

SCRUTINY PANEL A

Meeting held on Tuesday, 22nd September, 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Dave Shaw in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Trevor Locke,
Lauren Mitchell, Warren Nuttall, John Smallridge
and David Walters.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy and Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Councillor Dale Grounds.
Mark Leek (Operations Manager for Forces
within the Community Charity).

SA.17 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

Councillors Jim Blagden and David Walters declared Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests due to their former service within the Armed Forces.

SA.18 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 12 March 2020, be received and approved as a correct record.

Councillor Warren Nuttall took the opportunity to ask if the 'Bus Provision in Ashfield' review had been concluded and was advised that the review was currently pending due to the Covid-19 lockdown and the restrictions this had imposed on local transport providers over the past six months.

The review would be recommenced once local transport service had been fully resumed and an assessment could be made as to any developing gaps in local services following the lockdown.

SA.19 Scrutiny Review: Veterans and Service Personnel

The Chairman introduced the item and extended a warm welcome to Mark Leek who was in attendance at the meeting. Mark had founded the Kirkby in Ashfield Armed Forces and Veterans Breakfast Club and was currently working as Operations Manager for the local 'Forces in the Community' Charity.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services presented the introductory report which provided Members with some background information regarding current Council services accessed by veterans and ex-service personnel, national context regarding the topic, the Armed Forces Covenant and discussion points for the review's terms of reference.

Originally the review was set to take place as a separate scrutiny commission as announced at a Council meeting in July 2019 by the Leader of the Council. Due to several challenging circumstances experienced over the past year, work on the commission had unfortunately been delayed.

At the July 2020 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Members agreed the most appropriate course of action would be to incorporate the planned Veterans and Service Personnel Scrutiny Commission into the annual Scrutiny Workplan for 2020/21 to ensure the review could be undertaken with findings and recommendations being submitted to Cabinet.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members agreed some primary objectives for the review as follows:

- *To examine all relevant Council policies and strategies and ensure all information for veterans and service personnel is clear and easily accessible;*
- *To consider the Council's relationship with local veterans and service personnel charitable organisations;*
- *The development of a policy document to support the armed forces community, including information on:*
 - *General support*
 - *Benefits and finance*
 - *Jobs and employment*
 - *Housing*
 - *Health and wellbeing.*

Aside from the review, the Council's Senior Community Engagement Officer, Gillian Welch, had been working with the local veterans' community for some years and had been at the forefront of enabling the Council to sign an Armed Forces Covenant.

The Covenant offered the Council a unique and low-cost way to do their bit to honour the Armed Forces locally whilst also offering groups, organisations and individuals within the area access to Government funding and the Armed Forces Covenant Grant Scheme.

The Senior Community Engagement Officer had also enabled the Council to achieve the bronze and silver awards (2018 and 2019 respectively), obtainable through the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) which encouraged employers to support defence and offer inspiration to others.

Mark Leek had been actively engaged with the Council in their efforts to achieve the bronze and silver ERS awards and the Armed Forces Covenant and had worked tirelessly in the local area to support veterans and former members of the Armed Forces and Reserve Forces. It was for that reason Members were keen to invite Mark to the Panel meetings to access his experience and knowledge and to encourage informed debate and conversation.

At this point in the meeting, Mark Leek took the opportunity to address the Panel and gave Members some background in relation to his upbringing and his forces service in the Territorial Army, 1 Wessex and the Queens Regiment before undertaking civilian work for the Army in Germany.

Returning to Kirkby in Ashfield in 2010, it became apparent that many veterans and ex-service personnel were battling loneliness and isolation and were struggling to access the local services they required. To endeavour to address the problem, the Kirkby in Ashfield Armed Force and Veterans Breakfast Club was founded in January 2019 with 300 plus members now online with an average of 40-55 members attending the breakfasts on the third Saturday of each month.

Following the inaugural breakfast meeting, it became obvious that many veterans and ex-service personnel were struggling with a host of issues that included some frustrations with the support being offered by the Council. It was acknowledged that staff were always courteous and helpful but it was their lack of expertise in dealing with veterans, who were often struggling with mental health issues, that was the obstacle.

Many veterans and ex-service personnel needed additional support and understanding to help them acclimatise back into civilian life and it was suggested that a 'Welcome Pack', offered by the Council, might be an option to commence the process and assist them in accessing the services they require.

A discussion ensued and Members considered the following:

- the plethora of Armed Forces charities seemingly available and an acknowledgement that many were well-meaning but did not always offer the dedicated support required;
- the availability of financial support for former members and veterans of the Armed Forces, for training and educational programmes;
- the importance of local Councillors being trained to assist veterans and ex-service personnel in the first instance to ensure accurate signposting is achieved;
- concerns that the Council should not accept full responsibility for supporting veterans and ex-service personnel but should undertake their role in tandem with the local and national charities already available;

- the benefits of the Council producing a 'Welcome Pack' and to ensure all staff are knowledgeable as to the support and signposting currently offered by the Council;
- acknowledgement of the great work carried out by the Council's Senior Community Engagement Officer and a suggestion to invite her to the next meeting of the Panel to assist Members with the review;
- the importance of continuing with the efforts to achieve the Gold Award from the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) to cement the Council's continued commitment to the Armed Forces and its personnel;
- a suggestion to display posters in the Council's main reception advising any former members or veterans of the Armed Forces to introduce themselves and request the 'Welcome Pack' from customer advisers at the commencement of any initial conversation, consultation or interview;
- a suggestion that the Council could encourage all large employers within the District to guarantee a job interview for any positions applied for by veterans and ex-service personnel, to offer interview experience and assist with their transition back into civilian life;
- services offered by the Council to assist veterans and ex-service personnel could be advertised in the Council's publication 'Ashfield Matters' on a quarterly basis;
- the possibility of Members encouraging local businesses within their wards to display any promotional literature and endorse the support offered to Armed Forces ex-service personnel by the Council.

RESOLVED that
the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services be requested to undertake the following in readiness for the October 2020 meeting of the Panel:

- a) to commence work on the development of an Armed Forces Welcome Pack with a view to presenting a draft to the Panel for consideration at the next meeting;
- b) to further explore the possibility of producing an information poster, to be displayed in the Council's main reception, to encourage veterans and ex-service personnel to introduce themselves to customer advisers at the commencement of any initial consultation or interview to ensure targeted support and assistance is provided;
- c) to extend an invite to the following, to attend the October 2020 meeting of the Panel:-
 - Gillian Welch, the Council's Senior Community Engagement Officer, to clarify the work undertaken thus far to promote the Council's commitment towards the Armed Forces Covenant and the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS);

- a representative from the local Forces in the Community Charity to allow Members some insight into the ongoing challenges being faced by veterans and former members of the Armed Forces, to reintegrate back into civilian life.

The meeting closed at 8.00 pm

Chairman.