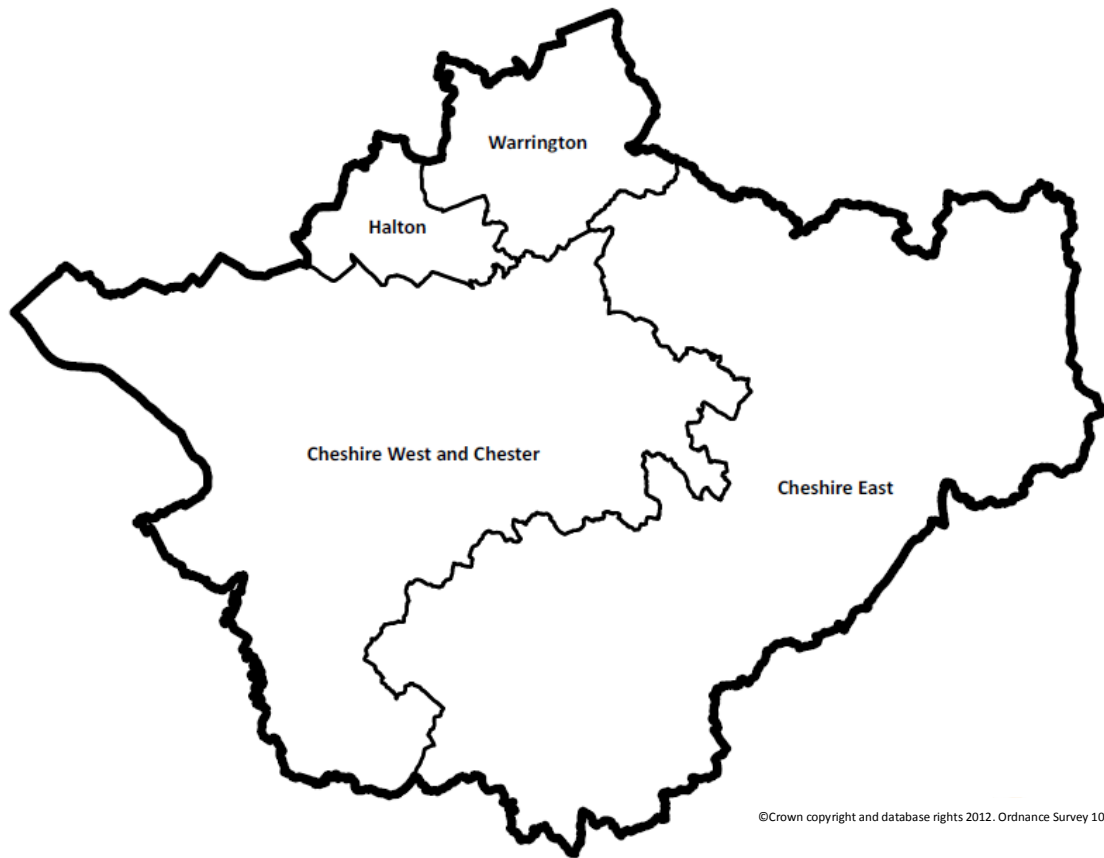




Community Covenant



Cheshire, Halton and Warrington

Community Covenant General Principles

The Armed Forces Community Covenant is a voluntary statement of mutual support between a civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community. It is intended to complement the Armed Forces Covenant, which outlines the moral obligation between the Nation, the Government and the Armed Forces, at a local level.

The purpose of this Community Covenant is to encourage support for the Armed Forces Community working and residing in Cheshire, Halton and Warrington and to recognise and remember the sacrifices made by members of this Armed Forces Community, particularly those who have given the most. This includes in-Service and ex-Service personnel and their families and widow(er)s in Cheshire, Halton and Warrington.

This publication explains how we will deliver the Armed Forces Community Covenant. It details our intentions, pledges and the approach that we are taking in order to ensure that the Covenant is a success for the Armed Forces, the Public, Private and Third Sectors as well as the wider community. As such, this covenant supersedes all and any previous versions held by individual signatory Local Authorities

The Armed Forces have a long history in Cheshire, Halton and Warrington:

- The Royal Navy assault ship HMS Albion is affiliated to the city of Chester.
- 75 Engineer Regiment has its Regimental Headquarters in Warrington.
- The 1st Battalion, The Mercian Regiment (Cheshire) recruits its soldiers from within the traditional Cheshire boundaries; the regiment has its area HQ at The Castle in Chester. The battalion is the successor to the 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment.
- The 1st Battalion, The Mercian Regiment has been granted freedom of the Borough of Cheshire East
- B (Cheshire) Company, 4 MERCIAN are located in Widnes.
- D (Cheshire) Company, 4 MERCIAN are located in Crewe.
- C (Cheshire Yeomanry) Squadron are located in Chester.
- The Royal Welsh (The Royal Welch Fusiliers) are located in Dale Barracks, Chester.
- The region's bomb disposal squad is Chester Troop from 521 Squadron, Dale Barracks, Chester. Part of the Royal Logistic Corps, the squadron deals with about 100 call-outs to unexploded ordnance across the region every year.
- B Squadron, 208 Field Hospital are located in Ellesmere Port.

We are immensely proud of our Armed Forces, particularly those from, stationed or returning to Cheshire, Halton and Warrington. We hope that this Covenant will demonstrate our commitment to all of our Armed Service Personnel, Veterans and their Families.

Participants

The following organisations have come together to form a Community Covenant Working Group while additional organisations have come forward to provide advice and support. They have shown their commitment to our Armed Forces Community by signing this Community Covenant:

Community Covenant Working Group

- The Armed Forces
- NHS Western Cheshire
- NHS Cheshire, Warrington and Wirral
- Cheshire Probation Services
- Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Warrington Borough Council
- Cheshire East Borough Council
- Halton Borough Council
- Jobcentre Plus

Supporting organisations

- Halton Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise
- Cheshire Army Benevolent Fund
- Combat Stress
- SSAFA
- The Royal British Legion
- Cheshire Constabulary
- SaBRE - Cheshire

Issues affecting the relationship between the Armed Forces community and the civilian community cannot be solved by one organisation alone, nor does it stop at Local Authority boundaries. The potential barriers faced by a member of the Armed Forces community may also be influenced by, or subject to, the systems created by any or all of these organisations. This is why the organisations listed above have made a commitment to work together to ensure that members of the Armed Forces community are not subject to disadvantage when residing or returning to our communities, accessing services or seeking support throughout Cheshire, Halton and Warrington.

Each member of this Armed Forces Community Covenant has a specialist area of knowledge and expertise. By working together we can be greater than the sum of our parts, working holistically to create the best outcomes for all.

Aims and Objectives

The key values identified at a national level through the government's Covenant guidelines have formed the basis of our Community Covenant:

1. Encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces communities in their areas through the development of local actions.
2. Nurture understanding and awareness amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces Community.
3. Recognise and remember the sacrifices faced by the Armed Forces Community.
4. Encourage activities which help to integrate the Armed Forces Community into local life.
5. Encourage the Armed Forces Community to help and support the wider community.

Furthermore we have identified five recurring themes that we feel we can significantly and positively contribute to. These are not a limit to what we will do but provide some focus to our actions.

- Housing
- Employment and Benefits
- Education
- Health
- Wellbeing

How we work

The Community Covenant Working Group is set up as a network where ideas, issues and best practice can be shared between organisations. Armed Forces Champions from each organisation will act as the first point of contact between organisations to allow the sharing of information and joined up working. Champions have responsibility for facilitating the implementation of the covenant principles and pledges within their organisations. They are also a central point to receive and distribute information within their organisation and externally with partners.

The Community Covenant Working Group will link in to the 42 (NW) Brigade Transition Delivery Working Group which covers Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside. The Community Covenant Working Group will provide local support, taking into consideration the themes, direction and intelligence provided at this highly strategic level.

The Community Covenant Working Group will also seek to engage with relevant organisations from the private, public and charity sectors. Active engagement with these groups will allow expert advice to be sought, working relationships to be built and further progress to be made.

Themes and Pledges

Housing

Both research and anecdotal evidence has shown that access to housing can be a problem, particularly for those leaving service or for the families of those currently serving or recently widowed. Traditionally, Local Authority Housing Policy has placed housing applicants into priority 'bands' to reflect need, with current residency status forming part of the assessment in accordance with the Common Housing Allocations Policy. Those discharged from service, with no medical needs, are therefore placed in a low band.

Those injured during service may also require additional support to adapt housing to help retain independence and remain in their own home, while homelessness is also recognised as an issue that may be faced by those discharged from the Armed Forces.

Pledge: All Local Authorities agree to place members of the Armed Forces in housing need into priority band B (or equivalent) and will not apply residency criteria to armed forces personnel. Those in housing need who have a serious injury, medical condition or disability that has been sustained as a result of their service in the Armed Forces will be placed in Band A (top priority). This commitment will extend to the dependents and widow(er)s of those serving in the Armed Forces.

Pledge: All Local Authorities agree to acknowledge that Service people occupying Service Family accommodation and who have been issued with a Certificate of Cessation demonstrates impending homelessness. In such cases, a possession order is not required before provision of housing assistance.

Pledge: Those in receipt of a War Pension will have part of this income disregarded in the means test when accessing funding from the Disabled Facilities Grant.

Pledge: Some instances of homelessness can be linked to mental health issues. The NHS is committed to ensuring improvement in mental health services for veterans at a regional level. All organisations will follow their lead and work together to support this aim.

Employment & Benefits

The health and wellbeing of people of working age is critical for supporting the local and national economy and positively contributing to society. It's recognised that being in work is generally good for health and wellbeing, while being out of work can lead to poorer physical and mental health.

Accessing employment opportunities and benefits can be challenging for those leaving service or the partners of those in service. There are approximately 5,000 Early Service Leavers leaving the Armed Forces per year with only 61% of these Early Service Leavers being employed at six month following discharge. Those leaving service may have spent the majority of their career with the Armed Forces and may therefore require additional support when entering the job market. Entrepreneurial individuals may also benefit from business advice and support for accessing investment.

Families of those in the Armed Forces may also be required to move frequently. This can make finding employment difficult. Having sole responsibility for child care whilst their partners are serving can also significantly reduce the ability to keep regular employment.

Pledge: Work together to share and distribute information about existing services allowing access to job opportunities, business advice and benefits.

Pledge: Work with Jobcentre Plus Armed Forces Champions along with Third Sector Organisations to signpost extra support to those discharged from the Armed Forces.

Pledge: Cheshire Probation will continue to provide additional support to veteran offenders, including mentoring.

Education

Frequent moves can cause practical issues when enrolling children into school, particularly outside of the school term. These families generally receive good support when a whole regiment moves but it can be more difficult when individual families move.

Children may also require additional support to ease integration into a new school or area and may face additional challenges when a parent is in service.

Pledge: Where possible, ensure that school admissions and local members of the Armed Forces work together before a move takes place.

Pledge: Work with schools and local groups to develop understanding and support for children of those in service. This includes the timely provision of appropriate support for Service Children with Special Educational Needs.

Health

The public health agenda recognises the Armed Forces community as an important demographic to address in terms of health inequalities and specific health behaviours and needs that are related to Service. Health refers to both clinical and non-clinical elements.

Pledge: We will ensure that all parts of the NHS community will offer support to the local Armed Forces community and make it easier for Service personnel, ex-service personnel, families and veterans to access the services, help and support which will be available in a timely and appropriate manner in order to maximise their potential to achieve good physical health and positive mental health and wellbeing. Accordingly, service members and their families required to move or relocate will maintain their position within a hospital waiting list and in accordance with clinical priorities.

Pledge: Regardless of changes to NHS structures and delivery we will aim to ensure that there is a commitment to service user led design in order that the health care needs of veterans are recognised and met.

Pledge: We pledge to raise the awareness among healthcare professionals about the needs of veterans so that these needs are met. To this end Hospital and GP records will indicate that a patient is a current/former service member. The identification of an individual as a former service member may help identify vulnerable individuals who can then be brought to the attention of supporting agencies.

Pledge: In line with the establishment of pilot schemes by Central Government we pledge to improve veterans' access to Mental Health Services

Pledge: The NHS/Primary Care Trust (PCT) pledges that in the provision of prosthetic limbs the NHS/PCT will as a minimum match the standard provided by Defence Medical Services.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is intrinsically linked in to all of the themes already described, both as a contributor to and an indicator of the state of individuals and our communities. However, each organisation can further support wellbeing in our communities.

Furthermore, we recognise the Armed Forces community as a distinct group that may experience common issues and needs. We aim to fully integrate involvement and consideration of this community, as we do with all stakeholders, as part of our core business, not as an add-on or afterthought.

Pledge: Cheshire Probation will continue to provide additional support to veterans using Veteran Support Officers with specialist awareness training and will continue to work with Veterans in Custody Support Officers from Merseyside and Great Manchester to ensure best practice

Pledge: Partners will work together to promote existing opportunities including Healthy Living Centres, access to mentoring services, and other services available to members of the Armed Forces community.

Pledge: Where possible, partners will work to provide discounts to leisure facilities and promote relevant discount schemes to the Armed Forces community.

Pledge: Armed Forces Champions will work to promote the needs of the Armed Forces community as part of existing services.

Pledges: All organisations aim to encourage a positive and strengthened relationship between the Armed Forces community and the wider community.

Pledge: All organisations will work together in a mutually beneficial way, acting in accordance with the key values of this Community Covenant.

Monitoring and Development

As our communities develop so too will the role of the Community Covenant. It is therefore important to revise this agreement when necessary. Organisations may also create action plans that will be developed and implemented locally to further support the aims and pledges outlined. The core Community Covenant Working Group will formally meet no less than every six months for the first two years to discuss existing pledges, achievements and issues as well as opportunities for development. Until a suitable non-military lead can be identified, this will be led by the Armed Forces Commanding Officer who holds a responsibility for Cheshire. Annual reviews will provide opportunity for additional organisations to officially sign the covenant.