

A Decade of the Covenant

A review of delivery and impact of ten years of the Armed Forces Covenant

Annex III Updated Covenant toolkit



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Introduction

In the original *Our Community – Our Covenant* report in 2016, we launched a “core infrastructure” and toolkit to support local authorities with the implementation of the Covenant. As our research shows, that core infrastructure continues to be of great importance to successful delivery.

In the five years since it was last updated in 2017, several factors in the overall context for local public services and in the wider support infrastructure for the Covenant, have changed, including.

- The Armed Forces Act 2021, which creates a duty of due regard to the principles of the Covenant in the focus areas of housing, education and healthcare. It is important to note that the accompanying statutory guidance details how disadvantage can arise.
- Declining resource which makes it increasingly difficult for small local authorities or those with a small AFC presence to sustain Covenant related action.
- The growth of collaborative arrangements between local authorities in how they organise and deliver Covenant related action.
- Training resources have been developed by some local areas and made available for others to use.
- Further development and promotion of good practice, notably through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust's Knowledge Network: <https://covenantfund.org.uk/resources/>

This section makes some updates to the components of the toolkit to reflect these changes and the findings of this report. It also sets out some recommendations for how the toolkit can be further developed to enhance its accessibility and usefulness.

The original toolkit was aimed at local authorities. We have decided not to create varied versions aimed at different sectors within local public services - this could be confusing and, without extensive consultation, could create misplaced distinctions about what is important for different sectors. We are also aware of other existing toolkits that were cited in the survey responses and provide useful resources. Rather we stress that the toolkit recognises the role of local authorities in convening local action and local partnerships and that it is designed as an enabler to effective local collaborative working.

The key changes to the core infrastructure and self-assessment cover:

- Creation of clusters of councils with a dedicated officer across the cluster.
- The importance of making best use of data to produce evidence of impact related to need.
- Making best use of the training material available.
- Reinforcing the importance of the action plan, which our research shows is currently the least adopted element of the core infrastructure.

Core infrastructure

The list of core infrastructure was developed in 2016 for the first *Our Community – Our Covenant* report and revised a year later. The version below has been updated but still has the same intention of being a checklist for councils and their partners to ensure that the basics are in place in their location.

Covenant core infrastructure

Core infrastructure to deliver the Covenant	
Individuals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An elected member Champion. • An officer point of contact within the council, or acting across a cluster of authorities. • An officer Armed Forces lead within council departments as a liaison point with the central officer point of contact. 	Vision and commitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An action planning process that is proportionate to local needs and circumstances. This should set out planned actions, success criteria, which organisation is responsible or needs to be engaged and target timings. It should link to annual reporting to record progress. The scale and scope of the action plan can reflect local collaborations and, providing there is clear accountability, does not need to be at an individual local authority or local partner level • Regular review of the action plan. • Policy reviews to ensure the commitment to the Covenant and associated legislation is reflected in all local public services. • Enthusiasm and commitment.
Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A webpage or presence to support delivery of the Covenant with key information and links for members of the AFC. This can be supported through use of web analytics to help focus refinement of content, and social media channels to highlight events and support offers. • Clear and accessible public statements of what members of the AFC can expect from the council and partners. • A route through which concerns can be raised. • Training. This should include awareness raising of the Covenant in induction programmes for all new staff and more detailed training for frontline staff tailored to scenarios they may face with different cohorts within the AFC. Training packages, such as that developed by the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Armed Forces Covenant partnership are available for use at no charge by other areas. • A vehicle for reporting local action and achievements such as an annual report, newsletter or forum minutes. Ideally this should bring partnership action together into one place and be linked to the local action plan. If our recommendations for piloting impact measurement are adopted, the annual report should become a channel for reporting on this. 	Collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Covenant Forum or co-ordinating group that meets at least twice a year. It includes the following: military representatives; military charities; public sector representatives, including the NHS, via the Integrated Care System; effective council members (senior elected members on cabinet); and the lead officer. Each Forum should review its membership, agenda and frequency of meeting every three or four years. • In some places (for example where there are combined authorities) councils and their partners may wish to establish a mechanism for collaboration at a sub-regional level. This could include: joint forums and action plans, training packages and joint training co-ordination, across the local public sector, applications for the Covenant fund, and a shared web presence. • Generally, collaboration should be considered: clusters of local action offer economy of scale in areas with a low Armed Forces presence, or for effective co-ordination of action covering small local authority areas.

Self-assessment tool

We drafted a self-assessment tool for the first *Our Community – Our Covenant* report, intended for councils who want to assess the situation of their local Covenant pledges. We have updated it but with the same purpose of enabling local partners to have a meaningful discussion about their commitment to ensuring members of the AFC do not face disadvantage due to their service. It will identify any gaps in provision and focus future action for delivery.

The tool is split into four sections: vision and commitment; individuals; collaboration; and communication. It is designed for members of the Armed Forces Covenant Forum, or a range of stakeholders (including council officers, military representatives, and representatives from military charities) to have a conversation about their local area in relation to the prompts. It is not designed for every question to have an answer, but merely a way for a question to be considered if it is relevant in each local context.

Self-assessment tool

Vision and Commitment

AFC presence

- What is the extent and nature of AFC presence in your local area? As a starting point, this should be linked to the typology for this report, described in [Table 7](#) of [Annex II](#) to the *A Decade of the Covenant* report.
- What more could be done to fully understand the AFC footprint? Has local evidence been reviewed in the light of data published in the 2021 census (England and Wales) and 2022 census (Scotland)?
- Is there potential for collaboration on the delivery of the Covenant with neighbouring councils or through a combined authority where it exists?

AFC needs and impact data

- Is there a good understanding of the needs of the AFC in housing, health, adult social care, employment and schools and children's services? How were those needs identified? Do they reflect the different needs of the three cohorts described in this report?
- Do you have the key data that evidences those needs?
- Which organisations would be able to help address those needs? (i.e. council, Armed Forces, charities).
- What is currently being done to help address those needs?
- What else can be done to address these needs?
- Do local organisations' policies reflect those needs or is there a need for review?
- How is the impact of local Covenant delivery evidenced?
- How is information about the impact of local Covenant delivery shared, locally and nationally?

Future direction

- Is there a shared understanding of what successful implementation of the Covenant would look like?

Action planning process

- Have the areas for action been defined?
- Is there an agreed method to the action planning process?
- Are actions published, with success criteria, a timeline and responsibility for delivery?
- How is the action monitored and reviewed?

Individuals

Armed Forces Champion

- Is there a councillor Armed Forces Champion?
- What does the role involve? Is there a role description for it?
- Are there areas in which the role of the Armed Forces Champion can evolve?

Officers

- Who is the senior officer responsible for the delivery of the Covenant and who has day to day responsibility for it?
- Can this role be further supported, for example by having lead points of contact in key service areas and customer service teams for liaison on training or resolving difficult cases?

Collaboration

Forum/ co-ordinating group

- Is there a Covenant Forum in place? Does the membership reflect the most locally relevant drivers of disadvantage and ownership of the key levers to address them?
- How frequently does it meet?
- What are the key items covered at the forum?
- Does the Forum contribute to and monitor the local action plan?
- To what extent are the goals of the forum being achieved? What could be done to increase the impact the forum is having?
- How frequently is the Forum's membership, agenda and frequency of meeting reviewed?

Local authority collaboration

- Has the council considered working together with other local councils in a cluster arrangement? Would such an arrangement offer benefits (economy of scale, consistency; better sharing of good practice) in areas including?
 - Sharing resources to fund a co-ordinator post.
 - Consistency of offer / policy.
 - Data assembly and analysis.
 - Training co-ordination.
 - Delivery (for example of Armed Forces hubs).
 - Single voice to larger local stakeholders that span local authority boundaries – housing associations, charities, ICSs.
 - Shared web presence.
 - Joint action plan.
 - Joint Armed Forces Forum.
- If your area has a combined authority, have your or your neighbouring authorities approached it about supporting co-ordination across the area?

Relationships

- Are there mechanisms in place to maintain relationships between Armed Forces stakeholders?
- Could the council, the Armed Forces and charities work together more effectively?
- Would an increase sub-regional collaboration, including involvement of combined authorities where they exist, help with co-ordination or economy of scale in delivering local Covenant pledges?

Communication

Internal

- How are local public service and charity officers and front-line staff briefed and trained on the Covenant and the risks of disadvantage for the AFC?
- Are front-line staff trained about when and how to ask people whether they have an Armed Forces connection?
- Have training materials, such as e-learning modules, been included on local organisations' training platforms?
- How is knowledge and information gathered?
- How could knowledge sharing within organisations be improved?

External

- How is action on local Covenant pledges disseminated to the public?
- How could the dissemination of information be improved?
- Is there an up to date website which is easy to use and regularly updated? Who hosts the website (council, HIVE or equivalent or charity)?
- Are patterns of website use monitored and linked to updates and enhancements?
- How is the support which is on offer to the AFC communicated to hard-to-reach people, such as homeless veterans?

Scenarios

We have updated the scenarios published in the earlier *Our Community – Our Covenant* reports. They relate to the range of issues that we have found to occur and will not be relevant in all places.

We have linked them to the three cohorts described in this report and intend them to be a tool for councils and their partners to use to think about the delivery mechanisms that they have in place in order to address the main issues in the scenario. Councils and partners could use these by asking the question, “what would we be able to do if we were faced with a resident in this situation?”

Serving personnel and their families

The Nelsons

A Royal Navy family living in MoD Service Families Accommodation. The father is a submariner currently on patrol and can only be contacted in an extreme emergency. The mother does not have a job. They have two children aged six and 10. The deadline for applications for the older child for secondary schools is imminent. The parents have separated and are in the process of divorcing; the husband when onshore stays on base in MoD single living accommodation. The family has been served with notice to vacate their house in 93 days. The mother wishes to stay in the area (in which housing pressures are acute) and has approached the council for help.

The Darlings

An Army family. They are moving from Germany to a base in an English county. Service Families Accommodation is provided at three locations in the area and family has been told that they will not know precisely where in the county their accommodation will be until two weeks before they arrive. They have two children aged eight and 13. The youngest has dyslexia and has a special educational needs assessment, whilst the older child requires routine but specialist secondary medical monitoring.

Personnel and families in transition between serving and civilian life

The Trenchards

A Royal Air Force family. The mother is serving in the RAF and is due to leave in five months at the end of her engagement aged 44. Her husband has a part-time job locally. They have two children aged 16 and 17 at the local sixth form college and want to settle in the area. Having joined the RAF initially as an airwoman, the mother is now a junior officer with qualifications which are not fully recognised outside the Armed Forces. She is beginning to look for work and for ways of translating her qualifications to be recognised by civilian employers. They do not have enough money to place a deposit on a house. What help is available to them, in housing and employment, as well as any other areas?

Chris - Early Service Leaver

Chris joined the Armed Forces at the age of 18, but part way through basic training he realised that continuing in the Armed Forces was not the right choice. Having left a very difficult home life, he is not able to return there and so is now vulnerable without accommodation or employment.

Sarah – discharge as a result of misconduct

Sarah had served in the Armed Forces for 10 years, but is about to be discharged from the Armed Forces for failing a Compulsory Drug Test. Sarah is in a same-sex partnership (the partner does not work) and the couple have a young child. They do not have enough money to rent accommodation and so find themselves at risk of homelessness.

Veterans

Roger Jarvis

Roger left the Army in 2001 having served in the Royal Logistics Corps for 14 years and taken voluntary redundancy as a Senior NCO. He is in his early 50s and left his wife eight years ago amidst mutual allegations of domestic abuse. He has had a variety of low-skilled jobs since leaving the Army and was recently made redundant and was not able to pay the rent on his flat. He has now moved back, without work, to the area in which he went to school, but his family no longer lives in the area and he appears to have no social network there either.

Mavis Smith

Mavis was widowed five years ago and is now aged 87. She is a veteran who served in the Royal Air Force for 20 years. She lives in a three-bedroom house in East London and has a son who lives in Newcastle. She has been quite isolated since her husband died. She is fiercely independent, but on a recent visit, her son noticed his mother increasingly struggled with stairs and was erratic in her shopping. The house was unusually dusty. The son contacted the local authority who carried out an assessment. However, she is well above the financial threshold to qualify for local authority funded support.

Peter Lal

Peter is Fijian and served in the British Army for 12 years. He is married to a Fijian and they have two children who were born in the UK. Having left the Army three years ago, the family now find themselves in need of social housing.

Top Tips

Since the first *Our Community – Our Covenant* report, we have identified a number of Top Tips which we think may be helpful to councils and their partners who are thinking about ways of improving the local delivery of the Covenant. The following Top Tips build on these and have been updated to reflect the findings of the latest research.

Good relationships

Establish, maintain and regularly refresh contact with base commanders and other key people in Armed Forces bases (reflecting the regular churn in post holders).

Use ceremonies, such as Armed Forces Day, to build and maintain contacts with key people.

Invite senior representatives of the AFC to serve on relevant local partnership bodies, not just those concerned with the Covenant.

Build and maintain good contacts with Armed Forces charities and establish a shared understanding with them on issues such as at what stage people with housing or social care needs will be referred to them.

Nurture relationships with the publication of annual reports about Covenant related achievements.

Council organisation

Explore the potential for your councils to collaborate with neighbours to make best use of the limited resources available to support work on the Covenant, including the potential role of combined authorities where they exist.

If the core infrastructure is not yet in place, establish a dedicated, time-limited post to help get the it and contacts in place.

In addition to having an officer point of contact on the Covenant in the council, consider nominating officer armed forces leads within key council departments and customer service teams. This should be a conduit to the central officer point of contact on points such as training co-ordination and resolving difficult cases.

Encourage the council's overview and scrutiny function to carry out a regular review of the delivery of the Covenant.

Ensure that the Covenant features in council induction and training programmes and that there is suitable training for front-line officers. Use available material shared by other authorities to provide e-learning through the learning management system.

Involve the Royal British Legion or another similar charity in briefing public-facing council staff.

Employ veterans and Service spouses as key workers providing support for veterans.

Data

Develop a simple process for capturing data and success stories about Covenant delivery. The best way to sustain action is to show the value of it.

Link this to an annual reporting process to make success visible and to be show the AFC the pride the organisation takes in what it delivers.

Take the publication of 2021 census information (England and Wales) and 2022 (Scotland), which will include information about people who identify as veterans, as an opportunity to review the evidence on the AFC locally.

Engaging with the bases

Secure, enable, encourage shared used of facilities on or near Armed Forces bases, stations or units.

Identify a Champion for each base – usually the member in whose ward or division the base is located.

Engage with young people from Armed Forces families – they bring a different and honest perspective. This can be done through the Service Youth Forums.

And finally...

Recognise that Base Commanders have to juggle a number of priorities, some of which will always have more priority than the Covenant. They also change post every couple of years so new relationships will need to be made as this occurs.

Recommendations

Self-assessment

We consider that the self-assessment process has the potential to be a helpful tool to assist in measuring impact of the Covenant.

We recommend that FiMT considers creating an online version of the self-assessment with the option for areas to give consent to share their answers with the Trust. This will help to gather baseline information. We previously noted that it would be useful for councils to complete a self-assessment every year – doing this through an online process and sharing of results would provide a mechanism to track Covenant action and assist with measuring impact.

Consolidation of good practice resources

Since the publication of the previous *Our Community – Our Covenant* reports, the toolkit has existed only as an annex to the report. It would be more accessible if it were created as a free-standing resource and promoted through websites including, the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust's Knowledge Network; the Government's Armed Forces Covenant website, charities and the LGA.

We also recommend a consolidation of good practice and case study resources so either a common set is available on all websites the offer them, or there is signposting to one location, such as the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust's Knowledge Network. This will support consistent messaging and should make available resources more well known.

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