

---

## **West Sussex County Council's Armed Forces Covenant 2021/22**

### **Background**

- 1** West Sussex County Council first signed the Covenant in 2012 as its commitment to the armed forces community. The Council achieved Gold Award status in August 2020 on the South East Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association (SERFCA) Employer Award Programme.
- 2** The County Council hosts the West Sussex Civilian Military Partnership Board, a stakeholder group including borough and district councils, armed forces organisations, charities and business and employment representatives. It works to improve service provision for the armed forces community. The Board is chaired by Cllr Pendleton, the County Council's Armed Forces Champion.
- 3** The County Council agreed an Armed Forces Strategy in March 2021, committing to developing its support further in a joined-up approach across Council services.

### **Update**

- 4** An officer Armed Forces Panel has been established to drive the delivery of the Strategy and to ensure that the Council provides a consistent, high-quality service for the armed forces family. The Panel is chaired by Emily King, Assistant Director (Communities) and comprises staff veterans working alongside representatives from Human Resources & Organisational Development and Communications & Engagement and colleagues from customer facing services. The focus of the Panel has been to map and record in our Library Information System details of community services, identifying where additional training would enhance support to those who have served, to revise the Council's website and to build data on veterans, reservists and forces family members working within the Council. This will lead to integrated records to signpost staff to the range of support and resources available as well as directly contributing to the development of the Council's approach.
- 5** The Council is part of Forces Connect South East which is charged with allocating funding to the South East county areas to provide training on the purpose and use of the Covenant, including the effect of new legislation. The Council is arranging further training on the covenant. County councillors and some members of the officer Panel attended a training session in June 2022, during Armed Forces week. For the first time, in May 2021, all members were asked the question 'have you served in the armed forces?' Five members said 'yes'.
- 6** The Leader of the Council has raised the Armed Forces Covenant in his meetings with leaders of borough and district councils. He has encouraged the leaders to prioritise this matter and to apply for new awards from the SERFCA scheme. He has also encouraged them to arrange for training on the Covenant as part of the Forces Connect South East funding. Training has been given to staff and members at Adur, Arun and Worthing Councils so far in 2022.
- 7** The archives and library of the Royal Sussex Regiment are held at the County Council's Record Office and the Record Office is working with the Royal Sussex Regimental Association Trust and the Sussex Yeomanry Museum Trust to preserve and promote the military heritage of the county.

- 
- 8** Examples of support by the County Council include the immediate practical assistance for those arriving as part of the Operation Pitting evacuation of Afghanistan during August 2021, the delivery of wrap around support within bridging accommodation and the programme of resettlement of Afghan families. Many include someone who worked with British armed forces or who served in the Afghan military. Refugee resettlement programmes have been well supported across West Sussex and the Council has provided assistance in finding work for Afghan refugees as well as employing directly. Discussions are underway with the Record Office to identify how the stories of those spending time in West Sussex can be captured as part of our local history.
- 9** The County Council has many positive links with other organisations and prides itself on strong partnership working. An example is the relationship with the University of Chichester who have delivered a first 12-week bridging course for 20 Afghan refugees, including some who worked as interpreters to the armed forces. This innovative course provides participants with the knowledge and skills to access higher education and was originally designed for British service veterans but has been expanded to support those awaiting permanent resettlement. The course will also provide refugees with personal and professional skills, helping employability and organisation specific knowledge i.e. voluntary roles and academic progression routes. The bridging model is fully funded externally and delivered to fit around refugee work and family life. By completing the course, participants will have the qualification necessary to apply for one of the highly respected degree courses at the University of Chichester. A second course started in September to enable another cohort of students to participate.

### **Moving Forward**

- 10** The officer Panel referred to in paragraph 4 has asked the Customer Experience Team to review the content of training material for customer service staff within the County Council to ensure it reflects the current policy position on the Armed Forces Covenant.
- 11** The network will be strengthened with more officer appointments from key services around the Council.

### **Recommended**

That the report be noted.

### **Jacky Pendleton**

West Sussex County Council Armed Forces Champion

**Contact Officer:** Charles Gauntlett, Senior Advisor, Tel: 033 022 22524

### **Background papers:**

None