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To: Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee

Date: 8 November 2019

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 report to County Council in 2018, 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 CONFIRM 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

2. KCC's Activities to support the Armed Forces Community over the last year

- 2.1 On 13 June 2019, the Board held its 6th Annual Conference at The Duke of York's Royal Military School in Dover. The Conference brought together senior Ministry of Defence 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 "strengthening connections" and working together in partnership. The delegate feedback was very positive. A revised Action Plan has been developed with all the relevant Sub-Groups being tasked to take forward all the issues raised.
- 2.2 The fourth Service Children's Voice Conference was held earlier in June bringing together service children from around Kent, their teachers and for the first time some parents to explore what it meant to be an Armed Forces child. This year we had a focus on how to support service children in schools with only a few service children. As a result, we have set up an advice and guidance page on KELSI for school staff which can be found at: <https://www.kelsi.org.uk/support-for-children-and-young-people/supporting-children-of-armed-forces-personnel-in-school>. The conference was such a success that we are already planning the next one which will take place in June 2020, again at Duke of York's School. Professor Jan Walker attended the Conference to gather research for a House of Commons Paper on the needs of service children. We are also looking at the operation of service pupil premium and best examples of good practice in its use. We published a book 'Our Parents are Special' by the Service Children of Kent, taking quotes from the children who attended the 2018 Service Children's Conference, copies of which are now in all libraries and a pdf version can be accessed on the website.
- 2.3 Peter Bruinvels, who has been commissioned to work with us in Kent since 2016, continues to provide 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.
- 2.4 Kent was part of a consortium from the South East, led by Surrey who successfully bid for £321k from the MoD to embed awareness of the Covenant and the needs of the Armed Forces Community in all front-line services, as well as training Elected Councillor Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Lead Officers. The resulting project, Forces Connect South East, has been a runaway success. The two Training Teams have been working across the South East ensuring consistency in the delivery of the Covenant and the provision of welfare advice with Kent leading on the design and production of a dedicated 'Forces Connect' App which is now being widely used by both service providers and the armed forces community themselves.
- 2.5 As part of this project, a range of training programmes have been rolled out, including:

- Training for Elected Councillor Armed Forces Champions, including newly elected Councillors across Kent and Medway by Peter Bruinvels: a second dedicated training session was held in October 2019, with lead officers and 36 Royal Engineers also present, to ensure they have a consistent understanding of their role, and the knowledge and support needed to carry it out, along with the role played by the military.
 - Targeted training for customer-facing front-line staff, including contact centre staff: short 45-minute sessions for teams 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. To date, over 2,300 staff members have now been trained.
 - A Service Champion training programme in partnership with the NHS resulting in 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 has had over 425 staff complete the training. It is now on the Armed Forces Network website enabling access to colleagues in other organisations across Kent.
- 2.6 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 was repeated in June 2018. In June 2019, 3 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment held an information and recruitment day on Reservist Day.
- 2.7 The very public commitment of Kent County Council to support defence personnel and their families was recognised under the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme in 2019 with a gold award, just one year after it received its silver award. This was as a result of the Council not only pledging to be 'Armed Forces-friendly', but demonstrating 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.
- 2.8 Following on from our 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. This group continues to meet biannually and 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).
- 2.9 This year, we have continued to focus on building stronger local-level relationships with visits to and meeting with our lead Army Task Force Commander and District Armed Forces Champions, Unit Welfare Officers, RAF at Manston, and Royal Navy.

These discussions continue to 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.

- 2.10 We have also worked closely with our Districts and Boroughs to offer them support in applying both for MoD Covenant Grants and successfully applying for MoD Employers Recognition Silver Awards – in the case of Dover, Folkestone & Hythe and Medway. We have also helped a number of Councils in Kent establish Civil-Military Panels.
- 2.11 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.
- 2.12 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles (1RGR) who are currently based in Shorncliffe near Folkestone, and 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles (2RGR) who are now in Brunei are preparing to swap over again in summer 2020 (their last Unit move was in 2017). This will be a significant logistical exercise, particularly as fewer families will be coming to the UK than are leaving for Brunei. The Board is once again taking a leading role to ensure plans will be in place early, learning from issues raised in previous years. All the stakeholders from the Army and 11 Infantry Brigade including the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (which manages service family accommodation), Amey (which manages allocation and maintenance of Armed Forces housing), local schools, KCC's school admissions team, Health, District Councils and Job Centre Plus are working 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 in 2017 much more successfully than in previous years, so we are confident that 2020 will run even more smoothly. Education colleagues are working particularly hard to secure school places and prepare children and parents for the move.
- 2.13 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. We are exploring 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. We are also seeking to spread messages to employers about the benefits of employing service spouses, and how they can be supported into employment.
- 2.14 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 a three-year EU funded programme called Step By Step, which started last year.

- 2.15 The Forces Connect South East Veterans Hub project offers MoD Covenant Grant Funds to establish new Veterans Hubs and Veterans Drop-In Centres. A start-up guide 'Grow Your Own Hub' has been produced along with a Needs and Gap Analysis of the current provision for veterans across Kent. With 77,000 veterans residing in Kent, it is considered an excellent way of supporting them. Funds can also be awarded to sustain existing ones (and Sheds can also be Veterans Hubs).

3. Priorities for 2020

- 3.1 Ensure that the legacy of the very successful Forces Connect South East project is maximised and we continue to build on it. The Board is collaborating with the MoD to share and promote best practice nationally.
- 3.2 Expand, train 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.
- 3.3 Hold another successful Service Children's Voice Conference in June 2020 and continue to promote awareness in schools – particularly amongst schools with only a few service children – about the potential needs of service children.
- 3.4 Build on previous achievements to deliver an innovative and meaningful 7th Kent & Medway Armed Forces Covenant Conference in May 2020.
- 3.5 Improve publicity and communication around events that support the armed forces and encourage KCC Members to support local events.
- 3.6 Continue to develop the Military diary of forthcoming events, celebrating Armed Forces Week and Reservists Day, and promoting Remembrance events, especially around Armistice Day 2019.
- 3.7 Support the FCSE Veterans Hub project by identifying new locations for such provision as well as sustaining existing ones.
- 3.8 Make the most of the benefits of achieving the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award – including sending staff on the Sandhurst Leadership Challenge and RAF Halton training.
- 3.9 Work closely with Kent Police and Kent Fire & Rescue, S E Coastal Ambulance Service to take forward the work around supporting vulnerable veterans.

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 CONFIRM the council's commitment to this work.

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