

Somerset County Council

County Council
– 22 January 2020

Annual Report of the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

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Division and Local Member: All

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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 2018. The Report is for your information.
- 1.2.** The purpose of the SAFC Partnership is to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Somerset. SCC leads the Partnership.
- 1.3.** The Covenant is a Government initiative designed to ensure that members of the Armed Forces community are not disadvantaged compared to members of the civil community. Delivery of the Covenant is aimed at four groups of beneficiary: regulars; reservists; veterans; and their immediate families.
- 1.4.** 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.'

2. Background

- 2.1.** SCC pledged its support for the Covenant on 20 February 2012. Since September 2015, SCC officer support for the SAFC Partnership has been provided by Chris Phillips, Service Manager – Stronger Communities.
- 2.2.** In May 2017, Councillor Rod Williams was appointed by the Leader as Chairman of the SAFC Partnership.
- 2.3.** In Autumn 2017, the SAFC Partnership's Executive Group adopted a Partnership Plan for 2017-2021. This four year Plan set out how the Partnership would be governed and how the Partnership would oversee the delivery of the Covenant in Somerset. In 2019, the half-way point of the Plan, it was reviewed, without any need for change.

3. Overview

- 3.1.** Since November 2018, the main activities of the Partnership have been five: continual liaison with partner organisations; responding to national developments; influencing regional developments; Somerset activities; and the annual Partnership Conference.
- 3.2.** These main activities have been underpinned by: careful governance of the Partnership, exercised through twice-yearly Executive Group Meetings; by our year-round effort to communicate well across the Partnership; and by listening to feedback from partner organisations.
- 3.3.** The structure of this Report is:
- national developments;
 - the South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership;
 - Somerset activities;
 - the annual Partnership Conference;
 - Remembrance activities;
 - other activities;
 - communications;
 - background papers.

4. National Developments

- 4.1. The MOD Veterans Strategy.** In January 2019, SCC's Chairman of the Partnership attended a MOD Veterans Conference in London on the Government's emerging Veterans Strategy. The Conference invited feedback from Local Government partners on the proposed Veterans Strategy. SCC collated feedback to provide a Somerset-wide written response. The Veterans Strategy was produced after cross-government collaboration and focuses on seven key themes for Veterans:
- community and relationships;
 - education and skills;
 - employment;
 - finance and debt;
 - health and wellbeing;
 - making a home in civilian society;
 - veterans and the law.

4.2. Renaming of 'Royal Navy and Royal Marines Welfare'. The former 'Royal Navy and Royal Marines Welfare' has been renamed as 'Naval Service Family and People Support (NS FPS). Somerset locations of NS FPS are RNAS Yeovilton and Norton Manor Camp, Taunton. NS FPS provides advice and support with: accommodation and housing; family support; local facilities; adult education; deployment support; and finance and legal.

5. Formation of a South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

- 5.1.** In 2018, Wiltshire Council had been impressed by the regional approach to delivering the Covenant adopted by some Local Authorities in South East England. After much work to assess this, Wiltshire advocated the formation of a South West regional Covenant Partnership. In late 2018 and early 2019, Wiltshire put this to South West Local Authorities, including Somerset.
- 5.2.** Having heard the case put forward by Wiltshire, Somerset had four serious reservations. First, we had to recognise the very different military demographics between the South East, Wiltshire and the other South West Authorities. Second, any new partnership could not be simply another level of management. Third, any new partnership could not reduce the responsibility and authority of SCC to deliver the Covenant in Somerset. Fourth, and perhaps most important, any new partnership must add value for the beneficiaries of the Covenant while still delivering the Covenant with a light touch and bringing negligible extra cost with it.
- 5.3.** After discussing these concerns for most of 2019, Wiltshire accepted that Somerset's reservations had to be satisfied if it was to join the partnership, and perhaps if enough other South West Authorities were to join too. With the principles underpinning a Partnership agreed, including some at Leader level, on 20 November 2019 a meeting was held of the Covenant champions of Bristol City, Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire, North Somerset, Somerset and Wiltshire.
- 5.4.** The meeting agreed to form a South West Covenant Partnership to improve delivery of the Covenant across the South West. Specifically, its purpose was to improve outcomes for the four beneficiary groups of the Covenant: regulars, reservists, veterans and their immediate families.
- 5.5.** The meeting agreed to form a Board to steer the Partnership and an officer group to support the Board. The Board would be chaired by Somerset until May 2021, coinciding with the County Council Election.
- 5.6.** The product of the Partnership can be split into 'hard' and 'soft' outputs.
- 5.7.** Hard outputs will include: a film to raise awareness of the challenges facing Service personnel and their families transitioning out of the Armed Forces and into civilian life; an Outreach Vehicle, with an ambassador driver to promote the Covenant; a website to help veterans and families access help; and training support in what help can be provided through the Covenant. The

Outreach Vehicle and driver can be booked for local events on email communities@somerset.gov.uk

- 5.8. The soft outputs will include: better outcomes for more beneficiaries; better policy alignment and sharing of best practice among partner Authorities; better data gathering and sharing to better understand the needs of beneficiaries; and better awareness of the Covenant across the South West.
- 5.9. In sum, my view of the formation of this South West Partnership is that it offers potential to improve our delivery of the Covenant and spread best practice across the South West. However, to realise this potential will require us to tread a delicate balance between avoiding 'mission-creep' but still improving outcomes for Covenant beneficiaries, while maintaining strict control of cost and effort. This will require skilled steering by the Partnership Board. Somerset's chairing of the Board puts us in pole position to ensure that the Partnership does add value for minimal cost and staff effort.

6. Somerset Activities

- 6.1. **Royal Opening of UKHO.** On 25 April 2019, HRH The Princess Royal opened the new headquarters of the UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO), at Admiralty Way, Taunton. UKHO is the most capable Hydrographic Office and marine geospatial information agency in the world. It provides state of the art digitised maritime information to the Royal Navy and merchant marines around the world. On 31 May 2019, Admiral Tim Lowe CBE (the most senior serving officer in Somerset) was appointed Chief Executive and Accounting Officer of the UKHO shortly before retiring from the Royal Navy. Rear Admiral Peter Sparkes has since been appointed the National Hydrographer and Deputy Chief Executive of UKHO.
- 6.2. **Raising of Armed Forces Day Flag.** In a show of Somerset-wide support for the Armed Forces, the Armed Forces Day flag was raised outside Somerset District Council buildings and County Hall on Monday 24th June.
- 6.3. **Armed Forces Day Family Fun Event - 2019.** On Saturday 29th June, the Taunton Veterans Breakfast Club held its first Family Fun Day at Wilton Lands, Vivary Park to celebrate Armed Forces Day. This was a private initiative by Taunton veterans to mark Armed Forces Day with an event that the public would enjoy and would enable them to show their support for the Armed Forces. The event was so well attended and supported by the public that, with encouraging support from Somerset West and Taunton District Council, there will be a similar, but bigger, event in 2020.
- 6.4. **Armed Forces Day Family Fun Event - 2020.** The 2020 event will be on Saturday 4th July 2020 in the whole of Vivary Park. It will be a free family fun day in the heart of our County Town that will show the respect and affection the whole community feels for the men and women who serve in our Armed Forces. The 2020 national Armed Forces Day will be on Saturday 27th June

but towns across the country are holding their own Armed Forces Day event when it best suits local facilities and commitments close to that date.

6.5. The Somerset Wood. Reinforcing the November 2018 message of ‘Somerset Remembers’, the first trees of The Somerset Wood were planted over December 2018 - March 2019. The Somerset Wood will commemorate the 11,281 Somerset men and women who lost their lives in World War One. In November 2018, The Somerset Wood was officially named by Her Majesty’s Lord Lieutenant of Somerset, Mrs Anne Maw, and was blessed by the Archdeacon of Taunton, the Venerable Simon Hill. The Wood will be immediately adjacent to a new Country Park being created near Monkton Heathfield, Taunton. Through a partnership between SCC, Somerset West and Taunton District Council and the two local parishes of Cheriton Fitzpaine and West Monkton, we aim to plant some 14,000 trees by April 2021. Volunteers have queued up to join planting work parties of about 20 and we look forward to resuming planting some 6,000 trees this winter as soon as land agreements have been made.

6.6. 40 Commando Royal Marines. For some years, Norton Manor Camp, Taunton, had been on a list of MOD sites for closure around 2028. Over the last 18 months, a thorough analysis by the MOD had recognised major advantages of the Taunton location and considerable costs and difficulties in finding another suitable site. Some cross-party lobbying took place in favour of the unit staying in Taunton. In February 2019, it was announced in Parliament that Norton Manor Camp had been removed from the list of sites for closure and that 40 Commando RM would remain there beyond 2028. It was an announcement met locally with much delight and some relief.

On 1st April, 40 Commando was presented with the Firmin Sword of Peace, becoming the first British unit ever to be awarded the Sword of Peace four times – a recognition of exceptional humanitarian service. The award was for the unit’s disaster relief in the British Overseas Territories of the Caribbean in 2017. The officer who presented 40 Commando with the Sword of Peace was General Sir Gordon Messenger KCB, DSO, OBE, ADC, the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff and a previous Commanding Officer of 40 Commando.

6.7. Veterans and Healthcare. SCC has joined various partners in healthcare to better recognise the difficulties Veterans can experience in accessing healthcare, including mental healthcare. The joint SCC/NHS meetings are producing a more collaborative approach to reduce these difficulties.

6.8. The Armed Forces Champion for Somerset West and Taunton (SWT). Many of you will have mourned the death on 30th March 2019 of Councillor Bob Bowrah BEM, the Armed Forces Champion for Taunton Deane. Bob served in the Army for 27 years and was Mayor of Taunton Deane in 2009 and of Wellington in 2016. As a Taunton Deane Borough Councillor and a member of Wellington Town Council, he was hugely respected in both communities as a man who gave years of service to the people of Wellington and Taunton. His memorial service in Taunton was packed to the rafters in

appreciation of a man who faithfully served the military and civilian communities, for the benefit of all.

In May 2019, the Leader of SWT appointed Councillor Andy Milne as the Armed Forces Champion for SWT. Andy is a former Royal Marines officer who has already brought understanding and energy to this role.

- 6.9. Partnership Briefings.** A briefing sheet on the Partnership has been produced and is available at www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant. SCC's Cabinet was briefed on the role of SSAFA, the longest established Armed Forces charity, and potential collaboration between SCC's Adult Social Care and SSAFA. Another briefing was given to SCC's Contact Centre (Somerset Direct) on what the Armed Forces Covenant is and the role of SSAFA.
- 6.10 Veterans Breakfast Clubs.** There are several Veterans Breakfast Clubs across Somerset which have arisen from local initiatives by Veterans. Typically meeting once a month, they provide an invaluable forum for Veterans to talk to other Veterans, to acknowledge any problem, and to give and receive mutual support. Some Veterans will acknowledge a need for help only to other Veterans, sometimes from the same regiment or corps. While most Veterans need no help, the Breakfast Clubs can be a means for those who do need help to start asking for the help that is available.

7. The Annual Partnership Conference

- 7.1.** As in 2018, this year's annual Partnership Conference was held to coincide with national Armed Forces Day.
- 7.2.** This year's Conference was held at Norton Manor Camp on 25th June 2019, by kind permission of the Commanding Officer of 40 Commando Royal Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Simon Rogers RM. The Conference was on Veterans welfare. It built on the success of the 2018 Conference and benefitted from our effort in 2018 to capture feedback from those attending. Attendance at this year's Conference was the maximum possible for the venue. Carefully selected speakers gave us their expertise on key areas of the MOD's Veterans Strategy, including mental health and suicide prevention. 97.5% of those attending rated the Conference as 'Good' or 'Excellent'.
- 7.3.** The Conference provided an excellent opportunity for partners to network and generated action afterwards that has improved our service to beneficiaries and strengthened the sense of shared purpose across the Partnership. For example, as a result of links made at the Conference, RNAS Yeovilton hosted Neil Thomas from the NHS to present on suicide prevention and Charlie Hobson from the Rock 2 Recovery charity to explain its work for veterans with mental health issues. Both presenters were invited to speak in subsequent mental health awareness days which produced good progress on how we could increase Service/Community support.

8. Remembrance Activities

- 8.1.** In late 2018, Wincanton hosted the Unveiling of the Poppy of Honour. 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. In 2019, the Poppy of Honour initiative was developed further with a Garden of Remembrance being created in Wincanton, continued touring to exhibit the Poppy of Honour and further public support for the Poppy as a symbol of Remembrance and support for those servicemen and women who have given their lives in war.
- 8.2.** In November 2019, 40 Commando RM made a particular effort to support local Remembrance services despite most of the unit being on exercise in the USA. 40 Commando's Base Party supported Remembrance services in Taunton, Wellington, Minehead and the parishes closest to Norton Manor Camp. Their presence was much appreciated and admired by the public.

9. Other Activities

- 9.1. Covenant Fund.** The Covenant Fund has replaced the previous Community Covenant Grant Scheme. The Covenant Fund is allocated £10m per year nationally by the Treasury. Further information on the Covenant Fund is at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covenant-fund>
- 9.2. 40 Commando Families Centre and Contact Flat.** 40 Commando's new Families Centre was opened in May 2019 with its new Contact Flat above it. As well as providing a creche, the Centre will hold coffee mornings, offer support and guidance to parents and children, run 'settling-into-school' sessions and family fun days. In late 2018, Somerset successfully bid for a £20,000 contribution towards a two-bedroom Contact Flat to enable 'contact visits'. A contact visit provides affordable, quality time for separated Service parents to share with their children in a family friendly, safe environment.
- 9.3. Archaeology Projects for Veterans.** In 2019, Breaking Ground Heritage successfully bid for just under £15,000 to provide veterans with projects in Archaeology, working with leading heritage bodies.
- 9.4. The Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (DERS).** The DERS recognises employers who support Armed Forces personnel, either by helping employees serve as reservists, by employing veterans, or by other support to the military community. The DERS in Somerset is run by the Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association, based in Taunton. The Scheme offers Gold, Silver and Bronze levels of recognition for graduated levels of support. SCC is submitting an application for the Bronze award and is working with each Somerset District Council to promote the DERS.
- 9.5. Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association.** Information on the Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association is at <https://www.wessex-rfca.org.uk/news/newsletters/>

9.6. Covenant Signatories. Many Somerset businesses have signed the Armed Forces Covenant and have been recognised for their help in delivering the Covenant. As example, in 2019 the Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust was awarded the Silver level of recognition. 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

10. Communications

10.1. Quarterly Updates. We have continued to produce Quarterly Updates for members of the Partnership. These Quarterly Updates are a comprehensive source of news, available support and 'how you can help'. I commend them to you as an easy way to keep in touch with what is going on in SCC's delivery of the Covenant. To receive the Quarterly Updates, please email communities@somerset.gov.uk to be added to the mailing list.

10.2. SCC Communications and Press Team. We thank SCC's Communications and Press team, led by Mark Ford, which has supported our delivery of the Covenant throughout the year with Press Releases and links to TV, radio and print media. For more information visit <https://somersetnewsroom.com/?s=armed+forces>

11. Background Papers

11.1. For more information on the Somerset Armed forces Covenant, including the SAFC Partnership Plan and its Annex A, which shows the matrix of partner organisations and the main areas of Covenant activity, visit www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant

11.2. For more information on the Armed Forces Covenant, visit www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/