

Annual Report of the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

Lead Member: Councillor Rod Williams – Chairman of the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

Division and Local Member: All

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1. Summary

1.1. This report updates the Council on progress with the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant (SAFC) Partnership since the last report to Full Council in November 2016.

1.2. The Covenant is a Government initiative designed to ensure that the Armed Forces community is not disadvantaged compared to the community as a whole by the activities of Local Authorities (LA) and partners in the public and private sector.

The definition of the Armed Forces Covenant is

“The Covenant is a promise from the nation to those who serve. It says we will do all we can to ensure they are treated fairly and not disadvantaged in their day-to-day lives. This includes offering injured servicemen and women, and bereaved families, extra support where appropriate.”

1.3. This report is for your information.

2. Background

2.1 Somerset County Council pledged its support for the Covenant on 20 February 2012. Councillor Rod Williams assumed the appointment of Chairman of the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant Partnership in May 2017. Since September 2015, SCC officer support for the SAFC Partnership has been provided by Chris Phillips, Service Manager – Stronger Communities, within Customers and Communities.

3. The 2017 Annual Conference

3.1 As in 2016, the annual SAFC Partnership conference was held to coincide with national Armed Forces Day celebrations and, in a show of unity with Somerset’s District Councils, the Armed Forces Day flag was raised at council buildings, with a local ceremony attended at West Somerset District Council on Monday 19 June.

3.2 This year’s annual conference was held in the excellent facilities of RNAS Yeovilton on Tuesday 20 June, thanks to the Commanding Officer of RNAS Yeovilton, Commodore Nick Tindall. The conference was extremely well

attended. SCC was energetic in capturing feedback from attendees to shape the 2018 annual conference. Of those who provided feedback from the 2017 conference, 98% rated it as 'Good' or 'Excellent'.

3.3 Following the annual conference, the SAFC Partnership website was refreshed to include a Partnership Directory (a 'Who's Who') and an Armed Forces Covenant Sway training presentation for frontline staff, which can be accessed via www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant

3.4 Using feedback from the annual conference, SCC's quarterly update to partner organisations was improved to provide clearer messaging and to improve engagement with partners.

3.5 Over the summer, SCC has strengthened our relationship with RNAS Yeovilton, 40 Commando RM and the UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO). UKHO is led by Somerset's most senior serving officer, Rear Admiral Tim Lowe CBE. We are also strengthening our relationship with the Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association (RFCA), the Royal Marines Association and the Somerset Branch of The Rifles and Light Infantry Association.

SCC is leading the production of a Forecast of Events for the Partnership that will do much to improve awareness across the Partnership of events of interest to all

4.

The Executive Group Meeting

4.1 On 18 September 2017, a meeting of the Executive Group of the Partnership, reviewed Governance arrangements for the Partnership. It decided:

- the Partnership would look widely for examples of best practice and would compare Somerset to other LAs;
- the Partnership should strengthen links with Somerset MPs;
- two executive meetings per year was the right amount and would be continued;
- the Partnership needed a high level Partnership Plan, based on the Chairman's analysis, to provide a clear direction of travel for the Partnership for the rest of this Quadrennium;
- further work was needed to strengthen links with District Councils;
- the date of the next year's Annual Conference would be 28 June 2018;
- the next meetings of the Executive Group would be on 16 April and 17 September 2018.

5. SAFC Partnership Plan for 2017-2021

5.1 The purpose of the SAFC Partnership is to deliver what the Armed Forces Covenant promises, in Somerset.

5.2 The Partnership is an association of organisations with differing interests and capability but a shared commitment to help deliver the Covenant in Somerset.

5.3 The aim of the Partnership Plan is to establish how Somerset will deliver the Armed Forces Covenant until 2021.

5.4 The Plan is attached with its two annexes. Annex A is a task matrix that shows the main areas of action of partner organisations. Annex B is the framework of a Stakeholder Communications Plan that will be elaborated in further work.

6. Communications and Partnership Working

6.1 We have continued links with SCC's Communications Team, leading to several press releases to support Covenant activity, including sharing Somerset Covenant Fund successful bids and commemorative events, including Armed Forces Day and Merchant Navy Day. For further information visit: <https://somersetnewsroom.com/?s=armed+forces>

6.2 Somerset Intelligence webpages on the numbers and health needs of serving personnel and veterans and their dependants have been updated. The link is <http://www.somersetintelligence.org.uk/armed-forces.html>

6.3 **South West Regional Initiative.** It is a Covenant priority to improve delivery of the Covenant locally and to improve the integrated delivery of services throughout the community. In early 2017, seven Covenant partnerships (Somerset, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, North Somerset, Devon, Plymouth and Torbay and Cornwall) found they had similar needs and jointly submitted a bid for £190,291 to the national Covenant Fund. Wiltshire is the lead authority for this bid. The aim of the project is to raise awareness of the Covenant in both the civilian and military communities and to train frontline public service staff and charities on the needs of the military community. In March 2017, it was announced that the bid had succeeded. Wiltshire has led funding and filling a full time post, from September 2017 to December 2018, to coordinate delivery of the project across the South West Region.

6.4 **Children/Schools.** For the 2017/18 financial year there are a total of 1,773 children in Somerset eligible for the Service Child Pupil Premium, across 203 different schools.

7. New Covenant Fund

7.1 The Covenant Fund replaced the previous Community Covenant Grant Scheme and is allocated £10m per year, in perpetuity, financed by the MoD from their Budget, overseen by the Treasury. The first funding window for the new fund closed in September 2015. Some 315 applications were submitted, with a value of bids in excess of £50 million, demonstrating the national demand.

7.2 In the last year Somerset made two successful bids. The bids were for projects to encourage integration between military and non-military families. The successful bids, for over £27,000, were for centres at Wyndham Park and the Balsam Centre.

- The Wyndham Park Community Hub is on the outskirts of Yeovil.
- The Balsam Centre, 'Hub2', will benefit residents living on the Deansley Way Estate, Wincanton. 40 per cent of homes are occupied by Armed Forces families. The Hub will provide opportunities for both civilian and military families to make new friends, take up new interests, develop new skills and improve their sense of community belonging.

7.3 We also continue to promote/support/engage with initiatives previously successful under the original Covenant Grant Scheme. These projects presented their update at the 2017 annual conference.

7.4 Further information regarding the New Covenant Fund is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covenant-fund>

8 National Developments

8.1 The Veterans' Gateway service was launched on 20 June this year. The Gateway provides a first point of contact for veterans seeking support. It aims to improve access to welfare services and speed up the time it takes for veterans to receive support.

8.2 The service comes in response to independent reports published by the Forces in Mind Trust and Lord Ashcroft's 2014 Veterans' Transition Review. Both reports called for the process by which veterans are guided to welfare support services to be made easier to navigate. Lord Ashcroft's principal recommendation was the creation of a single 24/7 contact centre.

8.3 In 2013, The Forces in Mind Trust's independent Transition Mapping Study found that the unsuccessful transition from Service to civilian life cost the UK economy an estimated £113 million in 2012 alone. Earlier, more accurate intervention should make the cost considerably less, to both the individual seeking support and the UK economy.

8.4 The service is funded by the MoD from the Covenant Fund and will be delivered by a Royal British Legion-led consortium comprising Poppyscotland, Combat Stress, Connect Assist, the MoD and SSAFA.

8.5 The 24-hour online chat, phone, and text message service is partly manned by veterans who have been trained to help a British Armed Forces community estimated to be around six million and growing by 20,000 annually. Bringing together over 30 referral partners, including Veterans UK, Mind and the Career Transition Partnership, veterans and their dependants will be able to access support services in areas like physical health, financial support, assistance with independent living, housing, mental wellbeing, and employment.

8.6 Further information is available at www.veteransgateway.org.uk

9 Other Activities

9.1 The Chairman attended Devon County Council's annual conference on Friday 29 September to compare Somerset's delivery of the Covenant to Devon's. Devon County Council was impressed with Somerset's approach, progress and plans to improve delivery further. A useful connection was established.

9.2 The Service Manager for Stronger Communities met Dorset County Council to discuss its Covenant Partnership.

9.3 SCC will continue to liaise with our neighbouring LAs over delivery of the Covenant.

- 9.4** The Chairman helped organise a talk by Kate Adie to raise funds for ABF The Soldiers' Charity at Kings College, Taunton on Friday 6th October. The talk raised over £3,500.
- 9.5** The Chairman attended the Royal British Legion's launch of its 2017 Poppy Appeal in the Museum of Somerset, Taunton on Thursday 26th October.
- 9.6** The Chairman was the guest of honour of The Rifles and Taunton Branch of the Light Infantry Association at their annual dinner on Saturday 4th November and gave a short talk on the SAFC Partnership.
- 9.7** The Chairman represented the Leader of the Council at an Army Families Federation (AFF) Reception in Whitehall, Monday 6 November 2017, attended by Ministers, MPs and the professional head of the Army, General Sir Nicholas Carter, Chief of the General Staff.

10. Consultation

- 10.1** The Partnership's Executive Group was invited to comment on the draft SAFC Partnership Plan. Its comments have been incorporated by the Chairman into the version of the Partnership Plan attached to this Report.

11. Background Papers

- 11.1** Attached:
- Partnership Plan.
 - Annex A: Task matrix that shows the main areas of action of partner organisations.
 - Annex B: Stakeholder and Communications Plan Framework.
- 11.2** For further information about the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant visit: www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant
- 11.3** For more information about the National Covenant visit: www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/