

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 2021. 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 2022, following the local elections, Councillor Henry Hobhouse was appointed by the Leader as Armed Forces Champion and Chair of the SAFC Partnership. We thank the outgoing chair, Rod Williams for his guidance and support of the Partnership since 2017
- 2.3.** In March 2022, the SAFC Partnership’s Executive Group approved an update of the Partnership Plan with a refresh planned following vesting of the unitary authority.

3. Overview

- 3.1.** This year there has been a renewed focus on Partnership activities and celebrating the armed forces community and its contribution to Somerset. The highlight has been the Armed Forces Day events that took place in Taunton and South Somerset. The Partnership conference took place this October, with support from 40 Commando which hosted the event at Norton Manor Camp. It was fantastic to return to Norton Manor Camp for the first time since the pandemic and we are grateful for the continued support. More information on the Conference is in Section 6.
- 3.2.** This year, we have continued to strengthen collaboration with our NHS partners and are pleased that the creation of two posts within the NHS will further this work. An update on this group is later in this report.
- 3.3.** 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 Act.** The Armed Forces Act changes the status of the Covenant from being 'a promise from the nation' to having the force of law – a statutory duty. The Act requires those providing public services, including local government and the NHS, to have 'due regard' to the principles of the Covenant.
- 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. While draft statutory guidance has been produced we await final sign off through the parliamentary process, which is expected in late 2022. With this process complete the Statutory Duty will likely come into effect shortly afterwards. As the statutory duty comes into force, we will work across local government, the NHS and schools to ensure that policies and processes are updated to comply with the new legislation.
- 4.3. 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. The initial data has been released by the Office for National Statistics and can be found at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/armedforcescommunity/bulletins/ukarmedforcesveteransenglandandwales/census2021>. Further

data releases in 2023 will provide a more nuanced picture which will aid service planning and better provision of support for veterans.

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. The meeting is now chaired by Councillor Chris Williams of Wiltshire Council. The Board aims to consistently improve delivery of the covenant across the region. It does this by developing 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 to identify funding for the continuation of the outreach project.
- 5.3. Since July 2021 the Outreach Officer has been able to increase use of the Partnership outreach vehicle. The vehicle can be booked by County and District Councils and other partners for events throughout the South West. The calendar of events can be viewed at <https://www.forcesconnectsouthwest.org.uk/mobile-outreach/outreach-calendar>
- 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 20th June by SCC Chair Councillor Mike Best. He was joined by SCC Leader Councillor Bill Revans, SCC Deputy Council Leader Liz Leyshon and Armed Forces Champion Councillor Henry Hobhouse.
- 6.2. **Armed Forces Day events.** This year we provided small grants to support two Armed Forces Day events in Somerset to celebrate the Armed Forces Community. The first event was organised by Ark at Egwood in South Somerset. The event had a fantastic turnout and showed the excellent work that Ark does supporting the Armed Forces community. The second event

was the Somerset Armed Forces Day event at Vivary Park in Taunton with around 20,000 people attending through the day.

- 6.3. SAFC Partnership annual conference.** This year our Annual Conference was held at Norton Manor Camp on 11th October 2022, by kind permission of the Commanding Officer, Lt Col Andrew Dow. The morning focussed on local developments and organisations including Arc – Victory House Project and Somerset County Council discussing Family Hubs. The conference provided a welcome opportunity for organisations to discuss existing projects and new opportunities to work together to address any gaps. The afternoon included presentations from Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, Ark at Egwood and Forgotten Veterans UK.
- 6.4. Partnership updates.** A main effort of the SAFC Partnership is to enable communication with and between 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
- 6.5. 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. Since the scheme was introduced SCC has received just over 150 applications through this route. While some of these are still in process over 20 people have been hired through the scheme.
- 6.6. Remembrance.** The traditional Remembrance Day services were held in parishes across Somerset including a service at the Somerset Wood, near Taunton.
- 6.7. We are working through the implications of Local Government Reorganisation** for SCC and AFC Partnership members. Somerset Council will need to sign the updated Covenant to maintain its visible commitment and to sustain the current Silver Defence Employer Recognition Scheme. The Silver award is in place until 2024, by which time we hope Somerset Council will have developed additional support mechanisms for ex-military employees to enable an application for Gold recognition. The unitary authority will address the loss of Armed Forces Champions in district councils by identifying an appropriate mechanism for representation at either geographical level or aligned with core services.

7. Health

- 7.1. The NHS Armed Forces Forward View and The Nine Commitments.** The NHS '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 noted below has developed a plan to ensure the Somerset Integrated Care System (ICS) will meet the Commitments. The Nine Commitments identifies 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 [here](#).
- 7.2. The Somerset Health and Social Care Armed Forces Co-ordination Group.** The SAFC Partnership worked with Somerset CCG and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust (SFT) and in 2021 the co-ordination group became a formal sub-group of the SAFC Partnership Executive Group. To further support the work of the group, two roles are being recruited within Somerset NHS. These roles will work across the system to provide capacity and leadership to the workstreams underpinning the Nine Commitments.

8. Other Activities

- 8.1. Covenant Fund.** The Covenant Fund is allocated £10m per year nationally by the Treasury, enabling AFC partners and voluntary organisations to bid for funding to improve services for the military community. 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, by helping employees to serve as reservists, by employing veterans, or by through other mechanisms which support the military community. In Somerset, the DERS is managed by Wessex Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (WRFCA), based in Taunton. The scheme offers Bronze, Silver and Gold levels of recognition for levels of support. Somerset County Council holds the Silver award. More information on the scheme and how supporting the Armed Forces community can benefit the county's businesses is [available here](#).

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/