

Armed Forces Covenant (AFC) and the Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS): Our commitment to action

Summary

REF. Action plan line 5 “Improve brand to attract broader applicants (disadvantaged backgrounds, ex-offenders, armed forces, hard to reach communities, females etc.)” – target, gold certification for the armed forces covenant.

Supporting our approach to attract and retain broad talent, and as an organisation with a number of ex-forces employees, we looked to work with an external organisation to strengthen our support for ex-forces employees and to attract new people.

We found the Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) / Armed Forces Covenant (AFC), which are schemes run by the UK Government which encourage employers to align values with the AFC. The scheme offers three levels of accreditation, which is founded on ‘pledges’; in order to proceed to the next step, you must demonstrate that you have delivered against the previous pledges. The main objective is to demonstrate that you are an ex-forces (or reservist) employer. Advocacy forms a large part of this, i.e. engaging suppliers, customers, etc. and sharing best practice / engaging them to support the cause.

We started the journey in 2022 as a member, in 2022 we achieved bronze, then silver in 2023. We have applied for gold and aim to achieve it by July 2025 (submitted).

Why?

(What was the reason for taking action?)

- 01 Publicly demonstrate our commitment to the armed forces community both internally and externally
- 02 Work to achieve a formal accreditation and gain access to networking events to draw best practice for continuous improvement
- 03 Advocate with supply chain and clients to improve conditions for armed forces personnel across the sector
- 04 Improve employee wellbeing and engagement of ex-forces & reservist personnel
- 05 Improve skills in the business (as ex-forces personnel are generally highly talented, have diverse transferable skills and fit well within our organisation)
- 06 Support the military with mechanisms for reservists and their family if mobilised

What / How?

What are the steps to achieve accreditation?

Membership

Anyone can sign up to the ERS for free – the first step is simply a commitment to support the armed forces community (in addition to some basic requirements such as not having been subject to negative PR); you can stay at this level, but we wanted to progress.

Bronze

To get to Bronze you must achieve the relevant essential criteria; there is an option to 'overachieve' by completing further desirable outcomes. Whilst this is not a requirement, we felt it prudent to do everything possible.

For demonstration purposes, the essential requirements for Bronze are:

- “Employer must have declared their intent to support the AFC (signed the Covenant) and have registered their interest in consideration as a Bronze award holder via ERS website.”
- “Employer has confirmed their understanding of the AFC and ERS what it means to be a supporter of the Armed Forces community with the appointed NAM/REED.”
- “Employer informs their workforce of their positive support for the Armed Forces community.”
- In the case of both essential and desirable criteria, this level is largely a business commitment to act, and a declaration of intent within organisational policies and procedures.

Silver

Aligned to Bronze, Silver requires further essential and desirable outcomes, in total there are 17 requirements across Bronze and Silver, all of which we achieved.

Examples include:

- “Employer must actively ensure that their workforce is aware of their positive policies towards the Armed Forces community. For example, an employer should have an internally publicised and positive HR policy on Reserves in their workforce. In the case where no HR policy exists this should be demonstrated by specific references in job descriptions/organisation’s website.”
- “Employer demonstrates support to training by providing at least 5 days additional annual leave (ideally paid) for Reserve training.”
- “Employer should scope opportunities to support the Cadet movement (via official Cadet Force channels) through the following example activities: sponsorship, supporting the development of cadets’ wider skills to enhance their future opportunities; or providing employment advice and guidance.”

Silver accreditation is awarded by demonstrating that your organisation has delivered (and continues to deliver) against its commitments at Bronze.

Gold

To achieve gold there are a further 11 essential and desirable outcomes to achieve, largely focussed around advocacy.

Examples include:

- “Employer must be an exemplar within their market sector/ local area, advocating for the Covenant and the Armed Forces community to partner organisations, suppliers and customers with tangible positive results. E.g. demonstrate proactive steps/ activity and clear success in encouraging partner organisations and their supply chain to engage with and sign the AFC, or mentor others in progressing through the ERS.”
- “Employer demonstrates support to training by providing at least 10 days additional annual paid leave for Reserve training.”

Once again, we implemented all 11 outcomes and submitted our application for gold level accreditation in Jan 2025.

How did we do this?

We have outlined the timeline of our primary activities (omitting background processes):

AFC and ERS implementation journey



February: FAIR committee re-established
November: Started process for armed forces covenant (signed up) – managed by HR – FAIR committee representative
December: Began working with RFCA

January: Began working with and recruiting through the Careers Transition Programme
January: Applied for bronze pledge accreditation
March: Implemented policy to reflect additional paid leave for reservists
October: Awarded bronze pledge accreditation

January: Applied for Silver
April: Appointed social value and fair coordinator (Jops Hill)
March: Appointed armed forces FAIR committee representative to support (Aaron Smith)
June: Armed forces network launched, and chair appointed (Aaron Smith)
October: Awarded Silver pledge accreditation
November: Began requesting armed forces/ex forces status (employee data)

January: Began recording and releasing 'My 60 Seconds' videos (released throughout 2024)
January: Host townhall talks to raise internal awareness of armed forces networks and activity
March: Engaged supply chain to support ERS and AFC
March: Support AFC Bristol event
March: Female reservist brought as a guest speaker for our Network of Women
May: Resign covenant
May: Support AFC Okehampton event
June: Armed Forces Day/Week events
June: Host supplier day for FAIR culture and ex-forces support
August: Support AFC Castlemartin event
August: £3000 donation to cadet camp
August: Volunteering event alongside National Highways and Balfour Beatty (Foxglove, Caddick Green)
August: Volunteering event to repair armed forces flags
September: Released FAIR Play handbook, with a pillar around supporting ex-forces personnel
October: Host supplier day for FAIR culture and ex-forces support
November: Cement tanker and concrete mixer wrapped for Armistice Day
November: Established war memorial at Chipping Sodbury and Syston Offices for services, celebrations, and remembrance

January: New armed forces network chair appointed (David Standaloft)
January: Updated policies to reflect cadet additional paid leave
January: Applied for Gold pledge accreditation
January: Joined 5% club special interest group for attracting and retaining ex-forces personnel
January: Re-baseline armed forces employee data and set target to increase by 10% within the next three years
May: Re-engaged supply chain to support ERS and AFC and have begun recording supply chain armed forces maturity

2021

2022

2023

2024

2025

Outcomes (For the business, workforce and/or community)

Core outcomes:

- Achieved Bronze and Silver level pledge accreditation for the armed forces covenant
- Supported 8 supply chain members to join the AFC
- Increased engagement and communication with employees through our employee network and release of the paid-leave policies
- Applied for gold accreditation (the highest possible)

Feedback on our activity:

“I am so glad to be working with Heidelberg Materials UK. Your support and engagement have helped us to develop our cadets, and has provided surety for them that there are options for work after leaving the military” – Emily Kadoch, RFCA Wessex

“Having transitioned from the forces into HMUK I really felt the business wants to make a difference and support ex-forces personnel. My transferable skills were acknowledged, and there has been a real focus on growth and development opportunities. We’ve made great progress over the last few years, and I know there is still lots more we can do, I’m excited to be part of this” Nathan White, HMUK Area Transport Manager (Ex-forces)

Next steps:

Ongoing Engagement and Advocacy Initiatives

Once we have achieved gold, we will do the following to maintain our pledge level & continue to enhance our processes:

- Sustained Advocacy: We continue to champion the Armed Forces Covenant through ongoing internal and external engagement, reinforcing our long-term commitment to the Armed Forces community.
- Cadet Work Experience Days: We provide meaningful work experience opportunities for cadets, offering insight into our industry and supporting their personal and professional development.
- Educational Podcast Series: We are producing a podcast to raise awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant, highlighting its purpose, the benefits of signing up, and showcasing success stories from businesses that have made the pledge.
- Event Participation: We remain actively involved in key Armed Forces-related events such as Flying Fox, Ten Tors, and Cadet Camp, strengthening our connections with the community and supporting youth development initiatives
- Monitor for updates and best practice

What have we learned? What can others take from this?

Enablers

- Resource to support the delivery and management of our activity
- Early engagement and support from our exec team has enabled this to flourish
- Working with external partners such as RFCA and the Careers Transition Partnership for best practice and guidance

Barriers

- Gathering accurate data around employee data (self-recording of ex-forces status)
- Managing the scope of activity alongside other priorities (limited resource)

Opportunities

- Engage employees in our armed forces network to support in delivering activities
 - Work more closely with industry partners / clients / supply chain in co-delivered activities
 - Improved knowledge of the requirements and process to achieve Gold enables us to support others
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