

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 November 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 civilian community. Delivery of the Covenant is aimed at four groups of beneficiaries: regulars; reservists; veterans; and their immediate families.

2. Background

- 2.1.** SCC pledged its support for the Covenant on 20 February 2012. SCC officer support for the SAFC Partnership is provided by Jeff Brown, 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 defined the purpose of the Partnership, set out how it would be governed, how it would oversee the delivery of the Covenant in Somerset and the scope of its role. This year, we

have made the small updates necessary to the Plan and have anticipated the move to a unitary council for Somerset.

3. Overview

- 3.1.** As with last year, Partnership activities have been reduced by Covid-19. But a highlight was this autumn's conference, our 2020 conference having been cancelled due to Covid. This year's conference focussed on anticipating the implications for local government, the NHS and the third sector of the Armed Forces Bill and the implications for the Armed Forces community of Local Government Reorganisation and the Somerset Integrated Care System. Feedback from attendees was exceptionally positive, a tribute to the small SCC team that organised and delivered the Conference. More information on the Conference is in Section 6.
- 3.2.** This year's activities have been underpinned by: a continuation 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 October.
- 3.3.** This year, we have further strengthened collaboration with our NHS partners by formalising the previously informal Health and Social Care Coordination Group. An update on the activities of this group is later in this report.
- 3.4.** The structure of this Report is:
- national developments;
 - the South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership;
 - Somerset activities;
 - health;
 - other activities;
 - communications; and

 - background papers.

4. National Developments

- 4.1. Legislation - The Armed Forces Bill.** The Armed Forces Bill will change the status of the Covenant from being 'a promise from the nation' to having the force of law – a statutory duty. The Bill will require those providing public services, including local government and the NHS, to have 'due regard' to the principles of the Covenant. The Bill is making its way through Parliament and is likely to receive Royal Assent over this coming winter. We expect the Bill to come into force by mid-2022.
- 4.2.** The new status of the Armed Forces Covenant will have implications for the public sector in health, housing and education, and possibly social care later

on. SCC officers have been working in the South West regional focus group anticipating the likely impacts of this legislation. A member of the Covenant Team from MOD presented the main provisions of the Bill to our recent conference. SCC officers are convening groups with service areas that the Bill has implications for, and will be working with county and district equalities leads to ensure that the requirements of the Bill are reflected in the Equality Impact Assessment process. Once the legislation has been 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 new legislation.

- 4.3. The 'Integrated Review'.** In Defence, the Integrated Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy Review, known as the 'Integrated Review' (IR), provided a joined-up strategy for how the Government will promote the security, prosperity and influence of the UK. This joined-up strategic planning at national level has been a model of best practice for many other Departments of State.
- 4.4.** The Defence Command Paper substantiated the Defence dimension of the IR. It set out big changes to how Defence will operate. As well as adding the domains of Cyber and Space to the traditional warfighting domains of Air, Land and Sea, the paper has implications for the Regulars, Reservists, Veterans and Families that we support.
- 4.5.** For our Regulars, 40 Commando Royal Marines has been a testbed for the Future Commando Force that is an integral part of the Royal Navy (RN) and our global maritime reach. The Commando has married new thinking with new technology to create new capability at sea, on land and in the air. The Future Commando Force model underpins the creation of the UK's two Littoral Response Groups (LRG) – North and South. The LRGs will be forward-deployed, mobile and sustainable maritime advance forces integrated with Defence and Agency networks. Each LRG, or both, will be able to join the Carrier Strike Group to form an Expeditionary Strike Force, with allies if required. 40 Commando RM will be the heart of LRG (South) with a role across much of the Gulf, Indian Ocean and Pacific.
- 4.6.** RNAS Yeovilton (4,500 personnel) is a Main Operating Base for RN and Army Wildcat and Merlin helicopters. The base hosts six Naval Air Squadrons and 1 Regiment Army Air Corps. The Base hosts front-line squadrons and training units. For the RN, the Wildcat provides maritime attack, armed recce and anti-submarine force protection at sea, and is embarked in frigates destroyers, the aircraft carriers and Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships. The Merlin provides anti-submarine warfare and airborne early warning capability and support helicopter lift. For the Army, the Wildcat provides aviation recce for land combat formations such as the Armoured Infantry and Strike Brigades.
- 4.7.** As Regular Army strength reduces to some 72,000, Reservists will become even more important than before. Many Reservists bring specialist skills to our Defence capability. To allow the training time required to maintain those specialist skills in the military environment we depend upon the

understanding and support of civilian employers. You can read the report at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age>

- 4.8. Veterans Question in the 2021 Census.** For the first time the 2021 census included a question giving veterans the opportunity to identify themselves as a veteran. We expect this data to become available during 2022, which should greatly improve our knowledge of the veteran demographic in Somerset.
- 4.9. 'Living in our Shoes' Report.** Last year saw the release of the 'Living in Our Shoes' report which was an independent review of the needs of UK service families. The report made 110 recommendations. The Government released a response to each of the recommendations. You can read the response at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974334/20210229-FINAL_Selous_Response_O.pdf and the original report at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-our-shoes-understanding-the-needs-of-uk-armed-forces-families>

5. The South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

- 5.1.** The South West Partnership Board was chaired by SCC from its inaugural meeting in November 2019 until October 2021. At October's meeting Councillor Rod Williams handed over the Chair to a Member from Wiltshire Council, with Dorset Council taking on Vice-Chair. The purpose of the Board is to consistently improve delivery of the covenant across the region. It does this by developing our shared understanding of the data, shared best practice, aligned policy and processes (where appropriate for partner organisations) and some shared resource, where it is mutually advantageous.
- 5.2.** The Partnership Board is supported by an Officers Group from partner authorities. This group works at operational level to identify where better outcomes can be achieved, to align policies and, most importantly, to measure the value the partnership adds for its constituent authorities.
- 5.3.** Covid-19 continued to affect the use of the partnership's outreach vehicle this year, but since July 2021 a new Outreach Officer has been able to increase use of the vehicle. The vehicle can be booked by County and District Councils for events throughout the South West. It attended our conference in September 2021 and has been booked for the Somerset Armed Forces Day event on 2nd July 2022 at Vivary Park, Taunton.
- 5.4.** The Partnership has an app - 'Forces Connect South West'. Somerset is on the app, which signposts members of the Armed Forces community to the support available to them both locally and nationally. Click here to download the app through [Google Play](#) or [Apple store](#).
- 5.5.** You can find out more about 'Forces Connect South West' at <https://www.forcesconnectsouthwest.org.uk/>

6. Somerset Activities

- 6.1. 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 21st June by SCC Vice-Chair Councillor Mark Keating. He was joined by SCC Leader Councillor David Fothergill, Councillor Rod Williams and SCC Chief Executive Pat Flaherty. In line with Covid regulations in place at the time, the event was by invitation only. Senior Somerset figures attended the flag raising, including: Admiral (Retd) Ian Moncrieff, Deputy Lieutenant of Somerset; Rear Admiral Rhett Hatcher, National Hydrographer, UK Hydrographic Office; Commodore Niall Griffin MBE, Commanding Officer, RNAS Yeovilton; Brigadier (Retd) Richard Toomey CBE, County Colonel for Somerset; Lt Col Andy Dow, Commanding Officer 40 Commando Royal Marines; and Brigadier (Retd) Steve Hodder, Chief Executive, Wessex Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association. Councillor Rod Williams made a short speech reaffirming the commitment of Somerset County Council and the SAFC Partnership to support our Armed Forces community.
- 6.2. SAFC Partnership Annual Conference.** Following the relaxation of Covid restrictions, our Annual Conference was held at RNAS Yeovilton on 15th September 2021, by kind permission of the Commanding Officer of RNAS Yeovilton, Commodore Niall Griffin MBE. The morning focussed on the implications of the Armed Forces Bill for Somerset. The afternoon focussed on Somerset's recovery from Covid and the contribution of the Armed Forces community to that recovery. The conference's workshops provided an excellent framework for action in five themes: Partnership Working; Communications; Crisis Support; Prevention; and Better Transition from the Armed Forces into civil life. We will use these themes to focus action that SCC and the wider SAFC Partnership can take to improve delivery of the Covenant and to comply with the Armed Forces Bill.
- 6.3. 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. If you would like to be added to the mailing list please email: communities@somerset.gov.uk
- 6.4. Veterans Guaranteed Interview Scheme.** SCC launched the Veterans Guaranteed Interview Scheme during Armed Forces Week 2021. The scheme means that a veteran who has left the Armed Forces in the last five years – and their partner – will be guaranteed an interview with the authority if they apply and meet the essential criteria for the job.
- 6.5. Remembrance.** As well as the traditional Remembrance Day services held in parishes across Somerset, we have been told of special Remembrance Services at 40 Commando RM, in Vivary Park, Taunton and at the Somerset Wood, near Cheddon Fitzpaine and West Monkton, north east Taunton.

6.6. Remembrance Day is a tradition inaugurated in 1919 to remember the end of the First World War on 11th November 1918. We also remember members of the Armed Forces of the Commonwealth who lost their lives in the service of their country, or who were badly injured, in conflicts since 1918. There have been only two years between 1945 and 2020 in which a member of the Armed Forces has not been killed on operations - 1968 and 2016. Some of our badly injured veterans now are young men and women. We should honour their service and remember them all year round.

7. Health

7.1. The Somerset Health and Social Care Armed Forces Co-ordination Group.

The SAFC Partnership has worked closely with Somerset CCG and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust (SFT) to address the difficulty veterans and their immediate families can have in accessing healthcare, including mental healthcare. Our 2019 conference led to an informal joint SCC/NHS working group. In recognition of the growing interest in the group and its positive progress in 2021 the working group became a formal sub-group of the SAFC Partnership Executive Group. The progress made by this working group has been one of our biggest successes in 2021.

7.2. The NHS Armed Forces Forward View and The Nine Commitments.

The NHS's 'Healthcare for the Armed Forces community: a forward view' is part of the NHS Long Term Plan. The Forward View focuses on meeting the needs of regulars, reservists, veterans and their immediate families. It includes nine commitments to support the Armed Forces community. In Somerset, the co-ordination group described above has made a plan to ensure that the Somerset Integrated Care System (ICS) will meet the Nine Commitments. The Nine Commitments defines practical measures to improve access to healthcare, including mental healthcare, for the Armed Forces community. You can find the full NHS Armed Forces Forward View report at <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Healthcare-for-the-Armed-Forces-community-forward-view-March-2021.pdf>

8. Other Activities

8.1. Covenant Fund. 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/>

8.2. The MOD's Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (DERS). The DERS recognises employers which 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. 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

8.3. Army Engagement Presentation. On 23rd September, Colonel Neville Holmes MBE led a briefing by the Army Engagement Team for invited guests at The Canalside, Bridgwater. The briefing aimed to promote greater awareness and understanding of the Army, particularly among communities that have had relatively little exposure to the Army. The large audience asked a range of questions after the impressive presentation and was able to ask further questions informally to members of the Presentation Team. This annual Army Presentation is gaining a reputation in Somerset as an enjoyable and increasingly popular educational event.

9. Communications

9.1. SCC Communications and Press Team. We thank SCC's Communications and Press Team for supporting 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>

10. Background Papers

10.1. For information on the SAFC Partnership, including the SAFC Partnership Plan and its Annex A that shows the matrix of partner organisations and the six main areas of Covenant activity, visit www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant

10.2. For general information on the Armed Forces Covenant, visit www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/