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To: County Council

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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 the county's Armed Forces community, summarises key achievements since the last report to Policy & Resources Committee in 2017, and seeks Members' support for the proposed future actions.

Recommendation

County Councillors are asked to NOTE Covenant work to date and COMMIT to priorities going forward. Members are requested to CHAMPION the Armed Forces Covenant across the county and 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. In October 2017, a new combined Armed Forces Covenant including KCC, Medway and 11 Infantry Brigade was re-signed at the Kent and Medway Civilian 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.

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
- Children and Youth
- Housing
- Employment, Economy and Skills, and
- Recognise and Remember

2. Update on the Impact of Strategic Defence 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), underwent a major restructure and expansion in summer 2017, as a direct consequence of the formation of 4PWRR in autumn 2017. This took place under Army Refine 2020 with the western side of SE England and parts of Sussex and the whole of Surrey, including the current Farnham Reserve Centre, moving across to the newly-formed Battalion in September 2017. Its headquarters are to be in Redhill. 3PWRR are now concentrating more in Kent and Medway, including Rochester and Thanet, plus the eastern side of SE England. Mobilisation on operations continues to increase accordingly – and in recent years the Tigers have mobilised on operations to Afghanistan, Iraq and Cyprus.

3. KCC Activities to support the Armed Forces Community

3.1 On 14 March 2017, the Board held its 4th Annual Conference at Shepway District Council at the Leas Cliff Hall in Folkestone. The Conference brought together Government officials, Armed Forces, Councils, public services, military charities and others in 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. There was a focus on local level partnership working, and delegate feedback was very positive. An Action Plan has been developed with all the relevant Sub-Groups being tasked to take forward the issues raised. The next annual conference will take place on 13th June 2018 at Brompton Barracks with the theme of Strengthening Connections.

3.2 The second Service Children's Voice Conference was held last year 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 third such conference in June 2018, with the aim of getting even more participation from children at schools with only a few service families.

3.3 Peter Bruinvels was commissioned in 2016 to secure sustainable dedicated capacity to support the Armed Forces Covenant. He also works for Surrey County Council and 11 Infantry Brigade, and has excellent connections with a number of service charities which has resulted in the forging of closer links between KCC and partners across the South East. He has also ensured that the Civic Office is well connected into the Board's work.

3.4 Kent was part of a consortium of South East Councils who successfully bid for £321k from MoD to embed awareness of the Covenant and needs of Armed Forces Community in all front-line services. The resulting project, Forces Connect South East, is up and running. Trainers have been appointed to ensure consistency in the delivery of the Covenant and the

provision of welfare advice with Kent leading on the design of a dedicated 'App' which can be used by both service providers and the armed forces community themselves.

3.5 As part of this project, a range of training programmes are being rolled out, including:

- A Service Champion training programme in partnership with the NHS: within 2 years there will be fully trained service champions in every local front-line service in the county.
- An eLearning Training Module raising awareness about the issues facing the Military Family and the implications of the Armed Forces Covenant. KCC launched this in October 2017, and more than 250 staff completed the training. It is being put on the Armed Forces Network website so that colleagues in other organisations across Kent can also access it.
- Training for Elected Councillor Armed Forces Champions across Kent and Medway: a dedicated training session was held in February 2018, with lead officers also present, to ensure they have a consistent understanding of the role, and the knowledge and support needed to carry it out.
- Targeted training for customer-facing front-line staff, including contact centre staff: short sessions for teams is being organised to raise their awareness and ensure they ask customers whether they have connections to the armed forces in order to ensure appropriate support or signposting.

3.6 Human Resources colleagues developed KCC's 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. It resulted in KCC holding its first Reservist Day at County Hall in June 2017, to celebrate the role that Reservists play. This successful event will be repeated in June 2018.

3.7 The commitment of Kent County Council to support defence personnel and their families was twice recognised under the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme in 2017 with a bronze award in February, followed closely by the much sought-after silver award in Summer 2017. 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, encouraging Cadet Adult Volunteers, 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. Our ultimate aim is to be one of the few organisations in the country to reach Gold in 2018/19, so we are working hard to achieve this.

3.8 Following on from the spring 2017 survey of staff and members, which identified more than 65 people 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, we set up a KCC Military Peer Support Group which first met in late Autumn. This group is proving to be an invaluable sounding board as well as providing mutual support and being a focus for internal celebration of the armed forces (e.g. an annual gathering with the Chairman).

3.9 This year, we have continued to focus on establishing stronger local-level relationships with visits to and meeting with Army Task Force Commanders and District Armed Forces

Champions, Unit Welfare Officers, RAF at Manston, and Royal Navy. These discussions provide valuable hands-on feedback on the current issues impacting the armed forces community, ensuring that the Board's priorities are well focussed, and result in improved collaboration.

3.10 We continue to work closely with colleagues in Social Services and SSAFA to ensure timely referrals and integrated support to those ex-armed forces personnel who need it. A project to identify and support isolated older veterans was carried out in 2017 and the lessons learned are being carried forward.

3.11 Working with Kent County Council's nominated Armed Forces Communications Lead, the Board is continuing to raise the profile of the Covenant both internally and externally. This includes multiple articles on kNet, our public website, press releases and videos as well as Peter Bruinvels' monthly press review slot on BBC Radio Kent.

3.12 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles (1RGR) who were based in Brunei, and 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles (2RGR) who were based in Shorncliffe near Folkestone switched bases in summer 2017. This was a significant logistical exercise, particularly as more families came to the UK than left for Brunei. The Board took a leading role to ensure plans were in place early, learning from issues raised in previous years. It provided a conduit to bring together the stakeholders from the Army and 11 Infantry Brigade including the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (which manages service family accommodation), CarillionAmey (which manages allocation and maintenance of Armed Forces housing), local schools, KCC's school admissions team, Health, District Councils and Job Centre Plus. At one Board meeting all the key players, including senior representatives from 1RGR and Hornbill School in Brunei, were brought together to scrutinise plans, agree a timeline, mitigate any issues and set up a task group to deliver the plans. The challenges around integration of family and dependants into local communities at both ends (with the transition of schooling, housing, healthcare and spousal employment) were addressed much more successfully than in previous years. Education colleagues worked particularly hard to secure school places and prepare children and parents for the move. The multi-agency, integrated approach to planning has been deemed best practice by the Army, and has provided a national case study for MoD.

3.13 We have been working with 11 Brigade for some years on workforce skills, and recently have been in discussion about the relationship between the armed forces community and the Guilds. A discussion is planned at the meeting of Guild Chairs to explain:

- How service leavers can be supported or encouraged to move into those industries where there are personnel or skills shortages, by providing advice early in the transition period to enable them to develop the right skills.
- The benefits of employing service spouses, and how they can be targeted.
- That cadets make ideal candidates for Apprenticeships.

3.14 The Kent Shed concept and brand was developed back in 2013. The two main objectives were to support ex-military men to reintegrate (externally funded by MoD Libor Grant) and to provide accessible opportunities to combat social isolation for men of all ages in Kent (funded by Public Health, KCC). There are currently nearly 30 Sheds across Kent. They are highly diverse, many are themed around sustainable activities such as gardening, woodwork, boats or arts whilst others are focused on supporting the local community. Most

people attracted to this activity are men, but Kent Sheds is open to men and women of all ages, should they wish to participate, as agreed locally. The Programme has become popular with local people, and has about 250 members. In addition to improving people's wellbeing, a number of Shedders have also gone on to gain paid employment as a result of their work in Sheds. KCC is exploring further how Kent Sheds can support people back into work as part of an EU funded programme called Step By Step, which runs over the next three years.

4. Priorities for the Future

4.1 With Forces Connect South East now up and running, the Board will oversee its implementation, ensuring that it fully delivers its potential and training, working with our colleagues across the South East to drive improved outcomes on the ground for the armed forces community. Kent is leading on the development of an 'App' to enable individuals, and those who work with them, to access information, advice and guidance. The Board will also collaborate with the MoD to share and promote best practice nationally.

4.2 Expand and strengthen the network of KCC officers who champion the armed forces, encouraging them to cascade information and raise awareness amongst their colleagues of how to support the armed forces community.

4.3 Hold a successful 2018 Service Children's Voice Conference and build on previous achievements to deliver an innovative and meaningful 5th Kent & Medway Armed Forces Covenant Conference in June 2018.

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

4.5 Continue to develop the Military diary of forthcoming events, celebrating Armed Forces Week and Reservists Day, and promoting Remembrance events, especially around Armistice Day 2018.

4.6 Make the most of the benefits of achieving the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme Silver Award – including sending staff on the Sandhurst Leadership Challenge training - and seek to reach the very rare Gold Award standard in 2018.

4.7 Work closely with local partners to ensure bids for Covenant funding are of the highest quality, maximising income into the County. (£1,139,861 has been secured since October 2015.)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 County Councillors are asked to NOTE Covenant work to date and COMMIT to priorities going forward, including applying for the MoD Employers' Recognition Gold Award. Members are requested to CHAMPION the Armed Forces Covenant across the county and ENGAGE locally in Covenant efforts.

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