

Oldham Council Resolution – Supporting Our Armed Forces Community

The full Council at its meeting on 14th December 2022 debated the following motion:

‘The Royal British Legion (TRBL) have conducted a series of successful campaigns with the aim of improving the provision of public services for the Armed Forces community across the United Kingdom and promoting their entitlement and access to those services.

In November 2022, a new Armed Forces Covenant Duty came into force, as introduced by His Majesty’s Government. This means legal obligations have been placed on the Metropolitan Borough Council of Oldham to show due regard to the principles of the Covenant, particularly in the policy areas of healthcare, housing, and education.

Regarding TRBL’s *‘Making the Benefits System Fit for Service’* campaign this Council are already meeting most of the asks, which is positive, but there is more to do for the 5,941 veterans currently living in the Borough of Oldham.

This Council does disregard as income all payments made under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (2005), the War Pension Scheme, and Service Attributable Pensions in assessments for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Support / Reduction, Discretionary Housing Payments and Disabled Facilities Grants.

This Council also disregards as income all payments of Service Invaliding Pensions (SIPs) in Discretionary Housing Payments and Disabled Facilities Grants, however, it does regard SIPs as occupational pensions and does not disregard them in assessments for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support / Reduction.

TRBL believes that Local Authorities should ensure that veterans are not forced to give up their military compensation to pay for the same support to which their civilian counterparts are entitled. Military compensation is awarded to veterans, and sometimes their families, in recognition of the pain and loss of amenity brought about by injury and illness that was caused in Service. Military compensation is not income, and therefore should not be treated as such.

According to the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), there are only four practices who possess the ‘veterans friendly’ accreditation in the Borough of Oldham – those being Hill Top Surgery, Medlock Medical Practice, Royton Medical Centre and Saddleworth Medical Practice.

A University of Chester evaluation found that 84% of accredited practices said that they feel they have a better understanding of veterans’ needs after becoming accredited.

With respect to education, all state schools, academies, and free schools in England, which have children of service families in school years Reception to Year 11, can receive Service Pupil Premium (SPP) funding. SPP recognises the specific

challenges children from Service families face, and the funding can be used to offer pastoral support and help mitigate the negative impact on Service children of family mobility and parental deployment.

This Council resolves to act upon the two primary recommendations contained within TRBL's '*Unpaid carers in the Armed Forces community*' report, released in September 2021, by:

- Writing to all statutory bodies and those delivering statutory services in the Borough to ensure they routinely ask and record whether their patients and clients are a member of the Armed Forces community and if they have caring responsibilities.
- Urgently acting upon NHS England's recommendation to consider how carers from the Armed Forces can be supported in local carers' strategies, including how they can be encouraged to access support and take up a carer's assessment.

In addition, this Council resolves that:

- The Leader of the Council and Chief Executive Officer shall immediately suspend the Council policy which considers SIPs as a source of income in assessments for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support / Reductions.
- The Cabinet Member for Health & Social Care shall write to all GP service providers in the Borough, that are not currently accredited, and encourage them to seek the 'veterans friendly' accreditation. And, add to Oldham's carers' strategy ways in which to better serve and support our Armed Forces community – something it currently does not do.
- The Cabinet Member for Education & Skills shall write to education providers in the Borough to strongly encourage parents, who are Service Personnel, to notify the schools, colleges, et cetera of their unique status in order that they qualify for SPP.
- The Leader of the Council shall present the contents of this proposal to representatives on the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and promote the positive impact the resolutions will have if acted upon by their respective Councils for the 68,037 veterans living across the GMCA area.

In relation to housing, this Council supports TRBL's responses to Local Government consultations concerning this policy area, and resolves to meet their requests for this Council to:

- Ensure that all residents approaching housing services are asked a question that will identify their membership of the Armed Forces community.
- Regularly review staff training processes to ensure that all relevant staff are aware of the housing policies specific to the Armed Forces community.
- Use discretion in waiving the five-year limit and allow veterans to access housing support with an exemption from the local connection requirement regardless of the time elapsed since they left Service.
- Apply the local connection exemption to divorced or separated spouses or partners of Service Personnel who are separating or have done so, in the five years preceding their application.'

On being put to the vote **Council resolved** to refer consideration of the Motion to the Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It is intended that the Committee consider this matter in detail and present its findings thereon to a future meeting of the Council.