



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL ARMED FORCES WORKING GROUP
Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Armed Forces Working Group Committee held
on
Tuesday, 1 March 2022 at 10.00 am.

County Borough Councillors - Armed Forces Working Group Members in attendance: -

Councillor M Webber (Chair)
Councillor J Harries (Vice Chair)
Councillor S Bradwick
Councillor G Caple

Officers in attendance

Mr C Davies, Armed Forces Covenant Lead
Mr I Christopher, Strategic Manager
Mr J Ireland, Armed Forces Liaison Officer
Ms Jody Lewis, Regional School Liaison Officer

1 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair welcomed all Members and Officers to the Armed Forces Working Group Committee meeting.

2 MINUTES

It was **RESOLVED** to approve as an accurate record, the minutes of the meeting of the Armed Forces Working Group held on the 30th September 2021.

3 WLGA SUPPORTING SERVICE CHILDREN IN EDUCATION WALES

With the aid of a Power Point presentation, the Regional School Liaison Officer provided Members with an overview of the purpose of SSCE Cymru towards supporting service children across Wales. It was highlighted to Members that the programme began in 2014 and has been funded by the Welsh Government since 2019. The programme aims to work collaboratively with schools, children, supporting organisations, Local Authorities (LA), Armed Forces families in order to gather views, experiences, build supporting networks, and raise awareness of service children across Wales.

The Regional School Liaison Officer advised Members of the broad definitions of a service child and informed Members of the vital role of SSCE Cymru in encouraging schools to think broadly when identifying their service children. Members were advised that since September 2019

the Project Manager along with the Armed Forces Covenant Trust have employed four Regional School Liaison Officers (RSLO's); Members were made aware of staffing concerns in relation to RSLO's in North and East Wales; However, recruitment advertisements have been implemented and the two posts will be filled within the coming weeks.

The Regional School Liaison Officer informed Members of their duties, these involve undertaking regular meetings and visits to schools with service children, ensuring to offer advice, support, CPD training, assistance in filling funding application forms and encouraging engagement with the Armed Forces community. Thus far, the RSLO's have delivered CPD sessions to 91 participants from 43 schools. The team aims to promote the positives of being a service child, and beneficial impacts a service child towards a school.

The Regional School Liaison Officer informed Members of a project currently being undertaken by the RSLO's known as the *Armed Forces Friendly Status*; The project aims at encouraging school engagement in supporting and allocating service children. The Officer confirmed there are in the process of allocating a person within Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) who will work alongside schools in RCT to enable them to achieve a bronze status.

Members were informed of the MOD LAP (Local Authority Partnership) Meeting; the meetings are undertaken in order to set action plans and discuss matters surrounding service children across Wales; It was confirmed that over half of the LA's within Wales have attended the MOD LAP meeting.

The Regional School Liaison Officer informed Members of the importance of data collection for SSCE Cymru in order to identify the number of service children in Wales. Based on the Power Point presentation from 2020/21, the data collected highlighted that there are over 2500 service children in 550 schools across Wales; 157 are within Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council. The Regional School Liaison Officer recognised the significance of school responses in providing accurate and reflective data of the service children, however Members were made aware that only 49 schools have responded out of 115 schools. The Regional School Liaison Officer confirmed progress being made in order to encourage engagement from schools as funding from the Welsh Government is distributed to LA's depending on the number of service children within schools.

The Regional School Liaison Officer advised Members of £13,000 worth of funding which has been provided to RCT by the Welsh Government for the academic year in order to support service children. The funding provided will aim to support service children through events and workshops. Currently the team have organised an event known as the *Month of the Military Child* in April; the event will be delivered by Forces Fitness. The *Month of the Military Child* is aimed at highlighting the important role service children play in the Armed Forces community. The funding will also go towards a workshop known as the *Never Such Innocence*, which will involve poetry, song writing sessions, and Art for service children.

The Regional School Liaison Officer continued by providing a brief overview of upcoming events for service children. Members were informed of a Residential event scheduled for the 10th to the 12th June 2022 for service children in year 7 and 9 from RCT and Merthyr Tydfil (MT). The event will aim to encourage networking between the service children. The Regional School Liaison Officer informed Members of recent collaborations with Parc Prison due to the volume of Veterans within the prison; she confirmed that there are 40-100 Veterans within the prison who have service children in South Wales. As a result, a project will be undertaken in March such as a service children show case in order to break the barrier and increase the outreach to service children.

The Chair was pleased with the presentation and recognised the importance of data collection in order to identify Veteran families and children who require support. The Chair acknowledged the significance of the funding from the Welsh Government and echoed the importance of the events arranged in creating supportive network links for service children across Wales.

A Member raised a query surrounding the accuracy of the data collected in regards to the number of service children in Wales. He questioned if more could be done within schools to encourage responses. The Regional School Liaison Officer advised of different methods of data collection utilised by schools; she recognised that better information management systems are required in order to provide more reflective and accurate data. The Officer acknowledged the impact of the Pandemic to schools in relation to staffing levels which may have played a role in the lack of responses.

The Armed Forces Working Group **RESOLVED:**

- To note the content of the presentation

4 UPDATE FROM THE ARMED FORCES LIAISON OFFICER

With the aid of a Power Point presentation, the Armed Forces Liaison Officer provided Members with an update on the current services and projects currently being undertaken by the Armed Forces team in order to support the Armed Forces community. To begin the Armed Forces Liaison Officer informed Members of RCT attainment of the Gold award as part of the Armed Forces Employer Recognition Scheme. He confirmed that RCT Council will be re-applying for the award due to the tremendous efforts made to develop the services provided to Veterans with the aim of attaining the award again.

As part of Veteran Support, the Armed Forces Liaison Officer informed Members of the introduction of the guaranteed interview Scheme for Veterans and Reservists which went live in RCT at the beginning of January. The Armed Forces Liaison Officer acknowledged the transferable skills attained within the Armed Forces which would be of value to the Council.

To reach out to the Armed Forces Community, the team have partnered with CTP (Career Transition Partnerships) and Forces Family Jobs, to advertise relevant Council Jobs.

The Armed Forces Liaison Officer went on by providing Members with an overview of the current events scheduled which include the *Month of the Military Child* in April which will be hosted by Forces Fitness along with a Residential Weekend. The Officer reiterated the importance of the *Month of the Military Child* by informing Members that it's an opportunity to celebrate and acknowledge Armed Forces Children throughout the UK.

As part of new projects, the Armed Forces Liaison Officer informed Members of the introduction of the *Body and Mind Project*. The team have connected with Andy's Man Club in order to support Mental Health in Men. The Club will deliver free meditation sessions for individuals from the Armed Forces Community with the aim of reducing stress, negative emotions, and support those with PTSD; sessions are due to start at the beginning of April.

As part of Mental Health support for Veterans, the service will launch *Armed Forces Community Park Walks* and a *Gardening Project* in Ynysangharad War Memorial Park with the aim of providing exercise and improved Mental Health across the Armed Forces Community.

The Armed Forces Liaison Officer highlighted to Members the additional supporting services provided to Armed Forces Families; these included the RCT Council scheme which pays for the burial fees for Veterans. Members were informed that RCT Council is the only LA that provides this service.

Supporting services offered also include free access to Leisure facilities, and free swimming for Veterans. The Armed Forces Liaison Officer informed Members of the recent changes to policies which will provide greater supporting channels for Veterans; these included staff reservist policy to include Adult Cadet Instructors, changes to the Housing policy which ensures Veterans still have their priority banding despite being temporarily housed. The Armed Forces Liaison Officer was pleased to inform Members of the donations received as part of the Mayors Charity-Help for Heroes. Thus far £35,000 has been donated which has been provided to support Heroes in Pontypridd.

He went on by providing updates on recent projects successes regarding the *Veteran Connected Project*; aimed at helping Veterans stay connected digitally and tackle social isolation. Thus far over 40 tablets have been distributed to Veteran groups across Cwm Taf area. He also confirmed the introduction of free sim cards for Veterans in order to eliminate the need for WIFI; the free sim cards will permit access to all online services.

He also provided an update on *Mental Health First Aid Project*; the team have linked up with Noble Solutions through Covenant Funding to provide Mental Health first aid courses to Veterans and Armed Forces. The Armed Forces Liaison Officer confirmed the success of an Armed Forces Bid of £10,000, which will be utilised to deliver further mental health support for the Armed Forces community.

The Armed Forces Liaison continued by outlining the details of Veterans Groups supported by the service; these included Taf Ely Veterans Group, Valley Veterans and Mountain Ash. The Officer acknowledged the vitality of these groups as a supporting network and informed Members of future progresses of introducing new breakfast groups in Coed Ely (Tonyrefail), and Aberdare Town Centre in order to attract a younger age bracket.

The Armed Forces Liaison Officer continued by providing Members with an update on the Cwm Taf Veterans Advice Service; thus far over 900 referrals have been received since the start of the project launch in April 2019. The Officer shared current data to highlight how support is being offered to Veterans. The Officer informed Members that over 45% of referrals received are from Veteran groups which highlights the impact of the groups. The Armed Forces Liaison Officer advised Members that 25% of referrals received by the Veterans Advice Service are in relation to Adult Social Care, 19% are concerning Benefits and 12% are concerning Housing.

Lastly the Armed Forces Liaison Officer referenced the Ukraine crisis and reassured Members of the support channels that will be in place to support refugees who enter the Country.

The Chair was pleased with the projects currently being undertaken by the service. The Chair took the opportunity to commend the Armed Forces Liaison Officer for his tremendous work, dedication, and effort towards his role.

One Member was very pleased with the work currently being undertaken for the Armed Forces Team. He informed the Armed Forces Liaison Officer of a plot of land in Aberdare which can be utilised by the Veterans as part of their *Gardening Project*. The Member echoed the Chairs praise of the Armed Forces Liaison Officer and commended him for his outstanding work and dedication towards the Armed Forces community.

The Armed Forces Working Group **RESOLVED:**

- To note the updates of the presentation

5 ARMED FORCES DAY UPDATE

The Strategic Manager provided a brief overview of the upcoming Armed Forces Day event scheduled for the 18th June 2022. He confirmed the event will consist of a Parade within the Park and a family fun day with numerous activities. Infrastructures such as portable toilets, marquees and staging have already been arranged. The Strategic Manager confirmed advertisements of the events will be distributed shortly detailing event details. To conclude the Strategic Manager welcomed the attendance of individuals and families to the event.

The Chair was pleased with the update and commended the Officer for efforts made for reintroducing the event back to the Community since the impact of Covid-19.

The Armed Forces Working Group **RESOLVED:**

- To note verbal update

This meeting closed at 10.58 am

**Cllr M Webber
Chair.**