



## Plymouth City Council Armed Forces Community Covenant Select Committee Review

### The Royal British Legion response, August 2022

---

#### 1. About Us

- 1.1. The Royal British Legion (RBL) is at the heart of a national network that supports our Armed Forces community through thick and thin – ensuring that their unique contribution is never forgotten. We were created as a unifying force for the military charity sector at the end of the First World War, and still remain one of the UK's largest membership organisations. The RBL is the largest welfare provider in the Armed Forces charity sector, helping veterans young and old transition into civilian life. We help with employment, financial issues, respite, and recovery, through to lifelong care and independent living. For further information, please visit [www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk)
- 1.2. RBL produced a comprehensive report in 2021 *The Armed Forces Covenant Reflections on a decade of the nation's promise*.<sup>1</sup> The majority of our comments in response to Plymouth City Council's select committee review will be based on the findings in this report. We will however provide as many local insights as we can that focus on the work undertaken in Plymouth. RBL encourages the Select Committee to particularly consider the section on Local Government on page 69 of this report.

#### 2. General Comments

- 2.1. Over ten years ago, following a campaign led by RBL, and supported by Poppyscotland, the Armed Forces Covenant became enshrined in the Armed Forces Act 2011. The Covenant outlines the nation's obligation to look after those who have served and their families, ensuring that members of the Armed Forces community face no disadvantage because of their Service, and that special consideration be given in certain circumstances, such as for those who have been injured or bereaved.
- 2.2. The operational context of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and failures in policy to provide adequate support and welfare for those returning home from conflict or those left bereaved, gave the RBL the impetus to launch our 'Honour the Covenant' campaign of 2007. The campaign re-articulated a long-held belief that dates back to the origins of the RBL that the sacrifices and commitment of those who serve should be recognised and any disadvantages they face addressed. Political will coalesced with the campaign's call, and political parties of all sides stepped up to provide the legislative change necessary to enshrine it in legislation in 2011.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://storage.rblcdn.co.uk/sitefinity/docs/default-source/campaigns-policy-and-research/rbl-armed-forces-covenant-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=b65b18bb\\_0](https://storage.rblcdn.co.uk/sitefinity/docs/default-source/campaigns-policy-and-research/rbl-armed-forces-covenant-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=b65b18bb_0)

- 2.3. Over the decade since it has been enshrined in legislation, action delivered under the Covenant has led to significant steps forward in the provision of services to Service personnel, veterans and their families; for example removing local connection criteria for social housing five years after discharge from the Armed Forces.
- 2.4. Over time, an implied shift of responsibility may have occurred away from the UK Government onto other actors, such as local government, who have more limited financial means to be able to fund new Covenant initiatives on their own in the same fashion as UK Government departments. The Armed Forces Act 2021 further consolidated that shift by creating a new legal duty that is mostly focused on policy areas which are the responsibility of local government.
- 2.5. RBL recognise that Plymouth City Council, with the limited financial resources available to it has been able to deliver on its Covenant obligations that it signed ten years ago. A starting point for evaluating Plymouth's delivery is the *Our Community Our Covenant report* "core infrastructure to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant."<sup>2</sup> This report sets out the important actions that local authorities should take such as; appointing an elected member champion and a mechanism for collaboration with partners. RBL also recognises the recent action Plymouth City Council has taken to update and improve their website, this is another key piece of infrastructure referenced in the *Our Community Our Covenant report*.
- 2.6. RBL understand that there is an up-to-date action plan which outlines activities and is monitored. The Covenant Board may wish to consider how it promotes that action plan and visibly demonstrates to the public how it is achieving its targets. Alternatively, Plymouth could consider producing an annual report, similar to that of Surrey County Council<sup>3</sup> **RBL recommends publishing the Plymouth Covenant action plan and promote its achievements.**
- 2.7. During RBL's research and polling about public understanding of the Covenant, the concept of no disadvantage resonated with all sectors of society interviewed as a principle they could support. Within our interviews the terminology of labelling the Armed Forces community as a potentially 'disadvantaged' group was critiqued by one contributor for the impact it could have on veteran wellbeing, but overall, our interviewees found it useful as a framework for deciding on the application of the Covenant. For one Councillor from an area with a significant Armed Forces community similar in characteristics to that of Plymouth, it represented an idea of treating people "fairly", a term that does not appear in the original text of the Covenant but was often repeated by others in discussion of the principle. Terminology is important, whilst we acknowledge "fairness" is a positive objective, it doesn't recognise the service and unique circumstances of the Armed Forces which is why they may be disadvantaged.<sup>4</sup>
- 2.8. **RBL recommends that authors of any publication or statement that references the Covenant should ensure that they use the specific wording of the principles as outlined in the Covenant itself to avoid confusion and dilution of them.**

### 3. Response to questions

#### ***What you think the Community Covenant is***

---

<sup>2</sup> Shared intelligence, *Our Community Our Covenant*, 2017, available at <https://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/our-community-our-covenant-improving-delivery-local-covenant-pledges.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [Surrey County Council, Armed Forces Covenant report 2021 to 2022](#)

<sup>4</sup> The Royal British Legion, *The Armed Forces Covenant Reflections on a decade of the nation's promise*, 2021

- 3.1. RBL Response - When the Covenant was first conceived, its focus was on national government. Over time this has increasingly shifted to local government and businesses. The UK Government subsequently introduced Community Covenants, as they were initially known, and made them a central pillar of Covenant delivery. Community Covenants and their successor, the Armed Forces Covenant in the Community, have been supported by millions of pounds of funding for local Covenant initiatives. At its core, the 'Community Covenant' is the application of the two principles of the Armed Forces Covenant at the local authority level. Those being that members of the Armed Forces community face no disadvantage because of their Service, and that special consideration be given in certain circumstances, such as for those who have been injured or bereaved. If successful, the Covenant will pull together the Armed Forces community, local government, and the wider community in embedding those principle into local society.

***What you think has gone well with the Community covenant over the past 10 years***

- 3.2. RBL Response – In Plymouth the Council have done well to bring together representatives from business, the voluntary sector, and the Council. The four theme groups (veterans, serving personnel, children and families, and businesses) are unique compared to other Covenant Boards that RBL regularly attend. RBL thinks this arrangement is an example of good practice that Plymouth have pioneered.
- 3.3. Referring again to the core infrastructure in the *Our Community Our Covenant* report, most of this infrastructure is being delivered in Plymouth. RBL observes the following:
- 3.3.1. An elected member champion
  - 3.3.2. An officer point of contact within the council
  - 3.3.3. An outward facing forum
  - 3.3.4. A mechanism for collaborating with partners
  - 3.3.5. A webpage with key information and links
  - 3.3.6. A clear public statement of expectations
  - 3.3.7. An action plan that leads to action and is monitored and reviewed
  - 3.3.8. Enthusiasm and commitment

***What you think could have been done better***

- 3.4. RBL Response – The Plymouth Covenant has a strong focus on collaboration which is good but could do well to remind all members of the Board that it is a partnership and not all activity should necessarily be the responsibility of the Council. Whilst the Council host the meetings and provide administration support, it's important for all partners to be clear on their respective roles.

***What you would like to see happen in the future (whether continuation of work, specific improvements or new activities)***

- 3.5. Some councils, such as Somerset, Kent and Surrey have held an annual Covenant Conference, inviting a broad section of the community to showcase what the Covenant partners do, and share their successes. Many businesses, charities, and government agencies (such as the NHS) are often keen to ensure they are playing their part in delivering the Covenant, even if they would be unable to attend regular Covenant meetings. Inviting interested organisations to find out more and network in Plymouth could be positive in promoting awareness of the Plymouth Covenant.

- 3.5.1. With the new legislation coming into force later this year, a conference may also serve as an opportunity for the Ministry of Defence to update the wider community of this new legal duty.
- 3.6. It is likely that policy reviews are already being undertaken; referring to the *Our Community our Covenant* core infrastructure table, time could be given to updating Covenant partners of these reviews. Similarly, it may be that training of frontline staff is already being undertaken regularly, the Council may wish to inform the Covenant partners of this to highlight the steps Plymouth City Council are taking as a provider of public services.
- 3.7. New legislation contained in the Armed Forces Act 2021 is due to come into effect later this year as soon as the Statutory Guidance has been approved. This legislation creates a new legal duty to pay due regard to the Armed Forces community in the policy areas of housing, healthcare, and education. Whilst these are three important policy areas, the Plymouth Covenant should continue to support all areas of policy that impact on the Armed Forces community, and not just those they have a legal duty to have due regard of.
- 3.7.1. Prominent examples of topics where Covenant issues have been raised in recent years include employment, pensions, compensation, social care, criminal justice, and immigration. We cannot accurately predict all the issues that may arise in the future. Usage reports from the Veterans Gateway – a first point of contact portal for veterans seeking support, which is part-funded by the MoD and run by a consortium led by the RBL – indicate that employment and finance (which would include benefits and compensation) feature prominently alongside health and housing queries.
- 3.8. The Plymouth Covenant Board could consider re-signing the Covenant, as other areas have done, to reiterate their commitments, ten years on from the original signing. Whether a Covenant re-signing takes place or not, it is important to keep the core principles of ‘no disadvantage’ and ‘special consideration for those who have given the most’, at the forefront of Plymouth’s Armed Forces Covenant activity.
- 3.9. RBL recommends the Plymouth Covenant continues to focus on all policy areas that impact the Armed Forces community, and not limit itself to those that are covered by the new statutory duty of due regard.**

***Your name, your organization and your involvement with the Community Covenant***

- 3.10. Nick Craker, Public Affairs and Campaigns Officer, The Royal British Legion.  
Represent RBL at the Plymouth Covenant Board.

#### 4. Summary of Recommendations

- 4.1. RBL recommends publishing the Plymouth Covenant action plan and promote its achievements.
- 4.2. RBL recommends that authors of any publication or statement that references the Covenant should ensure that they use the specific wording of the principles as outlined in the Covenant itself to avoid confusion and dilution of them.

- 4.3. RBL recommends the Plymouth Covenant continues to focus on all policy areas that impact the Armed Forces community, and not limit itself to those that are covered by the new statutory duty of due regard.

**For further information or for clarifications please contact Nick Craker, Public Affairs and Campaigns Officer (South), on [ncraker@britishlegion.org.uk](mailto:ncraker@britishlegion.org.uk)**

**August 2022**