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To: Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee

Date: 14 January 2021

Decision No: n/a

Subject: Annual Report on the Implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report provides a briefing on Kent County Council's work to support Kent's Armed Forces community, summarises key achievements since the last report to the Committee in November 2019, and seeks Members' support for the proposed future actions.

Recommendation:

Members are asked to NOTE all that is being done to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent and to ENDORSE the council's commitment to this work.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Armed Forces Covenant outlines the moral obligation between the Nation, the Government and the Armed Forces, at a local level. Kent County Council was one of the first authorities to sign a Covenant, back in September 2011. In October 2017, a new combined Armed Forces Covenant including KCC, Medway, 11 Infantry Brigade and RSME was re-signed at the Kent and Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board.
- 1.2 The purpose of the Covenant is to encourage support for the Armed Forces Community (AFC) working and residing in Kent and to recognise and remember the sacrifices they have made for us to keep Britain safe and free.
- 1.3 The Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board oversees the implementation of the Covenant and meets twice a year, supported by sub-groups covering the following themes:
 - Health and wellbeing
 - Children and Youth
 - Vulnerable Veterans
 - Employment and Skills
 - Recognise and Remember
- 1.4 Since last year's PRCC presentation, much has happened with **COVID-19** impacting on our ability to both work with and support the Armed Forces Community, but this has not dimmed our resolve to implement the Covenant.

2. **Report from Peter Bruinvels, Civilian-Military Liaison Adviser, on activity during 2020**

2.1 We were pleased to see the very public role taken by **1 Royal School of Military Engineers (1RSME) and 36 Royal Engineers** as well as the **Gurkha Engineers** first helping construct the **Nightingale Hospital** at the Excel Centre in record time - along with 1RSME designing the vehicles needed to undertake **Mobile Testing**. Nearly **105,000** tests were conducted through and on behalf of **11 Brigade** by Reservists including both **3 Princess of Wales Royal Regiment (PWRR)** headquartered in Canterbury and **4PWRR**, as well as **7Rifles** and the **Royal Navy and Royal Auxiliary Air Force** across the SE. Others were used in transporting PPE and oxygen cylinders and driving ambulances. We also had Military Planners in the **Kent Resilience Forum**. All of them provided exceptional support and advice. All are on standby again, if required.

2.2 Having gone out to **Brunei** in February 2020 with **Col John BAYNHAM – then Dep Cdr Designate for 11 Brigade** – this was immediately followed with the postponement of the Brunei swap because of COVID-19, involving **1 Royal Gurkha Rifles (1RGR)** based at Shorncliffe exchanging Barracks with **2 Royal Gurkha Rifles (2RGR)** currently based in Brunei which had been planned for July 2020. All the advanced work undertaken including the allocation of both housing and school places has not been lost. In September 2020, KCC officers were once again in touch with Hornbill School, Brunei Garrison obtaining the names of all those children due to arrive in Shorncliffe for the start of the Autumn Term 2021. Housing Officers from both Folkestone & Hythe and Dover are waiting to be involved. On 30 November 2020, the Initial Planning Conference took place to agree a forward plan and timetable to exchange the 919 Gurkha soldiers and their families from 1RGR with the 1274 Gurkha soldiers and their families from 2RGR. This will now depend on the control of COVID-19 and the personal approval of the Sultan of Brunei. Once approval is given, we are expecting a very smooth transition both ways next July / August 2021.

2.3 The Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board continues to function despite COVID-19 and most recently met 'virtually' in October 2020, confirming its strategic aims and reflecting on the impact of Covid-19 on the armed forces community.

2.4 The Board's Sub-Committees have met virtually as well including: -

1. **EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS SUB-GROUP**

- Resolved to promoting Royal British Legion Industries (RBLI) Lifeworks Programme and an ongoing mentoring scheme.
- FM Conway careers fair was held in February 2020 with 20/25 attendees.
- Promoting the transition from service personnel to civilian employment.
- Promoting spousal employment & skills

2. **CHILDREN & YOUTH SUB-GROUP**

- The Sub-Group reflected on the impact of Covid-19 on service children. Initial issues considered were around identification of key workers' children, and the emotional and practical difficulties for families caused by the delay in the Shorncliffe/Brunei move. In general service children are facing just the same challenges as all children, with support from the Army Welfare Service, for example, being largely virtual and most community activity cancelled.
- 'Living in Our Shoes', a report by **Andrew SELOUS MP**, was published in the summer - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-our-shoes-understanding-the-needs-of-uk-armed-forces-families>. The lead researcher came to our 2019 Service Children's Conference, spent the whole day there

talking to children and teachers, and subsequently followed up with Debra Exall and the headteachers, on a number of topics. The resulting report is very comprehensive, sensitively written and we feel the researchers have really listened to service children and families, and responded thoughtfully to the issues raised. The main report is very long, but it is reassuring, as we felt that in Kent and Medway we are well on top of the issues raised, as there were no surprises for us. The report is to be adopted nationally.

- **Cadets** have been operating many innovative virtual training sessions, which have been well attended and well received, where the instruction has often been by the Senior Cadets themselves. In August the Chains of Commands of the Sea Cadet Corps, Army Cadet Force and Air Training Corps suggested that the Cadets should be given a break from virtual training and then recommence in September, which they have continued to do so ever since in all manner of subjects from within their respective Cadet Syllabuses and other fun and inventive virtual activities.
 - The Sub-Group were pleased to note that **Richard LONG** had been appointed Commandant of Kent Army Cadet Force,
- 2.5 KCC and its Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board ('KMCPB') have been very much at the forefront in supporting and mentoring Councils and is considered an Exemplar CMPB by 11X as it is the only Joint Board in England and Wales with both a Unitary (Medway) and a County Council (KCC) as joint members. Its way of work and terms of reference with its constitution has been used as a model of excellence in setting up the proposed Royal County of Berkshire CMPB which is to include all six Unitary Authorities. KMCPB is also supporting other authorities and bodies wishing to apply for **MoD Employers Recognition Gold Awards** in 2020 as 'military friendly' employers. I am pleased to advise that both Councils - **Medway Council** and **Dover District** as well as **Kent Fire & Rescue Service** were all awarded Gold, as was **RBLI**.
- 2.6 KCC through its Officers support all its Councils, including their **Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Lead Officers**, including myself, attending Civilian-Military Partnership Boards and Panels such as **Dover** and **Medway**. Training through **Forces Connect SE** was undertaken in Medway, Canterbury and Dover Council with many front line and contact centre staff trained, along with middle managers and other senior staff. Additionally, Peter Bruinvels issues a weekly **Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Lead Officers Update**, in which Kent features regularly - keeping everyone abreast of any developments involving the Military across the SE. If any Members would like to receive this, please contact Peter.
- 2.7 In October 2020, there was an online meeting of **Covenant Lead Officers** across the county to update each other on how matters were progressing. Most Officers have been seconded to Community Hubs and other teams supporting COVID-19 initiatives. However, what was clear was that all were keen to support the Armed Forces Community and some of them saw an increasing need for new Veterans Hubs and Drop-in centres post Covid-19 with many Ex-Service and Veterans experiencing loneliness and depression.
- 2.8 On 8 December, KCC and its Officers met with **Unit Welfare Officers** from across Kent and Medway to discuss welfare issues of concern as well as offering our support for that they are doing whether it concerns education, health and waiting list and spousal employment.
- 2.9 With COVID-19 around, there has been a temporary postponement of the setting up of two new **Veterans Hubs and Drop-In Centres** at Gillingham Football Club and

Dover White Cliffs – although the funds have been awarded. **Kent Fire & Rescue Service** plan to launch a Veterans Hub at **Canterbury Fire Station**. A brand new Veterans Hub for the Nepalese Community in Cheriton is also due to open soon. Kent County Council has worked closely with the Folkestone Nepalese Community Association on their proposal for the site which sits within the same building as Cheriton Library. This will ensure that the vital role the Library plays in the local community continues to be strengthened. This new centre will also be supported by Folkestone & Hythe Council.

- 2.10 Following **11 Brigade** being asked by the **MoD Covenant Team** to set up a **SE Focus Group** to look at possible **Armed Forces Covenant Legislation** and its impact on Local Authorities once the Covenant is enshrined in law, we were asked to look especially at Disadvantage, 'Due Regard', Judicial Reviews, Healthcare, Housing and Education. The plan is for the Focus Group to put forward suggestions to 'tighten up' the Armed Forces Covenant that might then be enshrined in law – firstly by a Green Paper and then through an **Armed Forces Bill**, to be introduced in the New Year in Parliament. The Focus Group is being convened by 11 Brigade with **Richard MOORE** as Convenor and **Peter BRUINVELS** as Facilitator. KCC and its partner Councils have representatives on Education and Due Regard with Equalities. **Tim WOOLMER** led for Judicial Review with his research being commended by the MoD Covenant Team. The SE is viewed as extremely 'military friendly' and already doing most of what the proposed legislation will 'ask' us to do. In summary, the SE already does the 'right thing' without the need for any new legislation. One recommendation already coming through is that the Armed Forces Community should also be trained along with frontline staff on what the Armed Forces Covenant 'does and does not do' in support of them. All of us are keen to 'manage expectations' and this has become even more important with an increase in demand from regular and ex-service personnel seeking the best school or one of best houses in Kent.
- 2.11 I am very pleased to report that **Forces Connect South East** was joint runner-up in this year's **Soldiering On 'Working in the Community' Awards** - sponsored by **Forces in Mind Trust**. We were awarded **£321k** in total and trained over **7000** people all about the Armed Forces Community, the Armed Forces Covenant and Armed Forces Family across the UK - including Elected Councillor Armed Forces Champions; Covenant Lead Officers; Contact Centre Staff; senior and front line staff in local authorities, Police, Fire & Rescue and Health, and voluntary sector partners including Age UK and Citizen's Advice. We toured the UK in those 20 months from Scotland (Inverness) to Cornwall. Our App was funded through the Covenant Fund and has had over **9500** downloads. We had a great partnership, and we know it really worked. It was also very pleasing to report that **536** KCC employees have been trained online on the Armed Forces Covenant and the Armed Forces Community and their issues. This is the highest number of staff trained in any Council across the UK.
- 2.12 During the Summer, we were able to celebrate **VE Day 75** with both Canterbury and Rochester Cathedrals in a limited way as we were **Armed Forces Day**, where a KCC video was produced by the Chairman and Lord-Lieutenant with a virtual Flag Raising. Sadly, we had to cancel our Special Reserves Day event. **VJ Day 75** involved a special restricted and socially distanced service of Evensong at Canterbury Cathedral. Advice was given on what we were allowed to do for **Remembrance Sunday** - even before the PM's Lockdown statement. There has been almost universal sadness that Church Services on Remembrance Sunday did not take place – although many outdoor ones did. **The Cenotaph in Whitehall** looked pretty eery, surreal and sombre despite all the key people being present including **HM The Queen**. All were socially distanced, and we really missed the mass parade with just **26 Veterans** marching by with **150** military in attendance. The **Royal British Legion**

Festival of Remembrance went off well despite it being closed to the public. Both Canterbury and Rochester Cathedrals held restricted services.

- 2.13 Meetings with our new **Task Force Commanders**, Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Lead Officers as well as with Kent Unit Welfare Officers are planned for early in the New Year.
- 2.14 At the **SE Regional Employers Engagement Group (SE REEG)** held in October, I was asked to brief the **49** members online on my role as **Chairman of the Gold Awards Association** in the **SE**. Members were keen to have training on developing the Armed Forces Covenant with Forces Connect SE training being praised. A good suggestion was that Gold Employers including Councils should mentor Silver Employers. It was an excellent opportunity to be able to praise the commitment of all our Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Lead Officers in Kent.

3. Priorities for 2021

- 3.1 It is not possible to forward-plan activities in the usual way, given the uncertainties created by the public health measures needed to respond to Covid-19, and the resulting lack of officer capacity to dedicate to Covenant activities. We will continue to be driven by the Kent & Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board's Strategic Aims:
- Promoting, publicising and co-ordinating events that **increase the visibility** of the Armed Forces Community to the civilian population
 - Recognise & Remember Sub-Group: publicise the calendar (including veterans' activities);
 - The Children & Youth Sub-Group will continue to raise awareness of military life and the impact for families amongst schools with only a few service children.
 - The Annual Conference and the Service Children's Conference contribute to achieving this aim, and we hope to deliver these, possibly virtually, in 2021.
 - Raising awareness of the **Armed Forces Covenant** amongst public sector staff, and making it easier for the Armed Forces Community to access information, advice and support
 - Build on the legacy of Forces Connect SE, ensuring the work is embedded and built upon.
 - Encourage Unit Welfare Officers to be more proactive in ensuring the armed forces community understand what the Covenant is (and what it is not) and how they are being supported across Kent.
 - Raising awareness amongst schools of the specific needs of **service children** and their families, including the Gurkha families
 - Children & Youth Sub-Group – range of actions identified
 - Service Children's Conference 2021 (virtual if necessary)
 - 2021 Brunei/Folkestone Unit Move (1RGR/2RGR swap) – particularly the community engagement aspect.
 - Maintaining a focus on how the **most vulnerable** within the Armed Forces Community can be supported to access what they need to thrive in their future civilian life
 - Improve identification of those veterans who have greatest needs, via networking across public services and the voluntary sector and improving signposting to support. Much of the collaborative work undertaken across partner organisations to support vulnerable people through Covid-19 lock-down has provided a strong platform upon which to build.
 - Increase signposting and support for financial and debt management services – and again, Kent Together provides a basis for this.
 - Supporting and promoting **recruitment** of volunteers and Armed Forces Reservists
 - Develop a proposal for a Kent-wide campaign to encourage more Adult Volunteers for the Cadets, and case workers for the military charities (including targeting retired veterans)
 - The Employment & Skills Sub-Group is taking a lead on promoting the benefits of employing Reservists to the private sector, in conjunction with SERFCA

- Plan and promote Reservists Day 2021

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 4.1 Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee is asked to NOTE all that is being done to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent and to ENDORSE the council's commitment to this work.

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