

10 January 2012		ITEM 7
Corporate Overview and Scrutiny		
VETERANS' CHARTER		
Report of: Veterans' Charter Task and Finish Group		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Accountable Head of Service: N/A		
Accountable Director: Steve Cox, Assistant Chief Executive		
This report is Public		
Purpose of Report: To bring the recommendations of the Veterans' Charter Task and Finish Group to Overview and Scrutiny for discussion and agreement.		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2011 elected Members voted unanimously in favour of a motion 'to investigate and consider working with partners to create a Thurrock Service Veterans' Charter'.

The motion stated that a number of named partners (but not exclusively) should be included in this work. Overview and Scrutiny established a Task and Finish Group to consider this motion. Of the partners named in the motion, The Group heard evidence from services provided by Thurrock Council, The Royal British Legion and the Burma Star National Gulf Veterans and Families Association. Thurrock CVS supported promotion of the work within the wider Voluntary Sector. The Group received verbal input via the Job Centre Plus. Evidence was not secured via South West Essex Primary Care Trust in the timeframe of the Group, but a meeting is confirmed following the Overview and Scrutiny meeting. In addition, the Group heard evidence from The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association – Forces Help (SSAFA) and the Far East Veterans Association. Members of the public, including serving personnel, also attended Group meetings and made contributions.

This report provides a summary of the work of the Group, and makes recommendations to Overview and Scrutiny for consideration prior to being taken to Full Council.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 1.1 Recommend that Council adopts a Veterans' Charter.**
- 1.2 Recommend that Council develops an information pack to inform and support Veterans access services and support in the wider community, and that a dedicated lead officer and contact number be available for enquiries from Veterans.**
- 1.3 Recommend that Council works towards a Community Covenant between public services, the Armed Services and communities.**
- 1.4 Recommend that Thurrock hosts an annual community event to mark Armed Forces Day.**

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

- 2.1 Thurrock Council carried a motion at its meeting of March 2011 to 'investigate and consider working with partners to create a Thurrock Service Veterans' Charter'. Corporate Overview and Scrutiny established a Task and Finish Group to take this work forward. The Group met five times between August and December 2011. The Terms of Reference are attached as Appendix 1.
- 2.2 Veterans' Charters acknowledge that service veterans may well have issues that can impact on their well-being and affect their adjustment to civilian life. Some of the barriers experienced by veterans when returning to civilian life cover the whole welfare sector including: access to housing; claiming benefits; breaking into social networks; seeking employment or retraining as well as coping with any disability caused as a result of a veterans time serving in the armed forces.
- 2.3 The Group agreed Terms of Reference to cover the scope of the motion and to reflect the comments made by Corporate Overview and Scrutiny when establishing the Group. The Group heard evidence from a number of partners and charitable service Groups, and carried out research via a survey which was well publicised across the borough. The Group was also contacted by serving personnel and was encouraged to widen the scope of the Group to work towards a 'Community Covenant' between the Armed Services, public services and the wider community. The Group stayed focused on the scope of the original motion; however, it has recommended that further work be carried out in support of a wider Community Covenant.

3. ISSUES AND/OR OPTIONS:

- 3.1 The Group was established and agreed a set of Terms of Reference in August 2011. The Group has worked to achieve each of the points in the Terms of Reference as detailed below.

Engage with veterans to explore needs – 13 respondents completed a survey questionnaire. Although feedback was limited, the research did generate a wider discussion amongst charitable groups and serving personnel. The general consensus from respondents was that the definition of a veteran adopted by the Group was sound, and that there is room for improvement across a wide range of services for veterans – especially raising awareness of veterans' needs and promotion services to veterans so that access can be improved.

To establish a definition of the term 'veteran' – the definition adopted by the Group for the purpose of the charter was 'A veteran is any man or woman who has served in the Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force (National Service, Regular or Reserve) and the Merchant Navy, and who has now left to rejoin family life'. This was widely supported through the survey and is recommended as part of the Veterans' Charter.

Consider the need for a Veterans' Database – The Group did not consider a data base to be possible due to the difficulties involved with identifying veterans and gaining consent to remain on a database.

Consider whether services need to change for veterans – The Group did not identify specific changes within services that needed to change. The Group heard from Housing Services who are currently looking to change their written policy to reflect current practice which does reflect the needs of veterans. The Group also heard from Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Heritage within Thurrock Council. Job Centre Plus replied to say they did not monitor the take up of services by veterans. It has not been possible to speak to South Essex PCT about services targeting veterans within the timeframe of the Group's work; however, a meeting date is set for January 2012. The Group felt that services were available to support veterans – however, more information and promotion needed to be targeted at veterans to make them aware of available support, and more consideration was needed by services when working with Veterans. SSAFA did suggest that all services should ask new contacts 'have you ever served in the Armed Forces?' to raise awareness of veterans' needs. The Group therefore recommended that an information pack – or KIT Bag be developed by the Council to bring a unified approach to available services. This would be particularly useful for veterans from ethnic minority groups such as the Gurkha community where language barriers within the wider community could inhibit a full understanding of services that can be accessed. The Group also felt the Council should play a key role by identifying a named officer and dedicated contact number to be promoted to veterans as a key contact.

Consider promoting Charitable Organisations that support veterans – The Group felt that this could be achieved through the information pack mentioned above.

Consider how the achievements of Veterans can be recognised and considered – the Group supported a suggestion by Children’s Services that more work be supported through charitable organisations to share oral history by veterans in schools. Furthermore, the Group felt that progressing a Community Covenant with the Armed Forces to include serving personnel – as well as hosting an annual event to mark Armed Forces Day – would help create a wider cultural understanding and appreciation of the sacrifices made by both serving personnel and veterans. Through its research, the Group learned that funding applications can be made for up to 60% of the costs towards an Armed Forces Day, and the Heritage and Museums Officer has agreed to liaise with local military heritage groups to help take an event forward. Further more, the Group learned that if the Council works towards and agrees a wider Community Covenant; funding can then be accessed through a dedicated resource assigned by the Ministry of Defence for areas with a Community Covenant. This could be applied to support of a number projects or activities that support a wider understanding of the Armed Forces including veterans - for example, oral history projects.

- 3.2 As a result of its work, the Group has provided Corporate Overview and Scrutiny with a draft Service Veterans’ Charter (Appendix Two). The Draft Service Veterans’ Charter is based on similar Charters produced by Mansfield Council and the Scottish Veterans’ Charter. The Group considers the Charter to adequately reflect its ambitions as a result of its work from August to December 2011.
- 3.3 As work with the public started around a Veterans’ Survey, a call was made for the scope of the Charter to be extended to include serving personnel as a ‘Community Covenant’. The Group did not want to change the scope of its work; however, the Group did strongly feel that Thurrock should develop a Community Covenant as this would encompass serving personnel and create a wider understanding of the Armed Forces therefore benefiting veterans. This was considered particularly important at a time when key operations carried out abroad, such as in Afghanistan, are to be wound down. Furthermore, the Government intends to reduce the size of the Armed Forces by 20,000 by 2020. This too is likely to increase the need for a wider community and service based understanding of the needs of veterans.

4. CONSULTATION (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 4.1 The Group was established by Corporate Overview and Scrutiny in July 2011. The Group has carried out consultation through a survey and through engagement with charitable organisations supporting veterans. Members of the public who have contacted the Group have been encouraged to attend and to make contributions to the Group.

5. IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

- 5.1 The recommendations specifically impact on two Council priorities. The first is to provide and commission high quality and accessible services that meet, wherever possible, individual needs. The second is to build pride, respect and responsibility in Thurrock's communities and its residents.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Funké Nana**
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The costs of implementing the Veteran's Charter will be met within existing budgets.

6.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**
 Telephone and email: **01375 652087**
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There are no direct legal implications but the adoption of such a charter would contribute towards the authority's community engagement strategy.

6.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**
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The Veterans' Charter and work towards a Community Covenant will need to take into account the diversity of ex-service personnel. Consideration will need to be given to the needs of veterans whose needs are traditionally underrepresented such as BME (Black and Ethnic Minority), LGB (Lesbian, Gay and Bi-Sexual) and increasingly female ex-service personnel.

6.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Section 17, Risk Assessment, Health Impact Assessment, Sustainability, IT, Environmental

None.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The Veterans' Charter Task and Finish Group has fulfilled its tasks and has made recommendations as set out above. The work carried out through the Group has identified a need for services and communities to gain a better understanding of the sacrifices made by serving personnel as well as veterans. A draft Service Veterans' Charter has been prepared for consideration by Overview and Scrutiny, and a recommendation made that Council works towards a Community Covenant. Alongside the Charter, an information pack for veterans, and an annual community event to mark Armed Forces Day are recommended as valuable activities to help improve a wider understanding of the Armed Forces and the needs of veterans.

BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT:

- None.

APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:

- Appendix 1 – Terms of Reference
- Appendix 2 – Draft Veterans' Charter

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