

From: Roger Gough, Leader of Kent County Council
Oliver Richardson, Armed Forces Champion
Derek Crow-Brown, Deputy Armed Forces Champion
David Cockburn, Chief Executive

To: Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee

Date: 18 January 2023

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 and the oral presentation to Full Council in November 2021 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 KCC's continued commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant at both a county and district level.

COMMIT and AGREE to priorities going forward as set out in the report, including promoting KCC's ongoing work to continue being an Employer Recognition Gold Award exemplar.

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 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 Parts of the Armed Forces Covenant were enshrined in law under a new Armed Forces Act on 22 November 2022. As a result, all Local Authorities and related public bodies will now have to show 'due regard' when considering applications from the Armed Forces Community for access to services including schools, healthcare, and housing. The Act has drawn heavily on existing best practice from exemplar Authorities and partnerships. A number of Kent initiatives were cited as best practice in the oral evidence sessions of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Armed Forces Covenant.
- 1.4 The Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board oversees the implementation of the Covenant. It is chaired by the Chairman of KCC with the Deputy Leader of Medway Council appointed vice-chair. It directs and supports Task Groups that lead activity around the key thematic areas of Covenant work:
 - Health and Wellbeing
 - Children and Youth
 - Vulnerable Veterans
 - Employment and Skills
 - Recognise and Remember

- 1.5 There are also twice-yearly meetings between the Regular and Reservists Unit Welfare Officers and KCC's Service Champions to discuss welfare matters, education and housing.
- 1.6 Whilst the pandemic did provide a challenge to some of the Covenant activity and particularly outreach efforts, now that restrictions have significantly reduced the opportunity is being taken to revisit and reinvigorate partnership working across Kent.

2. Summary of Covenant Activity and Outcomes in 2022

- 2.1 The Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board continues to function and most recently met 'virtually' in October 2022, reflecting on the impact the pandemic has had on Kent's Armed Forces Community and reconfirming its Strategic Aims.
- 2.2 The Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board held its 8th Armed Forces Covenant Conference at Leas Cliff Hall, Folkestone on Tuesday 7 June 2022 with over 140 attendees. The theme was '*Back to Work*' and a focus on accelerating covenant activity across the county after the pandemic disruption.
- 2.3 The first ever Kent Reserves Day was co-hosted by Kent County Council and SERFCA bringing together regular and reservists alongside employers and employees from the public and private sector to better understand the opportunities of employing reservists and ex-service personnel in Kent's workforce. This included a number of KCC staff.
- 2.4 The 'Brunei Swap' which involves 1RGR based at Shorncliffe exchanging Barracks with 2RGR based in Brunei finally took place in Summer 2022 having been delayed due to the pandemic. This involves significant preparation by a wide range of public sector services. There are now 522 Service Personnel moved into Shorncliffe. 11th Security Force Assistance Brigade HQ SE publicly thanked KCC for its 'outstanding work'. Special thanks go to KCC Schools Officers, Housing Officers from Folkestone & Hythe and Dover District Councils and the two dedicated local school headteachers.
- 2.5 For the first time, the 2021 census asked whether the respondent had served in the Armed Forces. 61,071 people responded that they had served equating to 4.1% of the population. Work is now underway to better understand the initial findings and how they should inform future covenant activity and prioritisation of activity and effort.
- 2.6 The Armed Forces Act is now law which means that, as public bodies, Local Authorities will need to show 'due regard' when providing services to our armed forces community. We are currently working with the Kent & Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board along with the thematic sub-groups, to review all Covenant processes and procedures, ensuring compliance with the new duty and the recently published Statutory Guidance. However, Kent has for some time upheld the principles of the new legislation and it is not foreseen that there will be significant changes to covenant practice in the county. Nevertheless the legislation serves as a useful reminder to persistently review our processes to ensure we continue to embed the principles of the covenant across our services. A briefing was also held with Kent Council Leaders and Chief Executives.
- 2.7 609 KCC staff have now voluntarily completed covenant e-learning training, significantly higher than any other area in the southeast. Over 19,000 people nationally have now downloaded the Forces Connect App developed in Kent as part of the Forces Connect South East partnership with our neighbouring Local Authorities.
- 2.8 In February 2022, HMS Kent visited Dover and the Chairman, Armed Forces Champion and lead officer attended an onboard reception along with both the Lord-Lieutenant and High Sheriff as guests of the Commanding Officer. The visit was a great success with the history of the name HMS Kent explained as coming from the Duke of Kent, rather than the County. Cdr Brettell in a post-visit message to the Board wrote that The Ship has a special relationship with the county whose name she shares and he looked forward to strengthening that further over the coming years. He wished Board Members "all fair winds and following seas!"

2.9 The Board's Task Groups have continued to meet virtually throughout the pandemic undertaking the following activity:

1. Employment & Skills Sub-Group

- Promoted Royal British Legion Industries (RBLI) Lifeworks Programme
- Held a careers fair alongside FM Conway
- Promoted transition from service personnel to civilian employment.
- Promoted spousal employment & skills and women in engineering
- Supported KCC and SERFCA to hold the first ever Reserves Day at County Hall

2. Children & Youth Sub-Group

- Learned about the impact of Covid-19 on service children
- Prepared for the 2023 Service Pupil Voice Conference (first since the pandemic)
- Designed a network event next Autumn for school staff who teach service children
- Resumed physical annual cadet camps and appoint a Lord-Lieutenant Cadet

3. Recognise & Remember Sub-Group

- Co-ordinated a large number of commemorative and celebratory events including Armed Forces Day, flag-raising and remembrance events
- Supported the need for more veterans hubs in light of pandemic and cost of living
- Supported the further development of the Nepalese Community Centre at Cheriton Library alongside Folkestone & Hythe Council

4. Health & Wellbeing Sub-Group

- A Single Point of Contact for Family and Carers has been launched through the Armed Forces Network website.
- Worked towards a 'Veteran Friendly' GP Practice in every Primary Care Network
- Worked towards all Kent Hospital Trusts achieving 'Veterans Aware' accreditation

2.10 KCC's Lead Covenant Officer continues to support all of our Public Sector partners as well as private and voluntary sector colleagues and Parish Councils in working together to embed the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant in all that we do. This includes holding regular training sessions and network meetings to continue to raise awareness and understanding, share best practice, and put in place escalation routes for urgent issues or concerns. A specific focus continues to be given to those key policy areas most relevant to the covenant including housing, social care, education and health.

3. **Priorities for 2023**

3.1 At the most recent Kent & Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board held in October 2022, the Board unanimously agreed and updated its Strategic Aims for 2022/23 and reaffirmed the commitment to working together across Kent & Medway to:

- Continue to promote, publicise and co-ordinate events that increase the visibility of the Armed Forces Community to the civilian population
- Raise awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant with public sector staff, making it easier for the Armed Forces Community to access information, advice and support
- Raise awareness amongst schools of the specific needs of service children and their families, including the Gurkha families
- Maintain 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
- Support and promote recruitment of Armed Forces Regulars and Reservists

4. Recommendations

Recommendation:

Members are asked to:

NOTE all that is being done to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent and KCC's continued commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant at both a county and district level.

COMMIT and AGREE to priorities going forward as set out in the report, including promoting KCC's ongoing work to continue being an Employer Recognition Gold Award exemplar.

5. Background documents

None

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