

THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT IN OXFORDSHIRE

Following on from last month's meeting about growing militarisation in everyday life, we invited our local Oxfordshire County Councillor Judith Heathcoat and OCC Senior Policy Officer Samantha Shepherd to Faringdon Peace Group's May meeting to tell us about the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) and how it works in Oxfordshire.

They explained that the Community Covenant was launched across the nation in 2011, and revised and renamed as the Armed Forces Covenant in 2017. It is a statement of mutual support between civilian communities and their local armed forces community. It facilitates the integration of armed forces personnel, veterans and their families into civilian life and ensures they do not face disadvantage in accessing local services, in particular education, health care, employment and housing. The armed forces community is encouraged to support the wider community through joint projects and supporting local events and services, while the local community raises awareness and understanding of issues concerning the armed forces, recognises the sacrifices they have made, and carries out acts of remembrance. They also support Armed Forces Day and repatriations in Carterton.

The AFC has been signed by central government agencies, the 3 armed forces (navy, army, airforce), businesses, local government, charities, communities and cadet forces with their adult volunteers. Faringdon Town Council, the Vale of the White Horse District Council and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) have all signed, indeed OCC were the first local authority to do so. There are 11,000 military personnel in Oxfordshire in Bicester, Brize Norton, Abingdon, Shrivenham, Didcot and Benson and each station has its own County Councillor 'champion'. They work with the 11th Infantry Brigade and service charities to support the civilian military partnership.

There is an annual £10 million fund to support the implementation of the AFC nationally. Local grants are available of up to £20,000 and have funded, for example, a road safety campaign in Benson, a Family Centre in Carterton and a youth engagement project. Judith and Samantha were certain that all residents benefit from the Armed Forces Covenant. While the Peace Group could agree that more integrated communities and equality of opportunity are good for everyone, some members questioned the government's motivation in launching such a scheme. Is it an attempt to extend and normalise the presence of the military in our daily lives, to aid recruitment and to suppress anti-war sentiment?