

THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT

Executive Summary

In May 2011 the Government published the Armed Forces Covenant which outlined the nation's moral obligation to the Armed Forces. At that time, Councils across the Country signed Community Covenants to declare their support for local Armed Forces communities. Woking signed its Community Covenant on 1st November 2012.

Councils are now encouraged to revise the Community Covenants into locally specific Armed Forces Covenants. These new pledges provide greater detail, as per statutory and discretionary support for Army personnel. By re-signing the Covenant, the Council agrees to uphold the Armed Forces Covenant and support the Armed Forces community, acknowledging that:

- Members of the Armed Forces Community should not face disadvantages arising from their service in the provision of public and commercial services.
- In some circumstances special provision may be justified, especially for those who have given the most, such as the injured or bereaved.

The Council has made significant progress in supporting the Armed Forces community since 2012. In 2016, it received the Employer Recognition Scheme Silver Award, a pre-requisite for achieving the Gold Standard. Subsequently in 2020, Woking became the first Council in Surrey to achieve the Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award from the Ministry of Defence, particularly acknowledging its 'Forces-friendly' organisational policies.

In support of the Armed Forces community, the Council oversees and promotes important local heritage sites including the Peace Garden and Brookwood Cemetery and hosts key civic remembrance events. It works closely with the Army Training Centre (Pirbright) and supports local Army and ex-service personnel with housing and employment support, promoting a monthly Veterans Hub at Woking Fire Station with partners and a weekly meeting for the Gurkha community. This work is overseen by the Military Covenant Advisory Panel (MCAP) which seeks to oversee and develop the local offer for the community.

Ten years on from the signing of the original Community Covenant in 2012, in view of its ongoing commitment to the Military, the Council has revised its commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, to be signed on behalf of the Armed Forces Training Centre (Pirbright) and Woking Borough Council at Council on 1st December 2022.

Recommendations

The Council is requested to:

RESOLVE That

- (i) the significant progress the Council has made in supporting the Armed Forces in Woking be noted; and
- (ii) the revised Armed Forces Covenant be signed.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendations set out above.

The Armed Forces Covenant

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Ten years on from signing the Community Covenant in 2012, the Council has revised its commitment to Armed Forces Covenant, to be signed on behalf of the Army Training Centre (Pirbright) and Woking Borough Council.
- 1.2 By revising the pledges within the Covenant, the Council formally agrees to support current and former military personnel and their families, acknowledging that members should not face disadvantages arising from their service in the provision of public and commercial services.

2.0 The Armed Forces Covenant

- 2.1 The Armed Forces Covenant is a pledge whereby the Council acknowledges and understands that those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society that they serve with their lives.
- 2.2 The principles of the Covenant are as follows:
 - *Members of the Armed Forces Community should not face disadvantages arising from their service in the provision of public and commercial services.*
 - *In some circumstances special provision may be justified, especially for those who have given the most, such as the injured or bereaved.*
- 2.3 The new covenant includes a range of locally specific pledges that uphold these principles. These include statutory and discretionary duties for the Council, with its partners, to support the Armed Forces community in Woking.

3.0 Support for the Armed Forces in Woking

- 3.1 The Council is committed to supporting the Armed Forces community in Woking through a range of provision. It has developed policies that are 'Forces-friendly', achieving an Employer Recognition Gold Award by the Ministry of Defence in 2020 and will seek to maintain this standard.
- 3.2 Brookwood Cemetery and the Peace Garden are both award winning heritage sites, attracting visitors locally and internationally throughout the year. These sites are an asset to the borough and provide important places for reflection and remembrance for the Armed Forces community and their families.
- 3.3 The monthly Veterans Hub at Woking Fire Station provides a welcoming space for serving and ex-military personnel. The Hub is a partnership between Woking Fire Station, Surrey County Council, Woking Borough Council, DWP, Health and SSAFA charity that supports local veterans.
- 3.4 This year the Council has supported the Veterans Hub through new promotional material published online, in the Woking Magazine and across its community services. There are opportunities moving forward now to strengthen local partnerships further through this provision, and with the Military Covenant Advisory Panel. This will bring stakeholders together to broaden local knowledge and create a more holistic offer for the Armed Forces community. The Council also supports a weekly meeting for the Gurkha community who, with guidance from Volunteer Woking, are developing their local offer and linking with the wider Gurkha communities in Surrey and Hampshire.
- 3.5 By revising a new Armed Forces Covenant, the Council has an opportunity to recommit its support for the Armed Forces community, recognising the significant value of their contribution

to society. The Woking Military Covenant Advisory Panel (MCAP) will continue to oversee the development of this work, ensuring the commitment to the Covenant is upheld herein.

4.0 Corporate Strategy

- 4.1 The Council's priority of creating Healthier Communities seeks to provide a safe, thriving and sustainable community and Health and Wellbeing for all. The Armed Forces Covenant is an important commitment to supporting the Armed Forces community in Woking to ensure that military and ex-military personnel face no disadvantage. This is further emphasised by the Council's Health and Wellbeing Priorities which include mental health, independent living, supporting carers and tackling isolation and loneliness.

5.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 5.1 There are no new financial risks associated with the Armed Forces Covenant.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 5.2 By re-signing the Covenant, the Council is recommitting its support for veterans and serving personnel from the Armed Forces and their families. The Covenant states the following:
- *Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most, such as the injured and the bereaved.*
 - *This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.*

Legal

- 5.3 The Armed Forces Covenant is a pledge towards a commitment and not a legally binding document. The Council's legal obligations to military personnel are reflected in its policies.

6.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 6.1 The re-signing of the Armed Forces Covenant is a pledged partnership between the Council and the Military, notably the Army Training Centre (Pirbright) and members of the Military Covenant Advisory Panel.
- 6.2 Engagement on the content of the pledges has been completed with MCAP representatives, Military personnel, Council Officers, Portfolio Holder and the SE Regional Employer Engagement Director.
- 6.3 Canon Peter Bruinvels CC, Surrey County Council Civilian-Military Armed Forces Covenant Lead and Liaison Adviser, states the following:

"As the Armed Forces Champion and Covenant Lead for Surrey County Council, I am delighted that Woking BC has decided to re-sign the Armed Forces Covenant. Having been present and involved with Woking BC from the time when it originally signed the then Armed Forces Community Covenant, its progress has been quite remarkable! I was pleased to assist Woking

The Armed Forces Covenant

BC as it firstly went for the Silver Employers Recognition Award and then the Gold Employers Recognition Award where I acted as their Mentor. I have also had the opportunity to get to know many of their staff not only on Election Duties, but when I have led Armed Forces Awareness Training. Woking BC, its Councillors and staff are 100% committed to both supporting the Military at ATC (Pirbright) and working with the Armed Forces Community and already show 'due regard' under the Armed Forces Act 2021 in all their dealings with the Military and especially in the provision of Housing and Employment, offering guaranteed interviews to appropriately qualified members of the Armed Forces Community and through supporting ex-service personnel and Veterans across Woking. They are a shining example of what makes a 'military-friendly' Council and Employer.

- 6.4 It is only right therefore that Woking BC should now re-sign the Armed Forces Covenant to acknowledge Woking BC's commitment to the Armed Forces Community and especially ATC (Pirbright) who proudly protect our nation with honour, courage and commitment, having already been prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice."

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