
Report to CABINET

Oldham Council Armed Forces Covenant and Employer Recognition Scheme

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor Peter Dean, Cabinet Member for Thriving Communities and Culture

Officer Contact: Steve Hughes, Assistant Director of Strategy & Performance

Report Author: James Mulvaney, Policy Manager

17 February 2025

Reason for Decision

To approve an updated Armed Forces Covenant for Oldham Council.

Executive Summary

The Council has a statutory duty under the Armed Forces Act 2006, as amended by the Armed Forces Act 2021, to pay due regard to the Armed Forces Covenant principles when exercising certain functions.

Prior to the implementation of the statutory duty under the Armed Forces Act 2021, the Council chose to pledge its commitment to the Armed Forces community by promising to honour the Armed Forces Covenant. This pledge was last made in 2013. In 2017 the Council received the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme Silver Award, and this was renewed in 2022. Since 2021, the Council has consistently gone beyond its duty to the Armed Forces community, as evidenced in this report.

To further build on its work, this report recommends that the Council shall re-pledge its promise to honour the Armed Forces Covenant, and that the endeavours relating to its support of the Armed Forces community, as detailed in this report, shall be noted. An application for the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award is to be made prior to 12 March 2025.

Recommendations

- Note the support the Council is already providing to the Armed Forces community along with other workstreams underway.
- Approve a new pledge that the Council will honour the appended Armed Forces Covenant.

Oldham Council Armed Forces Covenant and Employer Recognition Scheme

1 Background

- 1.1 In 2021, the Armed Forces Act 2006 was amended to place a duty (the Covenant Duty) on certain specified persons or bodies, in the exercise of relevant functions, to pay “due regard to the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant”.
- 1.2 Across Greater Manchester, all local authorities have committed to the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC). The aim is to embed and sustain activity, ensuring that members of the Armed Forces community receive the support they need in their local communities in recognition of their dedication and sacrifice. The aim of this activity is to make GM the best place in the UK for members of the Armed Forces Community to live. As such, each GM local authority has confirmed its dedication to having a lead officer, along with access to a permanent GM wide programme manager who supports and coordinates activity.
- 1.3 The Ministry of Defence (MOD) runs The Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS), which acknowledges employers that provide exceptional support to the Armed Forces community by going above and beyond their Covenant pledges. Through a 3-tier approach of bronze, silver and gold awards, the scheme recognises the various levels of commitment provided by employers.

2 Criteria for AFC ERS Gold

- 2.1 The window for applications opens only once a year. The next window opens on 8th January 2025 and closes on 12th March 2025. Once applications are submitted, a review board will assess the application and announces successful applicants in July 2025.
- 2.2 Guidance is published for potential applicants to consider, with a range of essential and desirable criteria. With work undertaken over recent months, Oldham Council scores well against all the essential criteria and scores well against most of the desirable criteria.

3 Current Position

- 3.1 Across GM, eight local authorities currently hold ERS Gold Awards, and three local authorities (including Oldham Council) hold ERS Silver Awards. Oldham Council achieved the silver award in 2017 and renewed this status in 2022.
- 3.2 Support is already offered in a variety of ways to the Armed Forces community in Oldham, including but not limited to:
- A Policy Manager in the Corporate Policy Team currently operates as our officer armed forces champion, and there is a councillor champion (Cllr Ken Rustidge).
 - The officer champion organises Oldham Armed Forces Partnership meetings which take place quarterly with organisations and other public sector bodies in the borough which support the armed forces community, including each of the Royal British Legion (RBL) branches.
 - A staff member in the mayor’s office supports the community to organise events, notably around Remembrance Sunday.
 - HR guidelines are in place to support veterans and reservists in employment, including guaranteed interviews and paid leave for annual training/camp, and mobilisation support.
 - Oldham Council is part of a supportive GM wide Armed Forces Network, which shares knowledge and best practice.

3.3 Actions we have made progress on ahead of the March deadline include:

- Re-establishing an internal 'Armed Forces Support' network, with staff in key departments such as Housing, Education, Social Care, Public Health, Council tax, HR, Communications, Mayoral, and Policy.
- The guaranteed interview scheme for veterans will be expanded to include Cadets.
- The intranet will be updated to better collate the support we offer to our staff members who are reservists, cadets, and veterans.
- Signing up to the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) and Forces Families Jobs (FFJ). These are both job sites for the Armed Forces Community which can share our job posting free of charge.
- Bolstering our already strong external and internal communications to highlight how we support the Armed Forces Community and our AFC ERS award.
- Presenting to some of the council's boards to share the benefits of becoming an armed forces covenant employer.
- Supporting the regional DWP to host a veterans' and Armed Forces employment event in Oldham Town Centre.
- Making contact with local cadet organisations to support their activities and offer mentoring/ CV writing/ mock interview/ work experience/ apprenticeship opportunities.

4 The Armed Forces Covenant

4.1 Oldham Council last signed the Armed Forces Covenant in October 2013. The purpose of this covenant is to encourage support for the Armed Forces community working and residing in Oldham. It is also there to confirm the Council's commitment to recognise and remember the sacrifices made by members of the Armed Forces community, including in-service and ex-service personnel and their families.

4.2 The pledge to honour the Armed Forces Covenant is often re-confirmed from time to time to reiterate the promise that the Armed Forces community will be treated fairly and face no disadvantage when accessing public and commercial services, with special provision made in appropriate cases for those who have sacrificed the most. With the numerous commitments Oldham Council has made to the Armed Forces community over the past 10 years since the previous covenant, now is an opportune time to re-pledge the Council's promise to honour the covenant.

5 Options/Alternatives

5.1 Option 1: Note the support the Council is already providing to the Armed Forces community along with other workstreams underway and approve that Oldham Council shall make a new pledge that it will honour the appended Armed Forces Covenant. This will allow the Council to display its re-affirmed commitment to supporting the Armed Forces community.

5.2 Option 2: Note the support the Council is already providing to the Armed Forces community, along with other workstreams underway, but do not approve a new pledge that Oldham Council will honour the appended Armed Forces Covenant. This will reflect poorly on Oldham Council, with the previous covenant pledge being made 11 years ago.

6 Preferred Option

6.1 Option 1: Note the support the Council is already providing to the Armed Forces community along with other workstreams underway and approve that Oldham Council shall make a new pledge that it will honour the appended Armed Forces Covenant.

7 Consultation

7.1 Oldham Council officers have been engaged with the Armed Forces Community and our partners in designing an updated Covenant.

7.2 **Financial Implications**

The report seeks approval for a continuation of our commitment to the Armed Forces Community, with some additional activity in order for the Council to achieve the gold award.

There are no additional financial implications associated with the proposal.

(Matthew Kearns – Finance Manager)

8 **Legal Implications**

8.1 The Armed Forces Act 2021 amended the Armed Forces Act 2006 to create the Armed Forces Covenant Duty, which is a legal obligation, on specified bodies in the UK. The Council is a specified body and, therefore in exercising a relevant function, it must have due regard to: (a) the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the Armed Forces; (b) the principle that it is desirable to remove disadvantages arising for Service people from membership, or former membership, of the Armed Forces, and (c) 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. The relevant functions are under or by virtue of the legislative provisions listed in sections 343AA(4)-(6), 343AB(4)-(6), 343AC(4)-(6) and 343AD(4)-(6) of the Armed Forces Act.

8.2 As detailed in Government guidance, the duty to have due regard is about informed decision-making and means that the Council should think about and place a suitable amount of weight on the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when it considers all the factors relevant to how it carries out relevant functions. The guidance further states that the duty is not prescriptive about the actions which the Council should take in order to comply with its legal obligations, and it does not mandate specific public service delivery outcomes.

8.3 The actions detailed in this report are undertaken in compliance with the statutory duty placed on the Council under the amended Armed Forces Act 2006.

8.4 The Council last made the Armed Forces Covenant in 2013, which is prior to the change in law. Following the making of this pledge the Council has proven good practice to remove, mitigate, or prevent incidents of disadvantage from occurring. There are no known legal implications to the Council reaffirming its commitment to the promises made under the Armed Forces Covenant.

Sarah Orrell – Commercial & Procurement Solicitor

9 **Equality Impact, including implications for Children and Young People**

9.1 None

10 **Key Decision**

10.1 Yes

11 **Key Decision Reference**

11.1 FCR/27/24

12 **Background Papers**

12.1 None

13 **Appendices**

13.1 Oldham Council Armed Forces Covenant