline staff, across all sections of the Council;
- to commend the work undertaken so far by the Council's Senior Community Engagement Officer in supporting the Ashfield Armed Forces community;
- to explore the potential to designate an Armed Forces representative in each section of the Council;
- to further expand a dedicated Armed Forces section on the Council's website;

- to support and continue to commit to achieving the Gold award through the Defence Employee recognition Scheme;
- to continue to develop a robust and purposeful Reservist Policy to assist and support employees as required;
- to commit to increasing awareness across the Council and embedding ongoing support for the local Armed Forces community within the Council's Corporate Plan.

RESOLVED that

- (a) a draft Armed Forces Welcome Pack and a finalised set of draft recommendations for Cabinet, be presented to the next meeting of the Panel for consideration and approval as appropriate;
- (b) in conjunction with (a) above, the content/sections of the Armed Forces Welcome Pack, as outlined in the report, be approved in principle.

The meeting closed at 8.02 pm

Chairman.