

Annual Report of the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

Lead Member: Councillor Henry Hobhouse – Chair of the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

Division and Local Member: All

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1. Introduction

- 1.1.** This Report updates Council on the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant (SAFC) Partnership since the last Annual Report to Somerset County Council in November 2022. This Report is for information.
- 1.2.** The purpose of the SAFC Partnership is to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant in Somerset. Somerset Council (SC) leads and provides light-touch support to the Partnership.
- 1.3.** The Armed Forces Covenant

‘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.** Somerset County Council along with Somerset’s District Councils pledged support for the Covenant on 20 February 2012. This commitment was reaffirmed by Somerset Council during Armed Forces Week in June 2023.

- 2.2. Officer support for the SAFC Partnership is provided by Jeff Brown, Service Manager, Stronger Communities and Kirsty Conger, Stronger Communities Officer, in the Partnerships & Localities directorate.
- 2.3. In May 2022, following the local election, Councillor Henry Hobhouse was appointed by the Leader as Armed Forces Champion and Chair of the SAFC Partnership. He is supported by three Armed Forces Champions – councillors Mark Healey, Andy Kendall and Lucy Trimnell.

3. Overview

- 3.1. This year there has been a focus on ensuring that previously-established Armed Forces-friendly policies remained in place with the move to the new unitary council. This culminated in the Armed Forces Week re-signing of the Covenant pledge.
- 3.2. Another key aspect of the work has been supporting activity in the wider Somerset system. This year we have further strengthened collaboration with our NHS partners, working closely with two new Armed Forces project posts that sit within the ICB.
- 3.3. Since vesting day there has been improvement in the referral routes and co-ordination of support for veterans facing homelessness. This will be an area of further focus in the coming year.
- 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 Act.** The Armed Forces Act came into force in late 2022 and changed the status of the Covenant from ‘a promise from the nation’ to having the force of law – a statutory duty. The Act requires those providing certain public services, including local government and NHS bodies, to have ‘due regard’ to the principles of the Covenant.
- 4.2. The new status of the Armed Forces Covenant currently applies to aspects of health, housing and education. The statutory guidance can be viewed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/armed-forces-covenant-duty-statutory-guidance>

4.3. In light of this change, training was delivered to Councillors to improve awareness of the Armed Forces Covenant as well as the new Duty. Training was also provided to town and parish councils. Nationally-produced training modules have been uploaded to the Council's online learning platform to ensure that refresher training is available. There is a short introduction on the [Armed Forces Covenant and the Statutory duty](#) and a more in-depth training module that explains [the Covenant and the impacts of service life on serving personnel and their families](#).

4.4. Operation Fortitude. A national veteran's homelessness pathway has been launched by the government. Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and the organisations working with them are encouraged to contact the Op Fortitude hotline on 0800 952 0774 or through a secure web portal at riv.org.uk/opfortitude. Further information can be found at www.riverside.org.uk/care-and-support/veterans/.

5. The South West Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

5.1. The South West Partnership 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 Officer Group from partner authorities. This group works at operational level to identify where better outcomes can be achieved and to align policies.

5.3. The Partnership has an app - 'Forces Connect South West'. Somerset information is on the app, which signposts members of the Armed Forces community to the support available to them both locally and nationally. The app is available to download through [Google Play](#) or [Apple store](#).

5.4. More information about 'Forces Connect South West' is available at <https://www.forcesconnectsouthwest.org.uk/>

6. Somerset Activities

6.1. Raising 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 19th June. The event was hosted by Deputy Chair of Somerset Council, Liz Leyshon and Mayor of Taunton, Cllr Nick O'Donnell. The flag was raised by WO1 RSM Duncan Maddocks. Flags were flown at Somerset Council's main offices leading up to National Armed Forces Day on Saturday, 24 June.

6.2. Re-signing of the Armed Forces Covenant. Alongside the flag raising, the Council also reaffirmed its commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant. The

new Covenant pledges were signed by Councillor Liz Leyshon and National Hydrographer Rear Admiral Rhett Hatcher. You can view the new Covenant pledge [here](#). Re-signing the covenant enabled the Silver Award of the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme to transfer to Somerset Council.

- 6.3. Armed Forces Day events.** This year we provided a small grant to support the Armed Forces Day event at Vivary Park to celebrate the Armed Forces Community. The event attracted 31,000+ people. On the day, Somerset Council had a team in attendance providing information from Cultural Services, Libraries, Somerset Music Hub, Road Safety Awareness, Communications, Public Health and Customer Services. Executive members were also in attendance.
- 6.4. SAFC Partnership annual conference.** The conference will be held at Canalside Conference Centre, Bridgwater on Tuesday 17th October. The event is jointly organised by Somerset Council and NHS Somerset. Organisations and individuals with an interest and stake in the welfare and support of the military community are invited to attend the day which will run from 10.30am (arrival from 9.30) till 4pm. To secure a place please complete the booking form by Friday 29th September 2023:
<https://forms.office.com/e/ZwEZ3aWPRW>
- 6.5. Partnership updates.** A main effort of the SAFC Partnership is to enable communication with and between members of the Partnership. Since 2017 we have produced 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
- 6.6. Veterans' Guaranteed Interview Scheme.** Somerset County Council 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 – is guaranteed an interview with the authority if they meet the essential criteria for the role. In the last year (July 2022 – July 2023) the Council has received just over 150 applications through this route. While some of these are still in process just over 20 people have been hired through the scheme.

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. 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 [here](#).

- 7.2.** To support and implement the work to meet the Nine Commitments, two new roles were recruited within Somerset NHS. These roles will work across the system to provide capacity and leadership to the workstreams underpinning the Nine Commitments. As part of this, engagement work with the armed forces community is underway to understand the health needs and identify gaps and opportunities for the system to work better together.
- 7.3.** Work is underway to develop two Armed Forces Hubs. Each hub will have a dedicated worker who will work in partnership to provide pathways for individuals from the Armed Forces community and to strengthen the networks of support. NHS funding to support the hubs has been agreed for 3 years.
- 7.4.** Considering the increased commitment and investment from the NHS it is important that Somerset Council reviews its approach to meeting the needs of the armed forces community, to match the resource and ambition of the NHS as an equal partner in the ICS.

8. Other Activities

- 8.1. Covenant Fund.** The Covenant Fund is allocated £10m each year by the Treasury and provides grants enabling AFC partners and voluntary organisations to improve services for the military community. Further information on the Covenant Fund and its current funding programmes 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 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 employers recognition at Bronze, Silver and Gold levels depending on the support they provide. Somerset Council holds the Silver award and has the ambition to go for Gold as resources allow. More information on the scheme and how supporting the Armed Forces community can benefit the Council and the county's businesses is [available here](#).

9. Communications

- 9.1. SCC Communications and Press Team.** We thank the Council'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 that shows the matrix of partner organisations and the six main areas of Covenant activity, visit www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant or contact the Stronger Communities Team at communities@somerset.gov.uk

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