

Partnering with Defence Conference, 16 March

Keynote presentation, Therese Procter, Tesco

As one of the country's largest employers of veterans and reservists, Partnering with Defence is close to our hearts. And today I wish to talk about three things:

- why we signed the Armed Forces Covenant
- how the partnership is mutually beneficial
- how we will continue to build on the work we are doing.

When we signed the Covenant, we agreed to give special consideration to helping and recruiting the armed forces community; to give a voice to those who have served or do serve. We did this because people are at the heart of what Tesco does.

We know that supporting the armed forces is the right thing to do, and it's something our colleagues and customers rightly expect of us. In fact, Tesco's connection to the armed forces dates right back to 1919, when our founder Jack Cohen set up his first market stall with his demob money after serving in World War One. But it's not just our history that forges today's connection to the armed forces.

As Chief People Officer, Tesco Bank and People Director, Tesco UK Office I'm really fascinated by why we tend to employ such large numbers of current and former service personnel. Part of this is because we have stores in the heart of military communities, so there is a natural, grass roots connection. But it's not just about store locations. We've realised that the skills, attitudes and experiences that people gain in the armed forces are just what we're looking for as a business.

Which brings me to my next point. This partnership is mutually beneficial to Tesco as an employer and to our colleagues. When recruited with armed forces experience, colleagues offer a strong sense of comradeship and teamwork. They show great leadership. And we see great examples of colleagues managing hugely complicated logistics, problem solving and resilience in the face of adversity. These are all qualities we need to achieve as a business and there is no better training ground than the British armed forces. That's why we have veterans and reservists across all levels and areas of the company: leading our hospitality business, running our distribution centres, and working across our stores, personnel and operations teams. And it's why we know it's so important to support former personnel with their transition to civilian life, as well as helping our employees to take an active role in the armed forces.

Put simply, we know that investing in supporting the armed forces community is good for our colleagues, customers, business and for society. We're already one of the biggest employers of serving and former servicemen and women in Britain. When we signed the Armed Forces Covenant we promised these staff we would do everything we can to do more for them. I've spoken to colleagues who have put their life on the line for our country and lost friends in battle.

One of my colleagues is a Falklands veteran, who served 13 years in the Navy and three years in the Territorial Army afterwards. When he first left the armed forces he found it hard to settle in jobs and in his first year he had 26 different jobs. He eventually found his way into retail and since joining Tesco seven years ago he hasn't looked back. My colleague told me he was initially quite skeptical when we signed the Armed Forces Covenant back in 2014 but then he heard about the support for veterans. He gets ten additional paid days so he can access support for his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at his normal rate of pay. It means my colleague can take the time to go to an intensive therapy clinic and use his holiday time to spend quality time with his family. He is one of the many colleagues who endorse the Network.

Another colleague started as a Tesco apprentice 12 years ago and now works as an Optical Assistant in Stockton. For the past two years she has been a reservist providing PPI kit and everything else for armed forces operatives. She trains one evening each week, works two weekends a month and attends a two week camp every summer. When I spoke to my colleague, she told me how grateful she was for the support she receives from Tesco for time off for training. She is from a military family and her three children aged 7, 11 and 18 love that their mum is in the armed forces. My colleagues daughter said her mum is an inspiration and she couldn't be more proud of her.

For them, and all of those who made and continue to make sacrifices every day - we will develop and strive to help as many people as we can.

Our partnership is delivering in many areas:

- Last November we were delighted to launch the most generous leave policy for our 600 reservists in the industry. We give two weeks' full pay for mandatory training and an additional five days fully paid leave for additional military activities.
- Last year, Tesco customers smashed records by donating £5.3 million to the Poppy Appeal.
- Since 2005 Tesco has raised over £30 million for Armed Forces charities including Help for Heroes.
- Tesco actively supports the recruitment of service leavers. In the last year we organised 105 trials via the Career Transition Partnership so that forces leavers can see if retail is for them.
- We also advertise jobs with RightJob, the recruitment website for service leavers, as well as working with local barracks to make forces leavers aware of opportunities.
- The important thing for us is to keep looking at what more we can do to help.
- As we grow the Armed Forces Network we'll encourage members to mentor new colleagues joining from the armed forces, or colleagues choosing to join the reserves.
- We will continue to engage with local military communities.
- We will soon announce details of our activity around Armed Forces Day 2016.

The network is also a very special example of what our company motto 'Every Little Helps' really means. When you look at all the things we do to try to support our armed forces, you see a huge range of little helpful things we try to do serve our brave servicemen and women better – from backing veterans charities to helping our reservist colleagues, supporting garrison communities to putting poppies on our stores. And we'll keep building on those efforts in the coming years.

I just have one last thing to say - thank you to Mark Richards, our Account Manager at Defence Relationship Management. Mark – you've put in a huge amount of time and energy into supporting our Armed Forces Network and are a great help in making it work. So thank you.