

Somerset County Council

County Council
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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 January 2020. The Report is for your information.
- 1.2. The purpose of the SAFC Partnership is to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Somerset. Somerset County Council (SCC) leads the Partnership.
- 1.3. 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. 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.

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 and Kirsty Conger, Stronger Communities Officer.
- 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.

2.4. This autumn, Chris Phillips was promoted to Strategic Manager and now moves from Public Health's 'Stronger Communities' to 'Commissioning'. He will no longer support the SAFC Partnership. On behalf of us all in SCC and the Somerset military community, I thank Chris for his exceptional work to advance delivery of the Covenant in Somerset, to strengthen the Partnership and to enhance Somerset's reputation across the South West. I congratulate him on his promotion and wish him every success in Commissioning.

3. Overview

3.1. Since January, the activities of the Partnership have been reduced by Covid-19 but not stopped. The biggest loss was the forced cancellation of the Partnership's annual conference in June. But what has carried on has been: continual liaison with our partner organisations; responding to national developments with the Covenant; influencing developments with the South West Covenant Partnership; and activities in Somerset.

3.2. These activities have been underpinned by: an intensification of our year-round effort to communicate well across the Partnership; listening to, and acting on, feedback from partner organisations; and careful governance of the Partnership, exercised through our Executive Group Meetings in March and September.

3.3. This year, we have made pleasing improvements to widen and strengthen the SAFC Partnership. In broad terms, we have strengthened our connection with healthcare, we have widened and strengthened the engagement and collaboration between SCC and Districts; and we have established a link with the Money and Pensions Service that can help our Prevention through education and guidance in personal finance. There is more detail on this later in the Report.

3.4. SCC's work on the Covenant has been recognised by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) awarding SCC the Silver level of award under the Defence Employers Recognition Scheme. This award follows SCC being awarded the Bronze level in 2019. There is more on this later in the Report but these awards recognise our progress and hard work since 2017.

3.5. The structure of this Report is:

- national developments;
- the South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership;
- Somerset activities;
- Health
- the annual Partnership Conference;
- other activities;
- communications;
- background papers.

4. National Developments

- 4.1. The Covenant becomes Law in 2021.** Having created the Office of Veterans Affairs in 2019, the Government intends to make the Covenant law in 2021. This will change the Covenant from being ‘a promise from the nation’ to having the force of law. This changed status will have implications for the public sector in health, housing and education, and possibly other areas too. SCC officers have been part of the South West regional focus group studying and anticipating the likely impacts of this legislation. We expect the legislation to be brought before Parliament next year, probably in the Spring. Once the legislation is passed, we will continue to look across local government, the NHS and schools to ensure that policies and processes are updated to comply with the legislation.
- 4.2. Veterans Question in the 2021 Census.** In 2016, the Royal British Legion, with Poppyscotland, launched the ‘Count Them In’ campaign calling on the Government to include a question on the Armed Forces community in the 2021 Census. Legislation has been finalised by the UK Government and Parliament to amend the census in England and Wales so that it will provide veterans the opportunity to identify themselves as veterans; this will be voluntary, not mandatory, but the improved data should significantly improve our knowledge of the veteran demographic in Somerset. The date of the next Census is 21 March 2021. Similar legislation has been passed in Scotland.
- 4.3. ‘Living in our Shoes’ Report.** In 2019, an independent review was commissioned by the MOD to better understand the needs of the families of our servicemen and women. In June 2020 the report ‘Living in Our Shoes’ was published which included many recommendations for improvement. You can read the report at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-our-shoes-understanding-the-needs-of-uk-armed-forces-families>
- 4.4. Sector Insight - Armed Forces Charities.** Research this year commissioned by the Forces in Mind Trust and published by the Directory of Social Change showed that a relatively small number of charities were raising and spending about £1 billion annually in support of the Armed Forces community. This community numbers over six million people who were either regulars, reservists, veterans or their families. Some of the key findings of the research were that:
- there are 1,843 Armed Forces charities, which represent less than 1% of the UK charity sector;
 - those charities raise income of £1.1 billion annually and spend £985m;
 - the Armed Forces charity sector is highly reliant on generating income from the public, including from donations, legacies, and trading activity;
 - the number of Armed Forces charities has reduced by about 50 charities a year since 2016;
 - Armed Forces charities operate a highly coordinated system of grant-making to support individual beneficiaries and provide nearly £65 million in grants to organisations who support individuals.

[To find out more and download the report here.](#)

5. South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

- 5.1. On 20 November 2019, the South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership Board met for the first time. The Board is chaired by SCC, currently until May 2021. The purpose of the Board is to improve delivery of the Covenant across the South West. It will do this by shared understanding of the data, shared best practice, aligned policy and processes, and shared resource where it is mutually advantageous.
- 5.2. The Board is supported by an Officers Group from its partner authorities. This Group works at an operational level to find where better outcomes can be achieved, to align policies and, most importantly, to measure the value the South West Partnership adds to its constituent authorities.
- 5.3. This year, Covid-19 has distracted all the partner authorities but the top level work of the Partnership has continued. The Board's next meeting, under the chairmanship of SCC, is on Tuesday 8th December.
- 5.4. One casualty of Covid-19 this year has been the use of the Partnership's Outreach vehicle. This can be booked for events throughout the South West and had been booked for events in Somerset, including the Taunton and Somerset Armed Forces Day event at Vivary Park. When Covid-19 allows, Somerset hopes to resume making good use of the Outreach Vehicle and its driver.
- 5.5. The Partnership has an app 'Forces Connect South West'. Somerset is on this app, which signposts members of the Armed Forces community to the support available to them both locally and nationally. To download the app, click here to access it through [Google Play](#) or here for [Apple store](#).
- 5.6. You can find out more about 'Forces Connect South West' at: <https://www.forcesconnectsouthwest.org.uk/>

6. Somerset Activities

- 6.1. **Victory in Europe (VE) Day and Victory in Japan (VJ) Day Celebrations.** This year marked the 75th anniversaries of VE Day, in May, and VJ Day, in August. Many physical events had to be cancelled. However, people found ways to mark these important days with a variety of virtual events. You may have seen that the UK's first sky-typing display took place over Henstridge airfield in Somerset. The display was commissioned to mark VE Day with messages reading 'We Will Meet Again' and 'Thank you' that could be seen for up to 20 miles away. To mark VJ Day, the Chairman of SCC, Councillor Nigel Taylor, and Councillor Rod Williams joined a small ceremony at 40 Commando Royal Marines.
- 6.2. **Raising of the Armed Forces Day Flag.** In a show of support for the Armed Forces, the Armed Forces Day flag was raised outside County Hall on Monday 22nd June by SCC Chairman Councillor Nigel Taylor. He was joined – with social distancing observed – by SCC Leader David Fothergill, Councillor Rod Williams and SCC Chief Executive Pat Flaherty.
- 6.3. **Armed Force Day Virtual Events.** Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association (RFCA) supported RNAS Yeovilton in running two virtual Armed Forces Day events via Facebook. The events were very well received with excellent engagement from the public.

- 6.4. Partnership Updates.** A main effort of the SAFC Partnership since 2017 has been to communicate well with members of the Partnership. Since 2017 we have issued Quarterly Updates which have become comprehensive sources of useful information and links to further information. In light of Covid-19 and to maintain good communication with our partners, we added weekly updates to our Quarterly Updates throughout the height of the pandemic. The Stronger Communities Team produced 16 weekly updates to spread up-to-date information to as much of the Armed Forces Community we could reach. The weekly updates were well received by partners and our mailing list has grown to over 200 subscribers.
- 6.5. Understanding our Data Better.** Our Executive Group Meeting of 14th September looked at the data that supports much of our delivery of the Covenant. We had known for some time that data on the military community in Somerset was weak - but Somerset is not alone in this.
- 6.6.** Pip Tucker from Public Health talked us through a difficult subject. He explained the gaps in the data and cautioned against drawing conclusions from small numbers and old sources of data. Our best estimate is that the military community, broadly described, is up to 10% of the Somerset population. This is derived from about 3,250 Regulars, 500 reservists, 13,000 Veterans plus the multiple of their immediate families and dependants. About 1,800 Somerset children qualify for the School Pupil Premium.
- 6.7.** Pip Tucker stressed the importance of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and the need to do everything we can to improve our data to understand the needs of the military community in Somerset in more granularity. Useful actions emerged from the meeting that will improve our data. Data on the Armed Forces is included on Somerset intelligence website at <http://www.somersetintelligence.org.uk/armed-forces.html>
- 6.8. The Somerset Wood.** In early 2018, the Leader of SCC had the idea of a Somerset Wood to commemorate the 11,281 Somerset men and women who lost their lives in World War One. The Wood was to be for all Somerset people, not just for those living locally to it. One hundred years after the end of the Great War, the idea of the Somerset Wood quickly won the support of the public and of very senior Somerset figures. A nominal four-way partnership was formed of SCC, Somerset West and Taunton (SWT) District Council and the two local parish councils of Cheddon Fitzpaine and West Monkton. The impetus for the Wood came from three visionary individuals. A good site was found in mid-2018 and the first of an intended 14,000 broadleaved trees were planted in November 2018.
- 6.9.** Since then, progress has been slower than hoped for, with no planting achieved last winter. Progress continues to be bedevilled by complex negotiations over land, both in a new Country Park which overlaps the Somerset Wood and over the land for 80% of the Wood. Negotiations between SWT and the two parishes have been protracted. 2,000 trees have been planted so far and all of these are in the Country Park, so we are far behind the original planting schedule to achieve 14,000 trees by March 2022.
- 6.10.** The success of the Somerset Wood is not key to our delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant in Somerset. But all Somerset people have an interest in the success of the Somerset Wood. The stalled progress of this wonderful initiative that enjoys strong public support is regrettable. Currently, there is

little sign of us being able to conduct the large scale planting necessary to recover from two years of delay. Volunteers from the public are waiting to help plant the Wood. We badly need to plant several thousand trees this winter, preferably outside the Country Park. But to do so we need to rapidly resolve the current deadlock over land ownership and we need to establish formal governance and management authority.

- 6.11. The Money and Pensions Service (MaPS).** Many military charities and social care organisations believe that the root cause of much of the need and distress they face is the inability to manage personal finance. Financial pressure can lead to relationship breakdown, eviction from the marital home, loss of job, addiction, homelessness and possibly suicide. Thus, better personal and household financial management is one form of Prevention.
- 6.12.** The MaPS brings together the Money Advice Service, The Pensions Advisory Service and Pensions Wise. MaPS is a national organisation, sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions, with a strong South West operation. Its vision is that everyone makes the most of their money and pension(s).
- 6.13.** This year, the South West Regional Director of MaPS approached Councillor Rod Williams to facilitate access for MaPS to the military community in Somerset. Covid-19 has delayed possible MaPS presentations to military units, to audiences organised by Wessex RFCA or to gatherings of veterans but the SAFC Partnership is interested in the preventative potential of such a connection in 2021. More information on MaPS is at <https://moneyandpensionservice.org.uk>

7. Health

- 7.1. Veterans and Healthcare.** The SAFC Partnership has been working with Somerset CCG and the new Somerset NHS Foundation Trust (SFT) to address the difficulty Veterans can have accessing healthcare, including mental healthcare. Our 2019 Annual Conference led to an informal joint SCC/NHS working group. The success of this led to it being repeated several times this year. Its members relish the collaborative approach, quick decision making by operational staff and effective action. The working group has asked to become a formal sub-group of the SAFC Partnership's Executive Group and this will be decided in its next meeting, in March 2021.
- 7.2. Somerset NHS Foundation Trust.** On 1st April, the Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust merged with Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust to form the SFT. This move brought together Acute Services from Musgrove Park Hospital and Community and Mental Health services under one NHS Trust. Work is underway to coordinate patient pathways to enable integrated care from the NHS, SCC and Third Sector organisations.
- 7.3. Veteran Aware Status.** This year, SFT has been awarded 'Veteran Aware Hospital' status, which testifies to the improved access it gives to veterans. The new status was conferred by an NHS alliance formed under the aegis of the 'Getting It Right First Time' initiative, spearheaded by the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital.
- 7.4. The MOD's Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS).** The DMWS provides emotional and practical support to regulars, veterans and their families. It can help with mental health, seeking funding or form-filling.

Referrals come either from a clinical pathway or from SSAFA and the Royal British Legion. This year, SFT has partnered with the DMWS to fund a full time DMWS Welfare Officer based at SFT. Since arriving in post, she has experienced high demand, all from men and women under 45 years old and complex cases. One concern was District Council housing policy and Homefinder Somerset is helping DMWS to review this. If you or someone you know is serving, a veteran or a family member that could benefit from welfare support, you can access DMWS by contacting Ms Justine Clayton, DMSW Welfare Officer on jclayton@dmws.org.uk or by calling 07920 702372. The DMWS website is www.dmws.org.uk

8. The Annual Partnership Conference

- 8.1. Because of Covid-19, our Annual Partnership Conference due to be held at RNAS Yeovilton on Tuesday 23rd June was cancelled. For next year's Annual Partnership Conference we have booked RNAS Yeovilton for Tuesday 22nd June, coinciding with Armed Forces Week. Possible themes for the Conference are the delivery of the Government's Veterans Strategy in Somerset and the coordination of social care and education for military families.

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.covenantfund.org.uk/>
- 9.2. **The MOD's Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (DERS).** The DERS recognises employers who support Armed Forces personnel, either by helping employees to serve as reservists, by employing veterans, or by other support to the military community. In Somerset, the DERS is run by Wessex RFCA, based in Taunton. The Scheme offers Bronze, Silver and Gold levels of recognition for increasing levels of support. In April 2020, SCC applied for the Silver Award following it being awarded the Bronze level of recognition in 2019. In August we heard that our application for Silver had been successful and we received the award in September. Due to Covid-19 there was no awards ceremony but Wessex RFCA coordinated a social media campaign to announce the 2020 Award winners. For businesses, more information on how supporting the Armed Forces community can benefit your business is at wx-reed@rfca.mod.uk and wx-headeng@rfca.mod.uk
- 9.3. **Armed Forces Employee Network.** In 2019, we launched an SCC Armed Forces network for staff with a connection to the Armed Forces. Any member of staff who has served in the Armed Forces, is a reservist or is the spouse, partner or family member of someone who is serving or has served can join the network on Teams. In January, Councillor Rod Williams hosted an informal drop-in session for members to meet initially and swap experiences.
- 9.4. **Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association.** This year, the SAFC Partnership has continued its happy and smooth relationship with Wessex RFCA. Wessex RFCA is a Tier 1 partner organisation of the SAFC Partnership in its role of being responsible for reservists and cadets in Somerset and throughout the Wessex area. The Chief Executive of Wessex RFCA, Brigadier (Ret'd) Steve Hodder, sits on the South West Armed Forces

Covenant Partnership Board. Information on Wessex RFCA is at <https://www.wessex-rfca.org.uk/news/newsletters/>

10. Communications

- 10.1. Quarterly Updates.** Our initiative to supplement our Quarterly Updates with weekly updates during the Covid-19 lockdown has been covered earlier in the Report. The weekly updates have not changed the Quarterly Updates, which have become remarkable compendia of relevant, succinct and useful information. My sincere thanks go to Chris Phillips and Kirsty Conger who have compiled them throughout this year. 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, 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 information on the SAFC Partnership, including the SAFC Partnership Plan and its Annex A, which shows the matrix of partner organisations and the six main areas of Covenant activity, visit www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant
- 11.2.** For general information on the Armed Forces Covenant, visit www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/