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## **Proposal for a Memorandum of Understanding between Welsh Local Government and the Armed Forces Community in Wales**

### **Purpose**

1. To inform Members about the UK Government's Armed Forces Covenant and the Welsh Government's Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales and the opportunity to develop Community Covenants. The report will also seek views on a proposal to develop a Memorandum of Understanding between Welsh local government and the Armed Forces Community in Wales.

### **The Armed Forces Covenant**

2. In 2011 the UK Government (Ministry of Defence) published *The Armed Forces Covenant: Today and Tomorrow* which sets out, "An enduring covenant between the people of the UK, Her Majesty's Government and all those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their families". This Covenant recognises that the Armed Forces defend the realm on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and sometimes suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. It recognises that in return the nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families who also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces and therefore deserve respect and support, and fair treatment.
3. The Covenant sets out that those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration may be appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most, such as the injured and bereaved. This obligation of supporting the Armed Forces Community involves the whole of society: voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and individuals. The two key principles underpinning the Covenant are 'no disadvantage' and 'special consideration'.
3. In November 2011 the Welsh Government published their *Package of Support for the Armed Forces Community in Wales*. The Welsh Government document should be read in conjunction with and compliments the MOD's Covenant and sets out specific policies that the Welsh Government plans to implement in the coming year and beyond in areas and services that are devolved. To date, the Welsh Government has taken and is taking the following actions:
  - Contributed to the production of an annual **Armed Forces Covenant Report** which will report how the Government is supporting the Armed Forces Community and this will allow progress to be reported against the initiatives included in the Package of Support
  - Appointed an **Armed Forces Advocate** for Wales (June Mulligan, Director General Local Government and Communities)
  - Established an **Expert Group** on the needs of the Armed Forces Community in Wales which meets biannually, chaired by the Minister for Local Government

and Communities and with members from a number of organisations representing the Armed Forces. Its purpose is to consider the public service needs of the Armed Forces Community; whether existing service delivery meets their needs on equal terms with civilian society; and what scope there may be for making services more responsive to their needs

- Improved **communication** with the Armed Forces Community to ensure they receive the information on services and support they are entitled to
- Welsh regulation, inspection and audit agencies will provide the checks and balances with regard to local authorities, health etc on how they are operating.

4. The following provides information on the initiatives being taken by Welsh Government and its expectations of public services in addressing issues affecting the Armed Forces Community in Wales as set out in their *Package of Support*:

- **Recognition:** Support for Armed Forces Day
- **Participation as Citizens:** improving the ability of service personnel to vote (through the Elections Planning Group, Returning Officers in Wales will be encouraged to support a scheme which encourages Service personnel to register to vote through post or a proxy vote)
- **Healthcare:** there are a number of specific issues to be addressed in this area including mental health needs; waiting lists; prosthetic limbs; combating stress; bereavement; information services for discharged personnel
- **Education:** Admission authorities must treat a Forces family as meeting the residency criteria for a schools catchment area so long as they can provide evidence that they will shortly be posted there; and financial support for Service leavers to study at university
- **Childcare:** local authorities have duties to assess the sufficiency of childcare provision locally and secure sufficient childcare, including for parents working atypical hours
- **Housing:** service personal and veterans have priority status in the Homebuy scheme where housing problems result from events linked to service; preventing homelessness amongst veterans is a commitment in the Welsh Government Homelessness Ten Year Plan and a directory of services for veterans is to be published and access to housing advice before discharge
- **Benefits and Tax:** billing authorities give a 50% council tax discount on second homes owned by Forces personnel who live in accommodation provided by MOD
- **Transition:** supporting Reservists
- **Support after service:** automatic entitlement to Blue Badges for seriously injured Service personnel and veterans; eased access to concessionary travel for seriously injured Service personnel and veterans; 'Be the Boss' enterprise support for ex-service personnel which supports people to pursue either self employment or a business idea; recruitment of veterans
- **Working with wider society:** Following the publication of the Armed Forces Covenant which encourages public service providers, the private sector and voluntary bodies to offer targeted support for their local Armed Forces Community, the Welsh Government wish to develop and support a new Community Covenant Scheme and work with local authorities, LSBs and WLGA to support the Covenant and enhance the arrangements.

## **Community Covenant and Community Covenant Grant Scheme**

5. A **Community Covenant** is a voluntary statement of mutual support between a civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community and is intended to compliment the Armed Forces Covenant. The aims of the Community Covenant are to encourage local communities to support the Service community in their area and increase understanding and awareness amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces Community. While many activities are already held in support of the Service Community, for example, by participating in Armed Forces Day, the Community Covenant does not replicate such support but aims to encourage the civilian community to extend their support throughout the year and on longer term projects that benefit their local community. The aims of the Community Covenant are to:
  - Encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces Community in their areas;
  - Nurture public understanding and awareness amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces Community
  - Recognise and remember the sacrifices faced by the Armed Forces Community
  - Encourage activities which help to integrate the Armed Forces Community into local life
  - To encourage the Armed Forces Community to help and support the wider community, whether through participation in events and joint projects or other forms of engagement.
6. As highlighted above, the Welsh Government is keen for local authorities and their partners to develop Community Covenants as so far, in Wales, the Vale of Glamorgan County Borough Council is the only, local authority which has launched a Community Covenant and details of this can be found at [http://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/living/armed\\_forces.aspx](http://www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/living/armed_forces.aspx). Further details on establishing a Community Covenant and examples of good practice are available from [www.mod.uk/covenant](http://www.mod.uk/covenant).
7. The Ministry of Defence has also made available a **Community Covenant Grant Scheme** to deliver financial support to projects at the local level, which strengthen the ties or the mutual understanding between members of the Armed Forces Community and the wider community in which they live. £30 million is available from the MOD until 2015 and applications are invited for sums from £100 to £250,000 however it is envisaged that bids will be for smaller amount of funding to support local projects that deliver tangible benefits..

### **Proposal for a Memorandum of Understanding with the Armed Forces**

8. On 8<sup>th</sup> February 2012, the WLGA and Welsh Government held a joint conference entitled "Supporting our Armed Forces Community" which was attended by local authorities, health boards and health professionals and a wide range of organisations representing the Armed Forces, their families and veterans in Wales. Chaired by Cllr John Davies, WLGA Leader and with presentations from the Welsh Government Minister, the MOD, Cllr Janice Charles from the Vale of Glamorgan, Brigadier Napier, Commander (160) Wales Brigade and Air Vice Marshall Matt Wiles, the aims of the event were:
  - To consider any issues of concern to the Armed Forces Community in Wales and how public sector bodies can work together and interact in the community and ensure their needs are fully integrated

- To provide an opportunity to learn about the Armed Forces Community Covenant in action and the experience of implementing and managing the process.
9. Participants at the conference were extremely positive about the opportunity provided by Community Covenants in developing more positive relationships with the Armed Forces Community and some the strong messages which came through the day was the need for improved and on-going communication and understanding between the Community and public services in Wales. The workshops held (on housing, education and health) also offered for a more detailed dialogue on the concerns and aspirations of the Armed Forces Community
10. In discussing the way forward at the end of the conference, and following discussions with a number of local government representatives who were in attendance, Cllr Davies proposed that in starting to take forward the issues that had been raised, and to build on the willingness and goodwill that had been evident throughout the day, that he would be seeking the agreement of WLGA Members to offer the development of a Memorandum of Understanding (or a similar agreement) between Welsh local government and the Armed Forces Community which could set out a high level commitment to work together and could also be a first step in encouraging local authorities in Wales to further develop their relationships locally with the Armed Forces Community. Such an understanding would also demonstrate the commitment of Welsh local government to helping to deliver relevant commitments in the Armed Forces Covenant and the Package of Support.

## **Recommendations**

### **11. Members are asked to:**

- (a) Read and comment on the content of this report**
- (b) Note the information on the development of Community Covenants and encourage a discussion within your authority on the opportunity to develop a Community Covenant with the Armed Forces Community locally**
- (c) Support the proposal to offer the development of a Memorandum of Understanding between Welsh local government and the Armed Forces Community in Wales.**

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