

Corporate Policy Committee

5th October 2023

Armed Forces Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS)

Report of: Helen Charlesworth-May - Executive Director of Adults, Health, and Integration

Report Reference No: CP/56/23-24

Ward(s) Affected: All

Purpose of Report

- 1 To provide an update on the Silver Defence Employee Recognition Award received by the council in May 2022.
- 2 To set out the requirements associated with applying for the Gold Defence Employee Recognition Award.
- 3 The Councils Corporate Plan states, as part of its “Open” vision, that by 2025, it will: “Receive the Ministry of Defence’s (MOD) Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award and proactively demonstrate that service personnel and the armed forces community are not unfairly disadvantaged as part of our recruiting and selection processes”.

Executive Summary

- 4 This report provides an update on the work the Council has done with veterans over the last two years, and in doing so applying and being awarded, the Armed Forces Employer Recognition Scheme Silver Award.
- 5 The report recommends that the Council apply for the Gold Defence Employee Recognition Award whilst setting out the associated expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Policy Committee is recommended to:

1. Apply for the Gold Defence Employee Recognition Scheme.
2. Agree to make the necessary policy changes as set out in Annex 1, to meet the requirements to achieve ERS Gold Award.

Background

- 6 The MOD have an Employee recognition scheme (ERS) for organisations who wish to demonstrate their support for the Armed Forces Community.
- 7 Cheshire East Council signed the Covenant partnership in August 2020 and received the Bronze Award, which is automatically assigned to any organisation that adheres to the Covenant.
- 8 Cheshire East Council has a long history of working with the Armed Forces Community and in 2022, the Council successfully applied (Annex 2) and received the Silver ERS award. Following intensive work in 2021/ 2022 with a large number of charities and groups, we were able to evidence the work completed:
 - The Council set up an internal staff network group for veterans and families, which meets quarterly, to engage in events, policy reviews and news stories locally.
 - The Council have played an active part in the Cheshire Armed Forces Network Committee regionally, and fed back information to local charities and groups.
 - The Council have worked in close partnership with Primary Care Networks, DWP, and the ICB colleagues:
 - Provide direct assistance to veterans that need extra support with housing/benefits.
 - Linked veterans with NHS specialists in order to provide specific PTSD support.
 - Highlighting the benefits of patients identifying as a 'veteran' which has led to a number of GP practices employing a veteran support clerk.

- The Council, in close partnership with community groups and charities, have helped develop a network of four new breakfast clubs, with the main focus of tackling self-isolation after the Covid pandemic, and peer support. A major breakthrough in these projects was inclusion of the LGBTQ+ veterans' community in the Crewe and surrounding area breakfast clubs.
- The Council led the Armed Forces Day in Queen's Park, Crewe on the 25th & 26th of June 2022, in collaboration with local charities. The event was very well received, with a footfall of 28,200 people over the 2 days.
- The Council was successful in applying for £18,000 from the Covenant Trust to run a digital inclusion project. This was awarded to the Alsager Royal British Legion in October 2022 for a project called BOD (Branching Out Digitally). They are embedding new technology and training directly to the most vulnerable veterans, to help combat isolation.

9 For simplicity, the requirements outlined in Annex 1, that the Council would be required to commit to achieve the Gold Defence Employee Recognition Award, are as follows:

EMPLOYER RECOGNITION SCHEME (ERS) GOLD AWARD NOMINATION

Essential Gold criteria:

- ✓ Organisations must have signed the AFC. Employers must have an existing relationship with their NAM/REED/appropriate Defence representative.
- ✓ The employer must have already demonstrated their support by holding a valid ERS Award at the Silver Level. Employers that do not hold a valid ERS Award at the Silver Level cannot progress to the Gold Level.
- ✓ The employer must proactively demonstrate their Forces-friendly credentials as part of their recruiting and selection processes. Where possible, they should be engaged with CTP in the recruitment of Service leavers and have registered with the Forces Families Jobs website. The employer must actively ensure that their workforce is aware of their positive policies towards Defence People issues. For example, an employer nominated for support to the Reserves must have an internally publicised and positive HR policy on Reserves. In the case where no HR policy exists this should be demonstrated by specific references in job descriptions or on the organisation's website.
- ✓ The employer must be an exemplar within their market sector, advocating support to Defence People issues to partner organisations, suppliers and customers with tangible positive results. For example,

demonstrate proactive steps/activity and clear success in encouraging partner organisations and their supply chain to sign the AFC.

- ✓ Within the context of Reserves the employer must have demonstrated support to mobilisations or have a framework in place.
- ✓ The employer must provide at least 10 days' additional paid leave for Reserve training.
- ✓ The employer must not have been the subject of any negative PR or media activity that could cause embarrassment to Defence.

Desirable Gold criteria

Employers should employ at least one individual from the AFC category that the nomination emphasises. For example, an employer nominated for support to the Reserves must employ at least one Reservist. In exceptional circumstances, where there is outstanding support for the employer, the organisation can be considered for the award where they do not employ someone from the AFC category. They should promote their support to Defence People issues through their full range of external communications.

Although, in exceptional circumstances, an award is possible for support of a single Defence People issue, such as Reserves. A nomination will be strengthened if support extends across the range of Defence People issues as outlined above.

- ✓ They should have a declared target for the number of Reservists within their workforce.
- ✓ They will have hosted a Reserve recruiting event on their premises in partnership with a local Reserve Unit or sS Recruiting Team.
- ✓ Other than in exceptional circumstances, they should not have appealed a mobilisation.

10 What does this mean for Cheshire East Council?

- Increase the current Annual Leave entitlement for reservists from 5 days to 10 days per financial year, allowing employees to fulfil their reservist role.
- Cheshire East will need to proactively demonstrate they are forces friendly e.g. carry on demonstrating examples of projects undertaken already, similar to paragraph 8 of this report.
- The Cheshire East HR policy will need to be aligned with the Gold Award Essential and Desirable Specifications (Annex 1)
- Cheshire East will need to proactively demonstrate they are forces friendly. See point 8 for examples of projects undertaken already.

- The Council must apply for the Gold Award no later than 2026.
- Currently, Cheshire East Council has at least 12 Current serving Reservists and 5 Active Cadet Leaders.

Consultation and Engagement

- 11 The Council already effectively engage with this cohort as described in point 8 of this report.
- 12 Should Corporate Policy Committee approve this recommendation further engagement will take place.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 13 Agreement to go forward with the Covenant Gold Award will enhance the councils HR policy for reservists, and proactively show the Council's commitment as an Armed Forces friendly organisation, both internally, and in the wider community.
- 14 Applying for the gold award is in line with the strategic aims of the Councils Corporate Plan 2022-2026. The Councils Corporate Plan states, as part of its "Open" vision, that by 2025, it will: "Receive the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award and proactively demonstrate that service personnel and the armed forces community are not unfairly disadvantaged as part of our recruiting and selection processes".
- 15 Further advantages are as follows:
 - Anecdotal evidence from other local authorities and organisations signed up to the Gold Award criteria, suggest it will help recruit and retain reservist employees.
 - This will be outlined in the Employee Benefits Brochure
 - The Armed Forces community will recognise the Council's commitments.
 - Promoting the Council as an Armed Forces-friendly organisation to staff and the wider public.
 - Supporting employees who are members of the Reserve Forces; granting additional paid/unpaid leave for annual Reserve Forces training; supporting any mobilisations and deployment

Other Options Considered

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| Option | Impact | Risk |
|--|--|---|
| Not to take part in the MOD employee recognition scheme Gold Award | <p>If the Gold Award is not applied for by 2027 the council will have to reapply for the Silver Status.</p> <p>By not applying for the Gold Award, it might impact the progress of work already completed, and ongoing both internally and in our wider communities.</p> | There are reputational and performance risk if the priority within the Councils Corporate Plan 2021-2025 is not achieved. |

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 17 The recommendations are supportable. However, it is recommended an equality impact assessment is carried out before we apply for the Gold Award, and for it to look at not only the general impact, but specific impact on any indirect gender inequality that may arise under our current leave policy between reservists and special constables. There is arguably a parity between the two roles, but as it stands reservists are entitled to additional paid leave, whilst for special constables this is discretionary. This disparity will increase on joining the Gold Award.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 18 The recommendation would result in an additional leave entitlement for certain employees, which would incur a “productivity” cost through reduced working days.
- 19 The value of this would depend on the number of armed forces reservists employed by the council. The estimated value below is based on the 2023/24 average cost per employee and the current cohort of 15 reservists.

- 20 The lost hours would be incurred across the council against the relevant services. There is no new funding associated with the gold award, therefore the affordability of the recommendation is contingent on the relevant services being able to absorb the productivity loss within existing resources.
- 21 The estimated cost is relatively small compared to the overall payroll budget for the council (approximately £150m). The scheme is assumed to benefit recruit and retention.
- 22 There is a risk that the council has little influence over the number of its employees who chose to be an armed forces reservist. If the number of reservists employed increased (and the gold award could potentially have an incentive effect on this) the cost of time lost via additional leave entitlement would also increase

Policy

- 23 This paper will place a responsibility on the Council to implement the Essential and Desirable criteria in the Specification found in Annex 1. The new criteria would be an additional form of special leave available to the applicable members of the workforce.

Aim: An open and enabling organisation

Priority: listen, learn and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation”.

Under this priority is the specific ambition to receive the Ministry of Defence Gold Award by 2025

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 24 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken with the following areas identified:
- 25 It is expected that a decision to proceed with the application for the Gold award and associated policy changes will have a positive impact on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in relation to the Veterans, Reservists and Cadet Leaders applying to or already in Cheshire East Council employment. This will be achieved through the implementation of best practice required of the essential and desirable criteria in Annex 1.
- 26 It has highlighted there is arguably a parity between the roles of Special Constable and Armed Forces Reservist, as it stands reservists are entitled to additional paid leave whilst for special constables this is discretionary. This disparity will increase on joining the Gold Award.

- 27 In addition to the parity between the role of Special Constable, the potential exits for parity between other roles such as retained firefighters, mountain rescue, and other similar roles.

Human Resources

- 28 This recommendation, if approved, will place a responsibility on the Council to implement the Essential and Desirable criteria in the Specification found in Annex 1.
- 29 A calculation by HR has shown that the average cost of a full-time employee in Cheshire East Council, including on cost, is £38000 per year. If all individuals above took the time allowed in Annex 1, based on an average salary, there would be a:
- Time Implication – **135 Days**
 - Cost Implication for time lost - **£19,730**
- 30 The Council would have to commit the time of relevant officers to develop and implement the policy changes.
- 31 The departments in which staff take the leave would have to cover workloads within existing teams.
- 32 The following policies would require amendment: Recruitment Policy and Procedure and the Leave and Time Off Policy.
- 33 The following policy related documents will require updating: Employee Benefits Brochure, Recruitment Process Guide – Centranet, Guidance on supporting employees who are reservists – Centranet, the Employment Charter.

Risk Management

- 34 Risks will be managed by the Council's Armed Forces Lead, with escalation through the Communities management structure, or with the relevant Policy area lead.

Rural Communities

- 35 It is not anticipated that this recommendation will have a direct impact on Rural Communities.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- 36 It is not anticipated that this recommendation will have a direct impact on Children and Young People/Cared for Children.

Public Health

- 37 It is widely publicised that veterans suffer with physical and mental health due to time within the armed forces, this recommendation will have a positive direct impact on this cohort.

Climate Change

- 38 It is not anticipated that this recommendation will have a direct impact on Climate Change.

| Access to Information | |
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| Contact Officer: | Dan Coyne, Head of Service Communities and Integration. Daniel.coyne@cheshireeast.gov.uk Andrew Makin, Community Development Manager Andrew.makin@cheshireeast.gov.uk |
| Appendices: | Annex 1-Gold Award Criteria Annex 2-2022 SILVER AWARD - CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL |
| Background Papers: | No background papers. |