

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting held on Thursday, 7th September, 2023 at the Council Offices, Farnborough at 7.00 pm.

Voting Members

Cllr M.D. Smith (Chairman)
Cllr Mrs. D.B. Bedford (Vice-Chairman)
Cllr K. Dibble (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr A. Adeola
Cllr Gaynor Austin
Cllr Jessica Auton
Cllr Jules Crossley
Cllr Mara Makunura
Cllr S.J. Masterson
Cllr Sophie Porter
Cllr S. Trussler

11. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 20th July, 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

12. SUPPORT FOR LOCAL ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY AND BRITISH GURKHA VETERANS

At its meeting in July 2023, the Council referred a Notice of Motion to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which highlighted the additional support needs of British Gurkha Veterans. The Committee had been asked to conduct a full assessment of all ongoing issues and support needs of the local Armed Forces Community, including those relating to local Gurkha Veterans.

The Committee welcomed a number of guests to the meeting, as set out below, who were in attendance to provide information and answer Members questions on matters relating to the support available locally, to the local Armed Forces Community and British Gurkha Veterans.

In attendance were:

- Dr Graham Cable – Chairman of the South-East Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee
- Councillor Dhan Sarki – Wellington Ward Member and Proposer of the Notice of Motion
- Councillor Jib Belbase – Wellington Ward Member
- Councillor Nem Thapa – Armed Forces Champion
- Councillor Nadia Martin – Shadow Armed Forces Champion
- Rachel Barker – Assistant Chief Executive

- Jill Shuttleworth – Corporate Manager – Democracy
- Jermaine Pinto – Housing Options Manager
- Madhu Gurung – Benefits Assessor

The Committee received the Corporate Manager – Democracy’s Report No. DEM2306 which presented a range of information and evidence to assist the committee’s assessment. This included the background to the Armed Forces Covenant and the council’s duties under the Armed Forces Act. The Report also presented information on census data, local organisations and partners that provide local support for Armed Forces personnel and their families, support for housing and healthcare, and the Gurkha pension scheme.

The Committee heard from Dr Graham Cable who advised on the work of the South-East Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee, the aim of which was to raise awareness of the Military Covenant, its aims and objectives and the provisions outlined within, to support all veterans and their families. In response to a question regarding the top three issues veterans experienced, Dr Cable mentioned education (for service children), housing and employment.

The Committee discussed access to help and assistance and the plethora of groups offering advice services and signposting. It was felt that a single point of access for serving military personnel and veterans would benefit those trying to access help.

Following a discussion regarding the Employer Recognition Scheme, for which the Council currently had a Silver Award, the Committee felt that striving for the Gold Award would benefit the local armed forces community even more. It was also suggested that other businesses in the Borough should be encouraged to join the scheme.

Cllrs Sarki, Belbase and Thapa addressed the Committee from the perspective of the Nepali community and on the issues of welfare and pension disparity experienced by former Gurkha Veterans, and provision for veterans. It was noted that the Indices of Multiple Deprivation had showed that a part of the Wellington Ward had the highest proportion of income deprived older people in the county, with a high percentage of those claiming Pension Credit. The 2021 Census data also identified that a high proportion of Nepali residents lived in the Wellington Ward (25.1%), 6.9% of which had served in the Armed Forces and almost 50% in that area had identified as Asian/Other in the ethnicity category (this group included Nepali residents).

Following consideration of all the information presented, the Committee agreed to the following outline recommendations:

- That the Council consider disregarding certain pension payments provided to veterans when assessing entitlement to the Disabled Facilities Grant
- That the Council works towards achieving the Gold Standard in the Employers Recognition Scheme

- That support be given to creating a single, coherent point of entry within the Borough for advice for the armed forces community – providing improved co-ordination between agencies and partners. If this could be provided as a physical place, such as locating a hub within the town centre of Aldershot (historically the home of the British Army) for example in the new Union Yard Development it would be even better. This could also provide a space for social purposes including for veterans. Linked to this, it was also suggested that arrangements be made to build a stronger network between the many organisations that support the local armed forces community to assist co-ordination. The Council could also offer to work with the Government on the development of a single gateway access point for the armed forces community.
- That the Leader of the Council write on behalf of the Council to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence and the local Member of Parliament to raise concerns about the disadvantage arising from pension disparity for former Gurkhas living in Rushmoor and urging the Government to address the current situation.

It was noted that Officers would draft the recommendations to Cabinet and share these with the Committee in due course.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their contribution to the meeting.

13. **WORK PLAN**

The Committee noted the current Work Plan.

The meeting closed at 9.18 pm.

CLLR M.D. SMITH (CHAIRMAN)
