

Notes from Heather Ogburn

What you think the Community Covenant is

As we all know, 'the AFC is a promise from the nation that those who serve or have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly'. Like the government, Plymouth Covenant should be committed to supporting the armed forces community. The Covenant in Plymouth has been a living, breathing entity, its membership ensuring the promise is upheld through working in real collaboration with the armed forces community and wider community across the city.

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

Many excellent things have happened through the Plymouth AFC up to and including some of 2019.

The Covenant came into being via the EPS Dept of PCC as, at that time, only EPS were involved in any measurable way, with the AF community. The PCC officer responsible for supporting military and veterans' children and their families had been working with schools for some time, to ensure equality of access and opportunity for these families. By the time of the signing of the Covenant, in 2012, a schools' service pupil voice network was already in existence and this network was linked across not only schools but the military community and civic activities. The achievement and progress of military children was tracked and reported on and the officer regularly acted upon feedback from the community. Because of this, there was already a foundation laid for the Covenant, that was quickly built upon by inviting membership from across the city to participate.

A significant success of the Covenant has been the consultation with the AF community so that planned outcomes would meet needs at a local level whilst remaining mindful of the national picture. The voice of children and young people in this has been unique to Plymouth and celebrated at a national level on regular occasions. Up to 2019, it remained the only Covenant to have this element. It would have remained so, however, the voice of the young people has been lost.

Covenant grant funding was very successful, during the early days of this process, as the Covenant officer worked closely with those seeking grant funding to ensure tightly written bids that met the local and national criteria of the Covenant.

The Covenant brought together many parties to support the promise to the AF community and enabled the linkage of topics and projects to maximise outcomes. The focused plans with measurable outcomes that would evidence impact were present and actively used to ensure the Covenant made a positive difference. The plans also included a maintenance section to ensure achieved outcomes did not slip or disappear once completed.

The inclusion of young people in the Covenant enabled Plymouth to become the leading LA in work with service children and young people, sharing their practice

across other LAs, even into Scotland and North Yorkshire. We were able to link work with the families' federations and various service providers within the armed forces themselves.

Plymouth quickly became the 'go to' LA for support for service children and families and we gained a seat on the national exec of the SCISS and a key member of MODLAP plus becoming a significant voice with service charities, notably, the RBL. In addition, we were regular contributors to the SCIP Alliance, supporting their development of materials for schools and HEI settings.

The Covenant membership, including the charitable sector and veterans' groups, enabled us to better understand their needs and aim to meet these within the Covenant remit. It also enabled individual memberships to make connections and maximise their impact together rather than individually.

The Covenant brought the needs of veterans' employment to the fore through local employment fairs, that the MOD were not able to provide, and through publicising this via the media, showcasing the teamwork of the Covenant on behalf of disadvantaged veterans and their families.

Plymouth resisted the temptation to 'tick the box' and become part of the wider SW Covenant due to recognising our unique nature as a garrison city. Whilst we liaised and shared practice across the region we remained exclusively Plymothian.

The appointment of Covenant officers and members from a military background made a significant positive difference to understanding the community we served.

The AF community knew they key lead officer(s)/ Champion and could approach them for help or with their opinions.

What you think could have been done better

What ever we achieve we can always do better.

The membership became very large, and meetings proved a challenge to productivity.

The decision to join up with the Wessex Covenant group, I believe, was a mistake, shifting us from a unique identity. I would ask what the membership of Wessex has done for Plymouth, specifically, that we could not have achieved anyway?

The loss of the driving officer being from a military background placed a deal of pressure on other officers to try to gain a military perspective.

The move to theme groups, whilst logical, given my first point in this section, was not as productive as it could have been. This put extra pressure on the lead officer's time and disjointed the aims and, thus, potential positive outcomes for each group.

The AF Awards was a great idea that lost integrity as the event became an activity outside of the Covenant itself. Due to Covid, this was abandoned but the award

recipients did not receive the recognition they deserved. Covenant could have done this, despite Covid, via Teams/Zoom etc.

The focus on the voice of the AF Community began to fade in favour of voices of those at the table (not always the same thing) especially the voices of young people who, due to restructure of EPS, fell under a new officer with little or no remit to ensure these young people were not disadvantaged. Because of this, the children's voice network (MKC Heroes) has collapsed, the Military Kids Choir, a key part of the Covenant plan, has not been reinstated post-Covid and military children and young people are no longer a part of civic activity. The Covenant does not know how well Plymouth children and young people are achieving, how their health (physical and mental) is or what they see as their priorities for the future. I would ask, does the Covenant know this of any of the AF Community and why has the Covenant not held those responsible for knowing and supporting to account?

The Covenant did not manage to maintain the employment fairs and could have worked harder to support spouses and dependents employment opportunities.

The website has never been as good as it could be and needs work.

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

I would like to see Plymouth Covenant redefine its unique nature within the UK and to have confidence in its ability to deliver the Covenant promise for the city, based on the voices of that community, including its young people.

I would like to see Covenant officers, officers linked to the military community and members held to account for their actions in support of the AF Community.

I would like the Covenant to have a comprehensive action plan with outcome focused, measurable impacts assigned across the membership.

If the theme groups remain, I would like to see these joined up with the theme leads meeting regularly to plan together and deliver joint and linked outcomes as appropriate.

I would like to see a defined focus on mental health, specifically for children, young people and their families, driven by the young people themselves, including the reinstatement of MKC H across Plymouth schools and a Military Kids Choir (a key support for families mental health) funded from the music budget. This is based on feedback I already have and regularly receive from the community.

Focusing on spouses' employment, if they see this as a priority, would also be something I see as a likely theme. This is an assumption; I don't have their voice on this.

I would like to see the Covenant focus on commemoration and celebration strengthened and to see members of the armed forces community, including children

and young people, involved in all civic events. Feedback to me is dismayed that there is no invitation to include military children in many things.

Web/social media needs to be addressed in a way that makes it easily accessible for all. Who can the community ask? Who is the Lead/Champion etc? What are the priorities and how does Covenant know this? Regular updates and links to support charities etc.

Cross party representation so that there is continuity across the political scene.