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To: County Council

Date: 4 November 2021

Decision No: n/a

Subject: Annual Report on Implementation of 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 2020, 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 including promoting that Kent County Council is a MoD Employers Recognition Gold Award Holder. Members are requested to CHAMPION the Armed Forces Covenant across the county and ENGAGE locally in Covenant efforts and related events.

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-Military Partnership Board. This is the only joint signing and Board in the UK between a County Council (Kent) and a Unitary Authority (Medway). District colleagues also have similar local arrangements.

1.2 The purpose of the Covenant is to encourage support for the Armed Forces Community (AFC) working and residing in Kent and recognise and remember sacrifices they have made.

1.3 Parts of the Armed Forces Covenant will be enshrined in law under a new Armed Forces Bill in late Spring 2022 when Local Authorities and related public bodies will have to show 'due regard' when considering applications from the Armed Forces Community in Education (school places and transport), Healthcare (access to GPs and hospital waiting lists) and Housing (homelessness and DFGs). KCC benefits from Canon Bruinvels being Armed Forces Champion and Parliamentary Adviser to the All-Party Armed Forces Covenant Parliamentary Group where not only has he given oral evidence to the Select Committee – but he has been able to cite a number of KCC initiatives as examples of best practice.

1.4 The Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board oversees the implementation of the Covenant and meets twice a year, supported and informed by an annual Task Force Commander Briefing, half-yearly Unit Welfare Officer Briefings and 5 Task 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 Members will recall that in November 2016, the then 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, there are some significant changes to the military estate planned including the partial closure of Sir John Moore Barracks (now home to the Royal Gurkha Regiment) and Somerset Barracks in Shorncliffe as well as closure of the 36 Engineer Regiment of the Royal Engineers and the Queen's Gurkha Engineers based at Invicta Park Barracks in Maidstone in or around 2027 after 229 years of being based there.

2.3 Members will also be aware that 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 now located in Redhill. 3PWRR are now concentrating more in Kent and Medway, including Rochester and Thanet at RAF Manston, plus the eastern side of SE England. Mobilisation on operations continues to increase accordingly – and in recent years 3PWRR have mobilised on operations to Afghanistan, Iraq and Cyprus as well as supporting COVID-19 testing initiatives across the SE and are currently recruiting across Kent.

3. KCC Activities to support the Armed Forces Community

3.1 On 19 September 2021, the Board held its 8th Annual Armed Forces Covenant Conference online because of COVID-19 restrictions with 90 representatives on Teams and with 16 speakers participating over 3 hours. The Conference brought together the senior Lead on the Covenant at the MoD, Armed Forces, Councils, emergency 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 Legislation covering 'due regard' for Education, Healthcare and Housing is fully implemented. There was also a focus on 'Partnership Working Post-COVID-19' across Kent and we were delighted to have both the KCC Chair and Leader present. Delegate feedback including from the Lord-Lieutenant was very positive. A Strategic Aims Action Plan is being updated with all the relevant Task Groups being invited to take forward the issues raised. The next annual conference will take place in June 2022 at the Leas Cliff Hall in Folkestone. [Our last in person Conference took place at Brompton Barracks with the theme of 'Strengthening Connections' and Conference Representatives were honoured to have the Household Cavalry as our principal VIP guests].

3.2 The fourth Service Children's Voice Conference was held in 2019 bringing together service children including many Gurkha 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 there are plans for a fifth such conference in June 2022 again at the Duke of York's, with the aim of getting even more participation from children at schools with only a few service families.

3.3 Canon Peter Bruinvels was commissioned in 2016 to secure sustainable dedicated capacity to support the Armed Forces Covenant. He continues to work at KCC and has helped strengthen links with 11 Infantry Brigade and Service Charities which has resulted in the forging of closer links with partners across the South East. He has also ensured that the Civic Office is well connected into the Board's work and the Lieutenancy now holds a Military Events diary which is used by all the Boroughs and Districts, KALC as well as by the media.

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 including Canon Bruinvels were 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 Forces Connect 'App' which is being used by both service providers and the armed forces community themselves. To date, there are 11,500 users covering 24 Regions.

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

- A Service Champion training programme in partnership with the NHS with 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 to date 565 KCC staff have completed the training. It has been put on the Armed Forces Network website so that colleagues in other organisations across Kent can also access it.
- The 1st dedicated training session for Elected Councillor Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Lead Officers across Kent and Medway was held in February 2018. Each year further sessions led by Canon Bruinvels have been held including Kent's three Task Force Commanders – all are immensely popular and have ensured they have a consistent understanding of their respective roles, and the knowledge and support needed to carry it out. This is particularly important following a large turnover of Armed Forces Champions across Kent in May 2021.
- Targeted training for customer-facing front-line staff, including contact centre staff: short sessions for teams has also been provided to raise their awareness and ensure they ask customers whether they have served or connections to the armed forces in order to ensure appropriate support or signposting. In late 2021, plans are in hand to train all Adult Social Care Staff to ask the question: 'Did you or anyone in your family serve?' If in the affirmative, we will be able to triage them quickly for welfare support.
- Forces Connect Veterans Hub SE received £148k to support Veterans Hubs and Drop-In Centres across the SE. Grants were awarded to Dover, Deal, Chatham and Cheriton to create new and sustain existing Hubs with more planned.
- Following a further Armed Forces Covenant Trust Fund grant of £25k, further training of both Elected Councillor Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Leads as well as Front-Line Staff will take place across Kent, Medway and the SE over the next twelve months. This again will be led by Canon Bruinvels.

3.6 Human Resources colleagues developed KCC's first Reserves Armed Forces Policy focusing on formalising arrangements around its 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 by the MoD. It resulted in KCC holding its first Reservist Day at County Hall in June 2017 and repeated again in June 2018. This successful event will be repeated on 21 June 2022 when it is hoped to have the Kent Bomb Disposal Unit as principal guests supported by 3PWRR.

3.7 The commitment of Kent County Council to support defence personnel and their families as a 'Military friendly' employer was recognised in Summer 2018 when KCC was awarded the prestigious Gold Award – one of very few County Councils to be so awarded. This was as a result of significant hard work across the organisation. The speed of this latest award was quite remarkable, having just been 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 more Cadet Adult Volunteers, having the policies and procedures in place to ensure they are supported around their Forces' needs and requirements, as well as KCC's wider support for the Armed Forces Covenant and Armed Forces Day.

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, the KCC Civil-Military Peer Support Group has continued to meet until the advent of COVID-19. 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). It is planned to have a new staff and Members survey in November 2021.

3.9 This year, KCC has continued to focus on establishing stronger local-level relationships with on-line meetings with Army Task Force Commanders and District Armed Forces Champions, Covenant Lead Officers and Unit Welfare Officers. 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. Relations have never been better or closer and we are particularly grateful to all of the Task Force Commanders who are really working in partnership with their local Armed Forces Champions and Covenant Leads – many of whom are new in 2021.

3.10 The Covenant Team continues 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. Two projects to identify and support isolated older veterans and those veterans in the criminal justice system were carried out involving SSAFA 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, Twitter @KentArmedForces, press releases and videos as well 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, and sets a blueprint for future moves in Kent.

3.13 With a move planned for Summer 2020, all the above work was repeated and all the places for the returning / exchange Gurkha children secured at local schools and for their homes in and around Folkestone and Dover. Canon Bruinvels went to Brunei to meet the Gurkha Major, Gurkha families and their children accompanied by 11 Brigade, a KCC Admissions Office and the Folkestone and Hythe Covenant Lead. Hornbill School was visited and both the children and parents met up with him. COVID-19 arrived and the Brunei Swap was then put back until July 2022. All the files have now been re-opened and forward plan meetings are taking place to prepare to welcome 2RGR back to Shorncliffe in Summer 2022.

3.14 We continue to work with 11 Brigade on workforce skills, and recently have been in discussion about the relationship between the armed forces community and the Further Education Colleges and Guilds. Topics for consideration include:

- 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 and use their transferrable skills.
- The benefits of employing service spouses, and how they can be targeted.
- That cadets make ideal candidates for Apprenticeships.

3.15 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 (and women) of all ages in Kent (funded by Public Health, KCC). There are more than 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 Sheddors 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 well as getting them to work closely with the newly formed Veterans Hubs.

4. Priorities for the Future

4.1 With Forces Connect South East now nearing completion, the Board continues to oversee its implementation, ensuring that it has fully delivered its potential and training; working with our colleagues across the South East to improve outcomes on the ground for the armed forces community. Kent led on the development of the Forces Connect 'App' to enable individuals, and those who work with them, to access information, advice and guidance. The Board will continue to collaborate with the MoD and regional peers across the south east and further afield to share and promote best practice nationally as well as promoting the Forces Connect 'App' across Kent.

4.2 Within KCC and with partners, the Board will 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 The Board has agreed to once again hold a Service Children's Voice Conference in summer 2022 and build on previous achievements to deliver an innovative and meaningful 8th Kent & Medway Armed Forces Covenant Conference in spring 2022.

4.4 The Board will continue to improve publicity and communication around events that support the armed forces and encourage KCC Members to support local events as well as continuing to develop the Military diary of forthcoming events, celebrating Armed Forces Week and Reservists Day in 2022, and promoting Remembrance events, especially around Armistice Day 2021.

4.6 KCC colleagues will prioritise maximising the benefits of achieving the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award – including sending staff on the Sandhurst Leadership Challenge training and establishing feedback groups as well as by introducing guaranteed interviews for appropriately qualified ex-service personnel, as well as offering mentoring.

4.7 KCC will work closely with local partners to ensure bids for Covenant funding are of the highest quality, maximising income into the County. (£1.3m has been secured to date.)

4.8 Like any other group in society, members of the armed forces community have been impacted by the pandemic. As the transition from response to recovery continues, KCC will work with partners to ensure Kent's armed forces community have access to the advice and support available, including the Helping Hands Programme.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 County Councillors are asked to NOTE Covenant work to date and COMMIT to priorities going forward, including promoting that Kent County Council is now a MoD Employers' Recognition Gold Award Holder. Members are requested to CHAMPION the Armed Forces Covenant across the county and ENGAGE locally in Covenant efforts and related events.

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