

From: Oliver Richardson, Armed Forces Champion
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To: Full Council

Date: 13 March 2025

Subject: 2024 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 during 2024.

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 the 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 (KCC) 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, remember and honour 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) thereby ensuring that no one is disadvantaged by their service to the Nation.
- 1.4 KCC 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, KCC 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 delivered by the Covenant Lead Officer. 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-chairman, supported by Task Groups covering the following themes:

- Health and wellbeing
- 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 2024

2.1 Kent & Medway Civilian-Military Partnership Board

The Board has been strengthened by the new Membership representation as follows:

- I. The Chairman of the Kent Royal British Legion
- II. The new SERFCA Deputy Chief Executive (East)
- III. 222 Medical Squadron, 256 Multi Role Medical Regiment Reserves – based in Ditton

2.2 10th Kent and Medway Armed Forces Covenant Conference – 1RSME Brompton Barracks in Chatham

2.2.1 The 10th Annual Armed Forces Covenant Conference was held on 4 June 2024 at 1RSME Brompton Barracks in Chatham and was kindly sponsored by MKC Training. The conference attracted 160+ delegates and the theme for 2024 was 'Working Together'.

2.2.2 The conference was opened by Brigadier James Webster-Commandant and Lt Col John Newton — CO—1RSME Speakers included HM Lord-Lieutenant – The Lady Colgrain; Capt Andy Balwah – from the Army Multicultural Network speaking on 'Diversity in the British Army'; Kent Police and Crime Commissioner Matthew Scott and Chief Inspector Gary Woodward on 'Working with Veterans in Policing'. Major Andy Stubbs – 220 Sqn – Ditton spoke on 'Providing Emergency Medical Support out 'in the Field'. Lt Col Tim Petransky – SO1 HQ SE spoke on our Army commitments within Kent and MoD Covenant Team and Canon Peter Bruinvels spoke on the latest developments with the Covenant and how well Kent was responding to them. Delegates were wowed with a fast-moving Gurkha Kukri display at lunchtime.

2.3 MoD Employer Recognition Scheme

- 2.3.1 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. On 28 March 2024 the award was presented to Full Council by Lt Col Nathan Horsman with Brigadier Andrew Wood DL.
- 2.3.2 The Annual Gold Awards took place on 3 October 2024 on HMS Warrior in Portsmouth, Kent based EC Safety Solutions and the Royal Engineers Association both received the Gold Award from Maj-Gen Lord Lancaster of Kimbolton TD VR PC Director of Reserves at the MoD.

2.4 Armed Forces and Veteran Community in Kent Needs Assessment

- 2.4.1 In 2024 KCC Public Health published The Armed Forces and Veteran Community Needs Assessment and technical report which focuses on the needs of armed forces and veterans living in Kent. It looks at the Armed Forces Covenant, governance in Kent and Medway, and the support structures that connect various organisations.
- 2.4.2 The Kent veteran population make up over 52,000. A substantial number (58%) are over 65 years of age and reside in the eastern coastal fringes of Kent.
- 2.4.3 Mental health disorders are similar to those rates found in the general population. Kent veterans are statistically more likely to attend substance misuse treatment services for treatment for alcohol rather than opiates or nonopiates compared to non-veterans.
- 2.4.4 The needs assessment identified that 418 applicants expressing a need for local authority housing. Ashford (71) and Dover (70) have the highest numbers whilst Tunbridge Wells (9) and Gravesham (0) have the lowest numbers. There were 19 cases of veteran homelessness in the County over a year in 2024.
- 2.4.5 Veterans in the Kent prison estate range from 2% (Standford Hill) to 5% (Maidstone). Nationally they tend to be male (98%) and within the age ranges 30-39 and 40-49 with almost 7% aged 70+. It should be noted that a number of Prison Officers are also ex-service and veterans across Kent.

2.5 Welfare Support

- 2.5.1 KCC and the Armed Forces Champions continue to provide case work support for both service personnel and ex-service personnel. Cases cover a range of topics such as obtaining a bus pass, school admissions, library fines whilst on active service and housing provision.
- 2.5.2 Initial preparations commenced in 2024 to support the Brunei Gurkha Unit move in Summer 2025. Initial contacts have been made and a number of the Brunei children have now registered with Kent schools and Kent County Council has nominated an officer to support the school admission process. Work to update a schools handbook

also commenced in 2024 ahead of the full move that will take place in 2025, which includes approximately 1500 people.

2.5.3 During 2024, KCC's Financial Hardship Programme allocated £46,100.00 to veteran homes via the Household Support fund, 461 awards in total: 236 energy only awards, 201 food only awards, and 24 food and energy awards. In addition, the programme also awarded 6 successful applications from the armed forces for technology via the hardware access scheme. ReferKent continues to actively register organisations that offer support to the Armed Forces.

2.6 The Full 2024 Annual Report - Implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant in Kent.

2.6.1 The full 2024 Annual Report can be found as appendix 1 attached to this report.

3. Looking Ahead to 2025

3.1 11th Annual Armed Forces Covenant will be held on 17 June 2025 at Maidstone Campus, University of Medway.

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 2025 as well as commemorating Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday 2025 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.

3.4 Armed Forces Awareness Training will continue throughout 2025 with a special for County Councillors and their senior Officers

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Recommendations

4.1 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.

4.2 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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