

**From:** Richard Long, Kent County Council Armed Forces Champion  
David Cockburn, Corporate Director of Business Strategy & Support

**To:** Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee

**Date:** 16 June 2017

**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 the county's Armed Forces community and summarises key achievements since the last report to the Committee in May 2016.

#### **Recommendation**

The Cabinet Committee is asked to ENDORSE Covenant work to date and COMMIT to priorities going forward. The Committee is requested to CHAMPION the Covenant across the county and individual Members are invited to ENGAGE locally in Covenant efforts.

## **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.

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.

1.3 The Kent & Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board oversees the implementation of the Covenant and meets twice a year, supported by 5 sub-groups:

- Health and wellbeing
- Integration
- Housing
- Employment, Economy and skills, and
- Recognise and Remember

## **2. Update on the Impact of Strategic Changes on Kent**

2.1 In November 2016, the Defence Secretary launched the 'Better Defence Estate Strategy'. 91 sites within the Armed Forces estate are earmarked for closure by 2040. The MoD will release value from surplus land and ensure its property portfolio is fit for purpose in the future, whilst making space for 55,000 new homes, and securing £3bn of combined income and savings by 2040 to be reinvested in defence.

2.2 From a Kent perspective, the most significant impact will be on 36 Engineer Regiment of the Royal Engineers and the Queen's Gurkha Engineers based at Invicta Park Barracks in Maidstone, which is now scheduled for closure in 2027.

2.3 The Army Reserve Centre Battalion of the Regiment, 3 The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (3PWRR), headquartered in Sturry (Canterbury), is undergoing a major restructure and expansion in summer 2017. It has recently been announced under Army Refine 2020 that a new 4PWRR will form up in autumn 2017 on the western side of SE England with parts of Sussex and the whole of Surrey, including the current Farnham Reserve Centre, moving across to the newly-formed Battalion. Its headquarters will be in Redhill. 3PWRR will then be concentrating more in Kent, including Rochester, plus the eastern side of SE England. Mobilisation on operations is likely to increase accordingly – and in recent years the Tigers have mobilised on operations to Afghanistan, Iraq and Cyprus.

2.4 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles (1RGR) currently based in Brunei, and 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles (2RGR) currently based in Shornecliffe near Folkestone, will switch bases again this summer. This is a regular movement, however it can pose challenges around integration of family and dependants into local communities at both ends, with the transition of schooling, housing, healthcare, and employment. The Board has done some innovative work around which has been deemed best practice and will provide a national case study.

## **3. Activities in Kent Over the Last Year**

3.1 On 14 March 2017, the Board held its 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, this year very kindly hosted by Shepway District Council at the Leas Cliff Hall in Folkestone. The Conference brought together Government Officials, Armed Forces, Councils, Public Services, Military Charities, and the voluntary sector to consider the needs of the armed forces community in the county and how we can collaborate to ensure the Covenant is fully implemented. This year there was a particular focus on local level partnership working, and delegate feedback suggested it was the best ever.

3.2 A Service Children's Voice Conference was held last year for the first time, bringing together service children from around Kent to explore what it meant to be an Armed Forces child, positives, negatives, and what, if anything, they needed more from schools. It was a great success, so much so that we are running a second such conference on 19 June 2017, with the aim of getting more participation from children at schools with only a few service families.

3.3 In last year's Committee report, securing sustainable dedicated capacity to support the Armed Forces Covenant was raised as an issue. Subsequently, Peter Bruinvels has been recruited to support efforts in Kent. He is experienced in this field and has links with Armed Forces and Military Charities. This has already resulted in the forging of closer links with the Civic Office, and with partners across the South East.

3.4 A consortium of South East Councils have bid for £321k from MoD to embed awareness of the Covenant and needs of Armed Forces Community in all front-line services, entitled 'Strengthening Local Government Delivery of the Covenant'.

3.5 As part of this bid, an Armed Forces service champion training programme is being developed to be rolled out across Kent in partnership with the NHS, so that within 2-3 years, there will be service champions in every local front-line service in the county.

3.6 Human Resources colleagues have developed our first Reserves Armed Forces Policy focusing on formalising arrangements around our commitment to employment of serving reservists and veterans, including flexibility around annual training and deployment. This has been identified as an exemplar model policy nationally.

3.7 The commitment of Kent County Council to support defence personnel and their families as demonstrated with the aforementioned policy, was recognised in February 2017 with a bronze award from the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme. This was as a result of the Council not only pledging to be 'Armed Forces-friendly', but demonstrating KCC's commitment in practice by employing both Reservists and Ex-Service Personnel across the organisation, having the policies and procedures in place to ensure they are supported around their Forces' needs and requirements, as well as our wider support for the Covenant and Armed Forces Day. Kent County Council is already working hard to achieve the next target of Silver Award, with the ultimate aim to be one of the few organisations in the country to reach Gold by 2018/19.

3.8 A survey of staff and members has recently been undertaken to identify those who have connections with the armed forces, including serving and ex-armed forces personnel, but also those who are partners, parents or children of serving personnel or veterans. This is not for data purposes, but to provide a source of colleagues who can provide us with advice and who can champion the Covenant aims internally. We also want to ensure we support and celebrate them, holding an annual event with the Chairman, and establishing an informal network.

3.9 This year there has been an explicit focus on establishing stronger local-level relationships with Army Task Force Commanders and District Armed Forces Champions, Unit Welfare Officers, RAF at Manston, and Royal Navy. This is providing valuable feedback on the issues impacting the armed forces community, ensuring that the Board's priorities are well focussed, and also resulting in better collaboration.

3.10 Following the ground-breaking research into the needs of serving, reservist and ex-armed forces personnel in Kent last year, the findings have been translated into actions for the Board to focus on this year. It has also received Ministerial plaudits.

3.11 Learning from Surrey has led to exploration with colleagues in Social Services and Armed Forces charities how we can work more closely together to ensure timely and integrated support to those ex-armed forces personnel who need it.

3.12 Working with Kent County Council's Communications Team, the Board is striving to raise the profile of the Covenant both internally and externally. This includes multiple articles on kNet, our public website, press releases and videos. This will continue to ensure all staff internally have heard of the Covenant, and externally, the Armed Forces community understand the principals of the Covenant.

3.14 The periodic 1RGR/2RGR switch this summer will be the first since the Board's establishment. The Board has taken a leading role in ensuring plans are in place early, learning from issues in previous years, providing a conduit to bring together the stakeholders from the Army, Defence Infrastructure Organisation which manages service family accommodation, CarillionAmey which manages allocation and maintenance of Armed Forces housing, local schools, KCC's admissions team, Health, District Councils and Job Centre Plus. One Board meeting brought together all of the key players including senior representatives from 1RGR and Hornbill School in Brunei, to scrutinise plans, agree a timeline, mitigate any issues and set up a task group to deliver the plans. By learning from previous experiences, the Board will ensure a warm and welcoming homecoming back to the county for 1RGR, and a fond farewell to 2RGR.

#### **4. Priorities for the Future**

4.1 If the cross-border bid is successful, the Board will oversee its implementation, ensuring that it fully delivers its potential, working with our colleagues across the South East to drive improved outcomes on the ground for the armed forces community. The Board will also collaborate with the MoD to share and promote best practice nationally.

4.2 Ensure the families moving to Kent from Brunei are welcomed and supported, and that the practical lessons learned from the experience are shared with MoD and inform subsequent arms plot moves.

4.3 Improve publicity and communication around events that support the armed forces, and encourage KCC Members to support local events.

4.4 Hold a successful 2<sup>nd</sup> Service Children's Voice Conference later this month and build on previous achievements to deliver an innovative and meaningful 5<sup>th</sup> Kent & Medway Armed Forces Covenant Conference in March 2018.

4.5 As a result of elections and personnel changes, the Board's membership will change significantly by the next meeting. This presents an opportunity for reinvigoration of the Board and a realignment of sub-groups.

4.6 After achieving the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme Bronze Award, Kent County Council is confident of achieving Silver and already prioritising reaching the very rare Gold Award, demonstrating exemplar practice.

4.7 The Board will work even more closely with local partners to ensure bids for Covenant funding are of the highest quality, maximising income into the County.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

5.1 The Committee is asked to ENDORSE Covenant work to date and COMMIT to the priorities going forward. The Committee is requested to CHAMPION the Covenant across the county and individual Members are invited to ENGAGE locally in Covenant efforts.

Debra Exall  
Policy & Partnerships Adviser

03000 **416074**

[Debra.Exall@kent.gov.uk](mailto:Debra.Exall@kent.gov.uk)

Tim Woolmer Strategic Relationships Adviser  
– Kent Public Services

03000 **416858**

[Tim.Woolmer@kent.gov.uk](mailto:Tim.Woolmer@kent.gov.uk)

Canon Peter Bruinvels  
Civilian Military Liaison Adviser  
03000 **412986**  
[Peter.Bruinvels@kent.gov.uk](mailto:Peter.Bruinvels@kent.gov.uk)