

Manchester City Council Report for Information

Report to: Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee – 11 October 2022

Subject: Armed Forces Covenant Update and Annual Report

Report of: Strategic Director of Children and Education Services and Strategic Management Team Armed Forces Champion

Summary

This report introduces the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report for 2021/22 which we are required to present to Council each year as part of our commitments made under the Covenant, providing an opportunity to reflect upon progress made against our Covenant Action Plan.

This report also introduces the Armed Forces Act 2021 which will place new statutory duties upon councils and other statutory bodies to have due regard to the principles of the Covenant when exercising certain housing, education, or healthcare functions.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

- (1) Members are recommended to note and comment on the report.
 - (2) Members are recommended to note actions being undertaken to prepare for implementation of the Armed Forces Act 2021
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Wards Affected: All

Environmental Impact Assessment - the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city

None

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - the impact of the issues addressed in this report in meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty and broader equality commitments
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Since Manchester City Council has ratified the Armed Forces Covenant, ex- armed forces and their families have been added to the EqIA template and all services should be considering the impact of their services on this cohort of people.
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Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS/Contribution to the Strategy
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	To ensure that the Armed Forces Community receive the support that enables them to thrive alongside their civilian peers. Also, make certain that they can aid us in the pursuit of a cutting-edge economy by making the most of their experience and expertise in Manchester's local businesses and organisations.
A highly skilled city: world class and home-grown talent sustaining the city's economic success	Our work will ensure employers understand the level of transferable skills Veterans and Reservists possess, that the Armed Forces Community has improved access to education, and that those who have left the forces can effectively articulate their skill set to employers. In summary, we will make sure the Armed Forces Community is work-ready.
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	We are working to mitigate and remedy the unique and niche disadvantages face by the armed forces community. We aim to rid as many barriers as possible, and unlock the potential of the armed forces community, thereby ensuring, " <i>all can thrive.</i> "
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	Our work is contributing to the fight against crime, poverty, and anti-social behavior with a focus on both rehabilitation and reintegration
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	We picture a unified support structure that works as one to make the most of our resources and ensures we can make as much of an impact as possible.

Financial Consequences – Revenue

There are presently no anticipated revenue costs. The delivery of Manchester's Armed Forces Covenant will be achieved within a business-as-usual approach. Additional funding was received by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

However, it is worth noting that additional expenditure requirements may arise from the Armed Forces Act 2021 implementation, this will be monitored and managed by officers in liaison with the Local Government Association.

Financial Consequences – Capital

None.

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Background documents (available for public inspection):

The following documents disclose important facts on which the report is based and have been relied upon in preparing the report. Copies of the background documents are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy, please contact one of the contact officers above.

- Manchester City Council Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2022
- Manchester City Council Executive Report, 19th December 2019: Manchester Armed Forces Covenant – Progress Report & Action Plan
- LGA. Armed Forces Act 2021 background, implications for councils and practical steps to get ready for the Act 16/02/2022

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report introduces the Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report for 2021/22. Manchester initially signed the Armed Forces Covenant, alongside all UK local authorities, in June 2013 and in October 2021 those commitments were refreshed when at the same time the Lord Mayor conferred the Freedom of the City on 209 Battery R.A., the Manchester Artillery.
- 1.2. The report also provides an introduction to the Armed Forces Act 2021 which will be brought into force in coming months when the Secretary of State for Defence formally publishes the associated statutory guidance.

2. Background to the Armed Forces Covenant

- 2.1. The Armed Forces Covenant, introduced in 2011 in its current form, is a commitment by the nation to those that currently or have previously before, served in HM Armed Forces, and their families. This commitment seeks to ensure that the Armed Forces Community will face no disadvantage that comes as a direct result of their service.
- 2.2. The purpose of the Covenant is to remedy and prevent the disadvantages experienced by service personnel and make certain that they too can benefit from all public and commercial services enjoyed by their civilian peers. The Covenant also recognises the need to make special provision for those who have sacrificed the most, such as the injured and bereaved.
- 2.3. As part of our Covenant Commitments the Council maintains a Lead Member for the Armed Forces and a member of SMT. Currently the Strategic Director of Children & Education Services, serves as Armed Forces Champion, chairing the Armed Forces Steering Group with membership drawn from MCC directorates, partner public service organisations and the Armed Forces VCS.
- 2.4. The Steering Group oversees a Covenant Action Plan which seeks to strengthen our relationship with the armed forces and our network of support for the wider community of ex-armed forces personnel, with a strong focus on work & skills, individual resilience, mutual support and comradeship. In December 2021 a new Armed Forces Specialist Lead was appointed to lead this plan and prepare for the introduction of the Armed Forces Act 2021. The Armed Forces Specialist role sits within the equalities team, allowing Covenant work to progress alongside our equalities approach.
- 2.5. The Annual Report provides an opportunity to report on progress against the Action Plan and supports our on-going dialogue with the Armed Forces Community in respect of forward plans. The full annual report is attached in Appendix 1.

3. Formation of Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group

- 3.1. The Armed Forces Covenant Steering Group exists to co-ordinate city-wide objectives, facilitate cross-organisational collaboration, and enable network

expansion. The Steering Group is the nucleus of the armed forces' work and has played a key part in local achievements. The group gathers on a bimonthly basis in a workshop format, with both core and flexible membership co-ordinated by the Strategic Management Team's Armed Forces Champion.

- 3.2. The Steering Group adopts a thematic approach, bringing focus to the individual pillars featured within the Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan. The pillars are Covenant Governance and Overarching Strategy, Housing and Homelessness, Employment, Finances, Living Independently, Mental Wellbeing, Physical Health, Family and Community, Criminal Justice, and Communication and Promotion. The diverse landscape of expertise within the Steering Group allows for great insight into these areas and helps close the gap between military and civilian experiences.

4. Successes to Date

- 4.1. To date there have been many successes as outlined in the Annual report, a few highlights are outlined in this section.
- 4.2. The Council achieved Gold Status from the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme due to significant progress in becoming a forces friendly employer.
- 4.3. A Guaranteed Interview scheme was implemented to ensure members of the armed forces community face no barriers when applying for Council roles. Since the 1st of April 2021 to 31st August 2022, MCC have hired 8 Veterans and/or Reservists.
- 4.4. The Councils Reservist Policy was updated to reflect our support for the reserves and ensure current and future Council reservists feel supported in both spheres of work.
- 4.5. MCC refreshed the current online Armed Forces Toolkit to ensure the Council provides necessary and improved information, links, and signposting for veterans, reservists, their families, and professionals working with the armed forces community.
- 4.6. Started and maintained an Armed Forces Focus Group to inform the Councils Covenant work and ensure the voice of the armed forces community is present and heard.
- 4.7. Acquired funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust to stimulate grass-root activity within Manchester. Consultation is currently being carried out with partners to identify and target where and what will be most impactful.
- 4.8. Armed Forces has been added to the Councils Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) template to ensure alignment and learning from the Public Sector Equality Duty and ensuring all services have due regard to the impact their service has on this community.

5. The Armed Forces Act 2021

- 5.1. The Covenant was introduced in its current form in 2011 as a voluntary agreement. However, there has remained concern that members of the armed forces community continue to experience disadvantage when accessing public services.
- 5.2. To remedy this, the current government has legislated to put in place the Armed Forces Act 2021 which strengthens the Armed Forces Covenant by obligating public bodies to have due regard to covenant principles when exercising relevant public functions within the spheres of education, healthcare, and housing. Those principles being:
 - The unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the armed forces.
 - The principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for service people from membership, or former membership, of the armed forces.
 - 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.
 - These obligations will come into force over coming months when the Secretary of State for Defence issues formal statutory guidance

6. Preparation for the Act

- 6.1. The Local Government association (LGA) is working with the Government to support local authority implementation, the key issues being to:
- 6.2. Raise awareness about the forthcoming due regard duty, and the anticipated implementation timeframe, with relevant council colleagues in housing, education and healthcare services, and with external partners from other in-scope organisations
- 6.3. Review and identify potential service gaps / areas to strengthen in local policies, processes and procedures across housing, education, and healthcare. Implement staff training at strategic, managerial and customer-facing levels
- 6.4. Participate in regional discussions about getting ready for the due regard duty that may be happening at regional Armed Forces Covenant Partnerships
- 6.5. Record costs that you may incur getting ready for the introduction of the duty and share these with the LGA to feed into the ongoing new burdens work
- 6.6. Identify potential learning from the local introduction of other similar duties, such as the Public Sector Equality Duty.

6.7. Having an established Armed Forces Specialist post and a Covenant Action Plan along with membership of the Greater Manchester Armed Forces Leads Group we consider that well placed to take this agenda forward. Whilst the government has stated that there will be no new monies to support implementation of the Armed Forces Act, the LGA has secured a commitment for a review of this decision after one year's operation. This evidence will be gathered and passed on accordingly.

7. Next Steps

7.1. MCC will continue to implement the Armed Forces Covenant Action Plan to deliver the priorities set out in the annual report, key activities include:

- Complete and finalise Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) to serve as evidence base for future bids and service developments.
- Deploy Armed Forces Champions into relevant departments to assist in the embedding of the Armed Forces Covenant and expand its reach and influence throughout the Council and its functions.
- Expand current data collection to further inform covenant work, influence decision making, advise in service development, and identify barriers.
- Implement the changes as required by the Armed Forces Act 2021 and work with LGA to record subsequent financial impacts.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Members are recommended to note and comment upon the Annual Report.

8.2 Members are recommended to note actions being undertaken to prepare for implementation of the Armed Forces Act 2021.

9. Appendices

1) Manchester City Council Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2022