

ARMED FORCES CABINET CHAMPION – ANNUAL REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES 2023/24

This Annual Report of the Cabinet Champion for Armed Forces, Cllr Nem Thapa, provides an overview of the year which summarises the role and expectations for the year, key activity achieved in 2023/24 and recommendations for 2024/25.

1. ROLE AND PRIORITIES – EXPECTATIONS FOR THE YEAR

- 1.1 The role of the Cabinet Champion for Armed Forces is to promote the objectives of the Armed Forces Covenant on behalf of the Council through local action and by building connections between the Military and civilian communities. The Armed Forces Act 2021 has now brought the Covenant principles into law to help protect military personnel, their close family, and veterans from being disadvantaged due to service life when accessing essential public services like healthcare, education, and housing.

Priorities this year:

- (1) Increase the visibility of the veteran community in the Borough and continuing to promote and develop connections with, and between, veterans' clubs.
- (2) Continue to support the development of the armed forces covenant arrangements and re-examine the criteria and possibility for Rushmoor Borough Council to work towards the Gold Award standard of the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme
- (3) Contribute to support the programme of joint military/civilian events in 2023/24 and actively support the events to encourage community cohesion and integration.
- (4) Develop the Armed Forces Covenant webpages on the Council's website with information that the Champion has curated through their networks.
- (5) Work with service families and supporting organisations to encourage engagement with local health and wellbeing services through the Primary Care Network and Clinical Commissioning Group

A full copy of the roles and responsibilities as agreed at the beginning of the year is attached as an Appendix.

2. SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACTIVITY IN 2023/24

Veterans and Armed Forces Community

- 2.1 In early September I submitted evidence and contributed to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's review of support for the local armed forces community and British Gurkha Veterans and highlighted the issues currently facing armed forces and Gurkha veterans arising from cost-of-living pressures.

Following the Committee's review, I wrote a letter jointly with the Leader of the Council to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence and the local Member of Parliament on behalf of the Borough's disadvantaged citizens and highlighting the issues arising from the Committee's assessment that:

- the Borough's most deprived areas are the same areas which are home to large numbers of former Gurkhas. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation show that part of the Wellington Ward in Aldershot has the highest proportion of income deprived older people in the County, and one of the highest in the country. A very high proportion of those affected are claiming Pension Credit at the lowest level. Rushmoor has a relatively large population of Gurkha veterans who are finding their circumstances challenging and are living in poor circumstances as they suffer the financial differential from pension disparity. This is a clear disadvantage.
- for those making the transition from military to civilian life, the many agencies providing support are complex to navigate, and that there would be a clear benefit from the creation of a single and coherent point of entry for advice for veterans and our armed forces community living within the Borough, and which would provide improved co-ordination between organisations. The letter offered to work with the Government on a funded pilot arrangement with our local Garrison to create a single gateway for advice for the armed forces community from the Borough that is the historic home of the British Army.

A copy of the response to the letter from the Ministry of Defence is attached at **Appendix 1** to this Report. This indicates that the Government is looking at options to increase the capacity of the Gurkha Welfare Advice Centre.

It is proposed that a key action for the Champion to take forward, as part of the Council's continued promotion of the Armed Forces Covenant is the holding of a network event with invitations to the key stakeholders and organisations that provide advice and support to Service Leavers and military families in the Borough to understand more about the strengths and focus for each provider and to develop a clearer overall understanding of which organisations to signpost to for different types of support.

Veterans

- 2.2 In addition to this, I have continued to take steps to attend and develop connections with the veterans' hubs in Aldershot and Farnborough and to seek to facilitate connections between clubs, which includes several coffee morning style clubs for example at the Aldershot Football Club, and Ramillies Park, Aldershot. I have also held a monthly surgery for veterans at the Prospect Community Centre in Farnborough. During the year, I have sought to investigate the possibility of establishing a single hub/venue which would bring together veterans from across the Borough. Looking ahead, there is a role for the Armed Forces Champion to continue to help facilitate links between veterans' organisations, and to facilitate links between veterans' clubs and local support organisations.

Website

- 2.3 Work is also underway to update the Council's Armed Forces Community Covenant webpages with the links, organisations, and information that I have curated during my time as Armed Forces Champion for Rushmoor.

Employer Recognition Scheme

- 2.4 One of my priorities this year was to investigate the possibility for Rushmoor to achieve the Gold Award standard in the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme. In November 2023, I met with the South-East Regional Employer Engagement Director and attended a Going for Gold Workshop in January 2024 to understand more about the application process, criteria for Gold and evidence required to be submitted.

Since January, some additional actions have been taken to move the Council towards closing the gap and meeting the criteria:

- the development of a draft new HR Policy on Reservists for the organisation which provides a framework and procedures for staff who may become Reservists in the Armed Forces, making provision for special leave for training purposes. This is planned to be formally approved by the Cabinet in April 2024.
 - Signing up to the Career Transition Partnership (CTP) and the Forces Families Jobs (FFJ) portal for the advertising of job vacancies at the Council.
 - Item in Council Communications news email to residents dated 7/3/24 promoting the signing of the covenant and the Employer Recognition Scheme.
- 2.5 There is still some work to do around understanding current staff connections to the Armed Forces, internal promotion and understanding of forces friendly policies, support for Cadets and advocacy for the signing of the Armed Forces Covenant to our networks.

A summary of the requirement and the plans to take the Council forward to make an evidenced based submission for a Gold Award is set out in **Appendix 2**.

Community Hub and 'Meet and Greet' Network Meetings

- 2.6 As part of my role to build connections between military and civilian communities, and to support service families I have attended and assisted the quarterly family liaison events held at the Aldershot Garrison Community Hub which bring together a range of welfare and advice organisations to support families, both military and non-military. I have also participated at Network Meet and Greet events at the Hub on a regular basis this year. Through our support to these events, the Shadow Champion and I have picked up and followed through on a range of casework during the year.

Events

- 2.7 Throughout the year, the Shadow Champion and I have played a key role in supporting military events which have focused on promoting integration and cohesion. These included:
- Garrison & Community Health Fairs
 - Hampshire Civilian Military Partnership Conference – May 2023
 - Sounding the Retreat at the Army Cricket Ground – June 2023
 - Armed Forces Day Celebration – June 2023
 - Bula Festival which focused on the role of the Fijian community – August 2023

- Service Families Christmas Party, supporting regiments while families are away – December 2023
- Community Carol Service – December 2023
- Commemorative event of the 52nd Anniversary of the IRA bombing of the Officers' mess in Pennefathers Road in 1972 – February 2024

3. **RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

Looking ahead to 2024/25 and building on the work that has been achieved in my first year as Armed Forces Champion, it is recommended that the following actions be incorporated into next year's priorities for the role:

- i) Progress plans for achieving the Gold Award standard of the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme and make evidence-based submission in 2024/25
- ii) Hold a stakeholder event bringing together organisations that provide advice and support for Service Leavers and military families in the Borough.
- iii) There is an important and meaningful role for the Champion in helping to increase the visibility of the veteran community in the Borough, which can help to facilitate and improve links between veterans and support services. It is recommended to continue to promote and develop connections with, and between, veterans' clubs (including the British Legion and informal breakfast clubs and coffee mornings).
- iv) Continue to advocate for the Armed Forces Covenant and support the covenant partnership arrangements in North Hampshire
- v) Support the programme of military community events planned to encourage community cohesion in 2024/24.

Cllr Nem Thapa
Cabinet Champion for Armed Forces 2023/24



Ministry of Defence

Ministry of Defence
Main Building (6/A)
Whitehall
London SW1A 2HB
United Kingdom

Email: People-DPTHub-Sec-ParliBox@mod.gov.uk

Ref: TO2023/14101

Cllr David Clifford / Cllr Nem Thapa
Rushmoor Borough Council
Council Offices
Farnborough Road
Hants
GU14 7LU
caroline.forbes@rushmoor.gov.uk

18 December 2023

Dear Cllr. Clifford and Cllr. Thapa,

Thank you for your letter dated 20 November 2023, to the Prime Minister the Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, regarding your concerns about pensions and welfare issues for Gurkha Veterans. Your letter has been passed to the Defence People Secretariat within the Ministry of Defence (MOD), and I have been asked to reply.

The Government greatly values the unique contribution that the Gurkhas have made and continue to make to the UK and remains committed to providing Gurkhas with a fair pension, including uplifts determined by formal review processes. The Gurkha Pension Scheme (GPS) is a very good scheme and suits the career pattern for most Gurkhas who retired after 15 years' service with an immediate pension. Comparisons conducted by the Government Actuary's Department show that around 80% of Gurkhas receive more over their lifetime from the GPS than British personnel with the same length of service do from the Armed Forces Pension Scheme.

Those Gurkhas who left the Army before 1 July 1997 qualified for an immediate pension under the GPS after only 15 years' service. In contrast, most British personnel who did not serve for the 22 years necessary to qualify for an immediate pension under the terms of their pension scheme instead had a preserved pension payable at the age of 60. Whilst Gurkha pension rates seem low, they are paid from as early as age 33 so most Gurkhas are receiving a pension for up to 27 years before their British equivalent receives a preserved pension at the age of 60.

The legal basis for Gurkha pensions has been upheld by three Judicial Reviews since 2003. The MOD's position has been upheld at Judicial Review, including at the Court of Appeal, and at the European Court of Human Rights in 2018. The grievance was also not supported by the All Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry, nor by Parliament during the debate on the APPG Inquiry in 2014. Gurkha pensions are different but are objectively and reasonably justified.

Those Gurkha veterans who regularised their immigration status on discharge from the Brigade of Gurkhas or the wider UK Armed Forces residents have the same access to state benefits, the NHS and other veterans' charitable organisations as any other Service veterans of the UK forces. We do however recognise that there will always be challenges for those settling from overseas with limited understanding of the British culture, system and language.

It was for these reasons that the Gurkha Welfare Advice Centre (GWAC) was established in November 2009 to support the Gurkha veteran community, with offices in Salisbury and Aldershot. The GWAC is managed between the Gurkha Welfare Trust and Ministry of Defence who provide several key staff. The Centre works closely with Government Departments, Local Bodies and Service Charities who are dedicated to supporting all veterans. Managed by retired Gurkha officers with Nepalese speaking staff, the GWAC supports Gurkha veterans and their families settling in the UK. It also provides advice and signposting to the wider Gurkha veteran community already settled, and on access to state benefits, employment and living expense grants.

The UK Government recognises the essential role the Gurkha Welfare Advice Centre plays and is looking at options to increase their capacity to ensure continued support to all Gurkha veterans living across the UK.

I hope this information is helpful and explains the position.

Yours sincerely,

Defence People Secretariat

REQUIREMENT AND PLANNING FOR ERS GOLD AWARD RECOGNITION

	Essential Criteria	Current Position/Evidence	Actions to progress
1	Signed Armed Forces Covenant	The Covenant was originally signed in October 2012	It is recommended that the Council could re-sign as the Covenant has since been updated.
2	Relationship with Account Manager/Regional Employer Engagement Director (REED)	Contact and meeting with Armed Forces Champion held with Andrew Gibbs on 29th November 2023 Attendance at a going for gold workshop on 19th January to find out more about the criteria and application process.	Maintain relationship and update Account Manager REED on progress
3	ERS Silver Award Holder	The Council was awarded a Silver Employee Recognition Award in 2019	
4	The employer must proactively demonstrate their Forces-friendly credentials as part of their recruiting and selection processes. Where possible, they should be engaged with Career Transition Partnership (CTP) in the recruitment of service leavers and have registered for the Forces Families Jobs (FFJ) portal.	In February 2024 the Council's People Team has signed up to the Forces Families Jobs portal and CTP Recent example of role posted to the FFJ portal: Committee and Member Services Team Leader, Farnborough, Hampshire – Forces Families Jobs	Vacancies in the organisation to continue to be posted to CTP and Forces Families Jobs
5	Employers must employ at least one individual from an AFC category (Reservist, Veteran, Military spouse/partner, Cadet Force Adult Volunteer (CFAV).	It is understood that the organisation employs staff and there are elected Members with links to the military, however work to understand this further to be carried out.	Further understanding of the number of people in the organisation for defence people categories (military spouses/partners, veterans, reservists, cadet force adult volunteers)

6	Employers must actively ensure that their workforce is aware of their positive policies towards Defence People issues (e.g., an internally publicised and positive HR policy on Reserves)		To promote internal organisational awareness of the proposed HR policy on Reserves and forces friendly recruitment following anticipated Cabinet approval in April 2024
7	The employer must be an exemplar within their market sector, advocating for the Covenant and the Armed Forces community to partner organisations, suppliers and customers with tangible positive results. For example, demonstrate proactive steps/activity and clear success in encouraging partner organisations and their supply chain to sign the AFC.	<p>Multiple examples required as submission evidence.</p> <p>North Hampshire Armed Forces Covenant Partnership Conference held 25/11/22.</p> <p>The Council organises an Annual Armed Forces Day Prom in the Park</p> <p>Appointment of Armed Forces Champion who has carried out work to promote and support veterans clubs and represent the Council at Garrison community events.</p> <p>Advocacy article in email news to residents issued 7/2/24.</p> <p>Council participation in a range of civic and community events led/shared with the Aldershot Garrison</p>	<p>Further advocacy e.g.</p> <p>Article submitted for the Council's email business newsletter to be published in April edition.</p> <p>Banners at civic events during the summer to promote AFC and ERS e.g. D-Day 80, Armed Forces Day, Victoria Day, opportunities at Public Open Meetings.</p> <p>Planned stakeholder conference for Autumn 2024.</p> <p>Plans to extend the length of the discount scheme for Armed Forces in Aldershot shops linked to the month of Armed Forces Day</p>
8	The employer must actively encourage a positive environment for Reservists by ensuring that positive policies in support of Reservists within the workforce are communicated to line managers.	A framework for reservists has been incorporated into a draft new Reservist Policy to be recommended to Cabinet on 16th April 2024	Presentation and sharing of Policy content with Service Manager/Corporate Manager Group following elections in June/July 2024

9	The employer must provide at least 10 days' additional leave, fully paid, for reserves to attend training.	This provision is incorporated in the current Special Leave Policy and will be included in the proposed new Reservists Policy for the Council.	
10	The employer should be an exemplar in demonstrating support to the Cadet movement. This could, for example, be through mentoring cadets in key employment skills, by providing guaranteed interviews for cadets, by direct investment in equipment and infrastructure for a local cadet unit, or by funding and sponsoring competitions, events, and specific activities for cadets such as overseas expeditions.	Councillor representative appointed to Air Cadets squadron in Farnborough	Follow up contact with local Cadets
11	The employer promotes volunteering with the cadet forces from their workforce, by providing additional leave for employees who are Cadet Force Adult Volunteers (CFAVs)	There is flexibility for employees who are Cadet Force Adult Volunteers (CFAV) to take additional leave through the Council's Special Leave policy	Internal opportunity to promote volunteering with the cadet forces
12	The employer must not have been the subject of any negative PR or media activity that could cause embarrassment to Defence.		

Desirable Criteria – linked to Reservists Employees in the organisation

Armed Forces Champion Roles and Responsibilities

Purpose: Promote the objectives of the Armed Forces Covenant on behalf of the Council through local action and by building connections between the Military and civilian communities.

Roles:

- (1) Ensure that Council services reflect the principles of the Armed Forces and Military Community Covenants
- (2) Provide a conduit for all parts of the military community, including veterans, who are looking for assistance from the Council
- (3) Understand the needs of the local military community and act as a signpost and interface between the military and the community
- (4) Brief and raise awareness of Council Members and staff on the role of the champion and the objective of the Covenant
- (5) Establish effective lines of communication between military organisations and the Council, to include meetings with Unit Armed Forces Champions
- (6) Support events held by and for the military community
- (7) Report back regularly to the Council, and especially the Cabinet on plans, projects and activities

Champion Priorities in 2023/24

- (1) Develop the Armed Forces Champion webpage on the Council's website with signposting and relevant links, informed by information that the Champion has curated through their networks.
- (2) Increase the visibility of the veteran community in the Borough, to help facilitate and improve links between veterans and support services. Continue to promote and develop connections with, and between, veterans' clubs (including the British Legion and informal breakfast clubs and coffee mornings).
- (3) Continue to support the development of the covenant partnership arrangements for North Hampshire and plans for a community partnership conference in 2023/24.

- (4) Re-examine the criteria and possibility for Rushmoor Borough Council to work towards the Gold Award standard of the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.
- (5) Support the programme of military community events planned to encourage community cohesion in 2023/24.
- (6) Work with service families and supporting organisations to encourage engagement with local health and wellbeing service through the Primary Care Network and Clinical Commissioning Group
