

From: Oliver Richardson, Armed Forces Champion
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To: Policy & Resources Cabinet Committee

Date: 17 January 2024

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, and summarises key achievements since the last report to the Committee and the oral presentation to Full Council in 2023.

Recommendation:

Members are asked to note all that is being done to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent and agree to priorities going forward including promoting Kent County Council's status as a lead MoD Employers Recognition Gold Award Holder.

Members are requested to continue to support the Armed Forces Covenant across the county and to endorse the Council's commitment to this work by engaging 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 Kent County Council, 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 Parts of the Armed Forces Covenant were enshrined in law under the Armed Forces Act 2021. The measures in the Act came into force on 22 November 2022, meaning all Local Authorities and related public bodies are required to show 'due regard' when considering applications from the Armed Forces Community (school places and transport), Healthcare (access to GPs and hospital waiting lists) and Housing (homelessness and Disabled Facilities Grants).
- 1.4 Kent County Council has worked closely with the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on the Armed Forces Covenant where several Kent County Council initiatives

have been cited in examples of best practice. Additionally, the Civic Office and the Lieutenancy are well connected into the Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board's work.

1.5 The Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board continues to oversee the implementation of the Covenant and meets twice a year under the chairmanship of the Kent County Council Chairman with the Leader and Armed Forces Champion of Medway Council appointed as vice-chair, supported by Task Groups covering the following themes:

- Health and wellbeing
- Children and Youth
- Employment and Skills
- Recognise and Remember
- Unit Welfare Officers – a Joint Task Group involving Kent County Council and Medway Council Lead Officers

2. Highlights of Kent County Council's Activities to support the Armed Forces Community during 2023

2.1 Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board

2.1.1 The Board has been strengthened by the new Membership of the Kent Police and Crime Commissioner; the Chief Executive of Kent Fire & Rescue; the Chief Executive of the RBLI and the Dean of Rochester Cathedral.

2.1.2 On the 21 February 2023 the Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board members endorsed a set of reinvigorated Strategic Aims under four key headings:

- I. Increase visibility of the Armed Forces Community to the civilian population.
- II. Continue to raise awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant plus the new legislation.
- III. Raise awareness amongst schools of the specific needs of service children and their families.
- IV. Support and promote recruitment of volunteers, Regulars and Reservists.

2.2 9th Kent and Medway Armed Forces Covenant Conference - Gravesend

2.2.1 The 9th Annual Armed Forces Covenant Conference was held on 6 June 2023 at Gravesham Borough Council with over 180 delegates attending. The theme was 'Joining Up' and a particular focus was placed on improving support for military spouses and service children, working with Kent businesses on communicating the benefits of employing reservists and ex-service personnel, and ensuring health and social care services are as accessible as possible to the armed forces community.

2.3 HMS Kent Freedom Debate and Freedom March – September 2023

2.3.1 On the 21 September 2023, Kent County Council voted and agreed in Full Council to grant HMS Kent (Type 23 Duke class frigate) the Freedom of Kent. The ship's

Commander was also present for the historic vote. A ceremonial march past was held in Maidstone to commemorate the occasion on 22 September 2023. The Royal Marines Band participated in the march, which also commemorated the 34th anniversary of the tragic loss of 11 Royal Marines at Deal. Over 6000 people lined the streets in Maidstone and the occasion was covered extensively in local media.

2.4 MoD Employer Recognition Scheme

2.4.1 On the 23 October 2023, Kent County Council received notification that it had successfully retained its MoD Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award following a rigorous re-validation process.

2.4.2 Kent County Council has been at the forefront in supporting and mentoring Councils and other bodies wishing to apply for MoD Employers Recognition Gold Awards in 2023 as 'military friendly' employers. Canterbury City Council and FM Conway were awarded Gold and Thanet District Council was awarded Silver.

2.5 Census 2021: UK Armed Forces Veterans

2.5.1 In 2021, the Census for the first time asked whether the respondent has served in the Armed Forces. This was welcomed by Kent County Council who, alongside other Local Authorities and Service Charities, had lobbied for this question's inclusion. Asking this question enables a better understanding of the size and location of Kent & Medway's armed forces community, the resulting data then informing the work of the Kent & Medway Civilian Military Partnership Board and its sub-groups, ultimately ensuring the public sector can tailor its services better.

2.5.2 The Census reported that there were 52,545 UK Armed Forces veterans living in Kent in 2021. 88% of Kent's UK Armed Forces veterans were male, and 57.9% were aged 65 and over. 37.2% of Kent's veterans were not in good health, above the national (35.6%) and the regional (33.8%) averages. 32.6% of veterans were disabled under the Equality Act. At 38.7%, Kent had a lower proportion of veterans who were economically active than was seen nationally (42.4%) and regionally (40.4%). Of those who were economically inactive 89.9% were retired. 97.9% of Kent veterans were living in households while 2.1% were resident in communal establishments. [2021 Census - Veterans \(kent.gov.uk\)](https://www.kent.gov.uk/census-2021-veterans)

2.6 Full Kent & Medway CMPB 2023 Annual Report

2.6.1 The Full 2023 Annual Report can be found as appendix 1 attached to this report.

3. Looking Ahead to 2024

3.1 The 10th Annual Armed Forces Covenant will be held on 4 June 2024 at 1RSME – Brompton Barracks, Chatham.

3.2 The Recognise & Remember Task Group will continue to publicise the military events calendar (including veterans' activities) in conjunction with the Lieutenancy Officer to celebrate Armed Forces Day 2024 and Kent Reservists Day on 10 September 2024 as well as commemorating Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday 2024 and

encourage Kent County Council Members to support all the local events.

- 3.3 A second Councillor and Staff Survey at Kent County Council is planned in 2024/25 to help understand better the armed forces community within our own workforce.

4. Armed Forces Act 2021

- 4.1 The Armed Forces Act for the first time enshrines the Armed Forces Covenant in law. The primary focus is to prevent service personnel and veterans from being disadvantaged when accessing key local services. As public bodies, Local Authorities now need to show 'due regard' when considering applications from Service Personnel seeking School Admissions, Housing Accommodation and Healthcare.
- 4.2 Kent County Council worked closely with Civil Service colleagues to inform the content of the Act and supporting guidance and already exceeds the minimum standards it sets out. Nevertheless, in collaboration with our local partners, Kent County Council continually revisits service processes and pathways to ensure they meet the needs of the armed forces community, and this is reinforced through regular awareness training for front line staff, senior officers and elected Members.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Recommendations

5.1 Members are asked to note all that is being done to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent and agree to priorities going forward including promoting Kent County Council's status as a lead MoD Employers Recognition Gold Award Holder.

5.2 Members are requested to continue to support the Armed Forces Covenant across the county and to endorse the Council's commitment to this work by engaging locally in Covenant efforts and related events.

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