

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

Lead Officer:

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Report updates the Council on the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant (SAFC) Partnership since the last Annual Report to Full Council in November 2017. The Report is for your information.
- 1.2 The purpose of the SAFC Partnership is to ensure that the Armed Forces Covenant is delivered in Somerset. Somerset County Council (SCC) leads the Partnership.
- 1.3 The Covenant is a Government initiative designed to ensure that members of the Armed Forces are not disadvantaged compared to members of the civil community. 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.’

- 1.4 Delivery of the Covenant in Somerset is aimed at four groups of beneficiary: regulars; reservists; veterans; and their immediate families.

2. Background

- 2.1 SCC pledged its support for the Covenant on 20 February 2012. Councillor Rod Williams assumed the appointment of Chairman of the SAFC Partnership in May 2017.
- 2.2 Since September 2015, SCC officer support for the SAFC Partnership has been provided by Chris Phillips, Service Manager – Stronger Communities.
- 2.3 In autumn 2017, the SAFC Partnership adopted a Partnership Plan for 2017-2021 to direct the work of the Somerset Partnership in delivering the Covenant. The last year has seen this Partnership Plan being implemented and reviewed, without the need for change.

3. Overview

- 3.1 Since last November, the main activities of the Partnership have been three. They have been the annual Partnership Conference, other summer activities, and the autumn activities connected with Remembrance. These three main activities have been underpinned by governance exercised in the biennial Executive Group Meetings and by our year-round effort to communicate well across the Partnership.

4. The Annual Partnership Conference

- 4.1 As in 2017, this year's annual Partnership Conference was held to coincide with national Armed Forces Day and was held at RNAS Yeovilton, thanks to the Commanding Officer of RNAS Yeovilton, Commodore Nick Tindall.
- 4.2 This year's Conference built on the success of the 2017 Conference and benefitted from the effort we had made in 2017 to capture feedback from those attending and act on it. This year, attendance was even larger, the background of speakers wider and the interaction with the audience greater. This year, 93% of those attending rated it as 'Good' or 'Excellent'.
- 4.3 Much effort goes in to preparing the annual Conference. It has paid off by gathering a disparate set of partners, by improving our understanding of what different organisations do, by strengthening our sense of shared purpose and by generating the goodwill that produces mutual trust and responsiveness when a problem occurs.

5. Other Summer Activities

- 5.1 In a show of unity across Somerset, and support for the Armed Forces, the Armed Forces Day flag was raised outside District Council buildings and County Hall. The County Hall ceremony was attended not only by our Chairman and our Leader but by the most senior serving officer in Somerset, Rear Admiral Tim Lowe, Deputy Chief Executive of the UK Hydrographic Office, and by 95 year old Mr Jim Booth who, as a young naval officer in June 1944, had commanded a group of midget submarines that marked the approach to the D-Day beaches. These two men represented 'those who serve and those who have served'.
- 5.2 Three other activities this summer are of note, coincidentally all in Taunton. 40 Commando Royal Marines demonstrated new urban climbing techniques on County Hall to a senior audience of HQ 3 Commando Brigade and MoD staff. The Lord Lieutenant of Somerset opened Trenchard Way, supported by a flypast by an A400M. And 40 Commando exercised their Freedom of Taunton in front of the Head of the Royal Navy, the 1st Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Philip Jones.

6. Autumn Activities Connected with Remembrance

- 6.1 On Saturday 6th October, the town of Wincanton hosted the Unveiling of the Poppy of Honour. This was a new tribute, by one man – a remarkable initiative and achievement. The Poppy of Honour is a 10 foot high Poppy into which is sealed a named poppy for each individual from Britain and the Commonwealth who lost their life in World War One. Waiting patiently in the rain and the cold, the crowd at Wincanton showed how deep and widespread is the support for those servicemen and women who gave their lives for our freedom.

- 6.2 On Thursday 25th October, the Somerset Branch of the Royal British Legion launched its Poppy Appeal in the impressive hall of Crowcombe Court, Crowcombe.
- 6.3 On Tuesday 6th November, the Lord Lieutenant of Somerset and the Dean of Wells Cathedral co-hosted 'Somerset Remembers', a Gathering to mark the contribution of Somerset to the national and Allied effort during the First World War. The Somerset Roll of Honour is kept in a Memorial Book in the Cathedral's South Transept. It records the 11,281 Somerset men and women who gave their lives in the War. Nearly half of those listed died while serving in the Somerset Light Infantry. The Gathering recalled the immense loss and personal tragedy that were central to the collective and individual experience of the War.

7. The Somerset Wood

- 7.1 Reinforcing the message of 'Somerset Remembers', an initiative to commemorate Somerset's sacrifice in World War One by creating a large new wood passed an important milestone on Friday 9th November. Following quick progress between Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC), the Crown Estate and developers, a Ceremony was devised and conducted to Name, Dedicate and Bless the wood, named Somerset Wood by the Lord Lieutenant of Somerset.
- 7.2 Located near Monkton Heathfield in north Taunton, this initiative is a product of exemplary partnership between SCC, TDBC and the two parishes of Cheddon Fitzpaine and West Monkton. This partnership hopes to plant some 14,000 trees over the next two or three winters as a permanent, tangible commemoration of the sacrifice of the Somerset generation who lived through, fought and won the First World War.

8. Communications

- 8.1 One of the lessons we learned from feedback from the 2017 annual Conference was that continual year-round communication was more valued than a single event, however good. Therefore, SCC's Chairman of the SAFC Partnership and his two supporting officers have put much effort into producing Quarterly Updates for members of the Partnership. These Quarterly Updates have become comprehensive sources of news, support and 'how you can help'.
- 8.2 We are also grateful to SCC's Communications and Press team, led by Mark Ford, who have supported our delivery of the Covenant throughout the year with Press Releases and links with the TV, radio and print media. For further information visit: <https://somersetnewsroom.com/?s=armed+forces>

9. Other Activities

- 9.1 **South West Regional Initiative.** Wiltshire County Council has led and funded a South West Regional Initiative aimed at better identifying the needs of Service leavers, veterans and their families so that the Covenant can better meet their needs. A year-long piece of research conducted by a commercial organisation has recently been completed and the Chairman of the SAFC Partnership will attend a conference at Tidworth on Friday 30 November that will help establish the way forward for this Initiative and what Somerset's part may be in it.

- 9.2 **Covenant Fund.** The Covenant Fund replaced the previous Community Covenant Grant Scheme. The Fund is allocated £10m per year, nationally, by the Treasury. Some 315 applications were submitted that bid for more than £50 million. In 2017, Somerset was successful with a bid for £27,000. In 2018, Somerset was successful with a bid for £20,000 which was to support 40 Commando providing a flat at Norton Manor Camp to enable 'contact visits' of affordable quality time for separated Service parents with their children in a family friendly, safe environment.

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

- 9.3 **Army Engagement Team Visit to Somerset.** On Tuesday 30th October, the Army Engagement Team hosted an evening of information at 'Junction 24' of Sedgemoor Auction Centre. The purpose of the evening was to update local people of influence, including employers, of what the Army is, has and does, including the values that soldiers uphold and demonstrate. This included: the vital role of Reservists; the exceptional training given to all ranks and the very wide range of skills that regulars and reservists have; and the support provided when a soldier 'transitions' from the Army to civilian life.
- 9.4 **The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.** The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme recognises employers who support Armed Forces personnel, possibly as reservists or if they are injured or sick. The Scheme is part of the Employer Engagement Programme managed by the Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association, based in Taunton. The Scheme offers Gold, Silver and Bronze levels of recognition for corresponding levels of support.
- 9.5 Many Somerset businesses have signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant and have been recognised for the support they continue to give. As example, this year the Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust was awarded the Silver level. More information on how supporting the Armed Forces community can benefit a business is available from wx-reed@rfca.mod.uk and wx-reed2@rfca.mod.uk
- 9.6 Information on the Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association is at <https://www.wessex-rfca.org.uk/news/newsletters/>
- 9.7 **The Warrior Programme.** The Warrior Programme is an unusual initiative that is becoming established across England and has a growing presence in the south-west. The Programme is aimed at serving Servicemen and women, veterans and their families. It helps individuals and families manage their emotions and helps individuals and families to develop resilience, focus and motivation. This may be particularly valuable to support and enhance family life amidst the stress of a parent absent for many months while deployed on training or operations.

10. Background Papers

- 10.1 Attached is the SAFC Partnership Plan and Annex A (matrix of partner organisations and main areas of activity).

- 10.2 For more information on the Somerset Armed forces Covenant visit www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant
- 10.3 For more information on the Armed forces Covenant visit www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/