
Annual Report of the Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

Chair of Committee: Councillor Henry Hobhouse, Somerset Armed Forces Member Champion

Executive Members: not applicable.

Local Members and Divisions affected: All.

Executive Director: Alyn Jones, Executive Director Strategy Workforce Localities

Executive Summary

This report updates Council on the work of the Somerset Armed Forces Covenant (SAFC) Partnership since the last Annual Report to Somerset Council in September 2023.

This report is for information.

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.

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.

In late 2022 the Armed Forces Act 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.

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>

Issues for consideration

Considering the increased commitment and investment from the NHS (detailed in the report) 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.

Identifying Officer Champions as key points of contact for members of the Armed Forces community particularly in the ‘in scope’ areas of the Armed Forces Statutory

Duty would help ensure the Council is well placed to meet its obligations under the Statutory Duty.

There is currently no formal oversight of the council's AFC work beyond this annual report. It is recommended that Children and Families and Adults and Health Scrutiny Committees receive reports on the council's AFC work. This will be taken forward once the new structure is in place.

Reasons for Proposals

To strengthen the Council's approach to supporting the Armed Forces community and delivering on its Statutory Duty. The changes would also ensure greater awareness of the implications of the duty and a more effective, joined up approach across council services and the wider system.

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Main report and supporting information.



Background and purpose of report

1. Somerset County Council along with Somerset's District Councils pledged support for the Covenant in February 2012. This commitment was reaffirmed by Somerset Council during Armed Forces Week in June 2023.
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 service.
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.

National Developments

4. **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.
5. Nationally produced training modules have been uploaded to the Council's online learning platform to ensure that refresher training is available for staff and members. 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](#). Other modules on specific aspects of the duty are being developed and will be added to the learning centre as they become available. We thank the HR Learning and Development team for their ongoing support.
6. **Armed Forces Veteran ID Cards launch.** A new digital service was launched in early 2024 to enable veterans who left the Armed Forces prior to December 2018 to verify their veteran status and receive a Veteran Card in the post.
7. The Veteran Card will provide veterans with a clear recognition of service, a tangible link to the Armed Forces, and allow them to easily verify their veteran status to access support and services from government, charities, and local authorities. To apply for a Veteran ID card, visit: [Apply for an HM Armed Forces Veteran Card - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

The Southwest Armed Forces Covenant Partnership

1. The Southwest Partnership Board aims to improve consistent delivery of the covenant across the region. The Partnership Board is supported by an Officer

- Group from member authorities. This group works at operational level to identify where better outcomes can be achieved and to align policies.
8. The Partnership has populated information into the Forces Connect app to help the Armed Forces community find support available both locally and nationally. The app is available to download through [Google Play](#) or [Apple store](#).
 9. This information is also available to access on the newly launched Forces Connect website <https://www.forcesconnect.co.uk/>

Somerset Activities

10. **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 24th June. The event was hosted by Chair of Somerset Council, Cllr Mike Best and Mayor of Taunton, Cllr Vanessa Garside. The flag was raised by Major Paris Roberts, 40 Commando RM. Flags were flown at Somerset Council's main offices leading up to National Armed Forces Day on Saturday, 29th June.
11. **SAFC Partnership annual conference.** Last year we jointly organised the conference with NHS Somerset ICB. The event was attended by nearly 100 people and the feedback received was very positive.
12. Taking place at Canalside Conference Centre, Bridgwater on Tuesday 23rd October, the event will again be 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 10.15am (arrival from 9.15) till 4pm. To secure a place please complete the booking form by Monday 30th September <https://forms.office.com/e/TEytXVjMfz>
13. **Bus Route improvements.** A partnership of Yeovil & District Chamber CIC, Somerset Bus Users Partnership, Buses of Somerset, RNAS Yeovilton, The Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm Museum, Somerset Council and Wessex RFCA, has worked to help improve connectivity to RNAS Yeovilton. Select journeys on the 54-bus route will now include a stop at Yeovilton Air Base, providing convenient access for both employees on base and visitors to the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm Museum. Special thanks to Wessex RFCA for convening the group following conversations with the base.
14. **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. This year we refreshed the format of the update and began requesting updates for inclusion, which has improved information sharing. If you would like to be added to the mailing list, please email communities@somerset.gov.uk
15. **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. Following the move to unitary council the scheme remains in place. In the last year (July 2023 – July 2024) the Council has received just over 170 applications through this route. While some are still in process, 12 people have been employed through the scheme.

16. Highly successful **Armed Forces Day events** were held in Bridgwater and Taunton this year. The Bridgwater event was organised by the local Royal British Legion branch while the Taunton event – which had countywide reach – was organised through a dedicated social enterprise. Each attracted a great deal of interest and raised the profile of the AF Community and the many organisations which provide support. The events also celebrated the armed forces' contribution to Somerset.

Health

17. **Armed Forces Engagement Report.** As part of the Somerset Integrated Care Board's Armed Forces work, the team conducted group and one to one engagement sessions during June and December 2023. The feedback will help NHS Somerset ICB to identify potential areas for development, leading to an improved offer of care, treatment, and support. The [full report is here](#), including the key findings from the engagement work, what respondents suggested NHS Somerset could do to make improvements, and what action will be taken or recommended to facilitate this.
18. **Armed Forces Hubs Launch in Somerset.** The Hubs being developed in Taunton and South Somerset are open to all members of the Armed Forces community including those serving, their families and veterans. They provide information to help members of the armed forces community navigate the system and find the services and support they need. One hub is at Arc in Taunton alongside the military homeless service (Victory House) and the other is in a rural setting at Ark at Egwood. NHS Somerset has agreed funding for link workers in each hub for three years.
19. To access support via the hubs contact either Jon at Ark at Egwood – jon@arkategwood.com Tel: 07759 005067 or Louis at Arc in Taunton – armedforces@arcinspire.co.uk Tel: 07376 090383 or contact your GP, health coach or village agent.
20. The hubs have been shortlisted for the HSJ (Health Service Journal) Awards. The work was also recognised by Amanda Pritchard, Chief Executive, NHS England when she visited Somerset and met the teams involved.
21. Find out more: [Armed Forces Hubs in Somerset - NHS Somerset ICB](#)
22. **Armed Forces Outreach Service.** To extend the reach of the hubs an outreach service pilot is currently running at Westlands Entertainment Venue in Yeovil and Victoria Park Community Centre in Bridgwater. These sessions will run monthly until February 2025 and bring together representatives of different agencies as well as the armed forces link workers. The aim is to better meet the needs in the area and assess the case for longer term investment. Further information [Yeovil Outreach Service](#) and [Bridgwater Outreach Service](#)

23. **GPs Veteran Friendly Accreditation.** At time of writing, 97.5% of Somerset's GP Practices are accredited by the Royal College of GPs as Veteran Friendly. Please encourage your contacts to let their surgery know if they are a military veteran. If a GP practice or PCN would like to know more about the Veteran Friendly Accreditation please visit Veterans' healthcare toolkit: [Course: Veterans' Health Hub | RCGP Learning](#) or contact Teri Underwood teri.underwood@nhs.net

Background Papers

24. For information on the SAFC Partnership visit www.somerset.gov.uk/forcescovenant or contact the Stronger Communities Team at communities@somerset.gov.uk
25. For general information on the Armed Forces Covenant, visit www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

26. Summarise links that the recommendations have to the Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan.
27. Describe how the proposed decision supports or furthers the Council's priorities or impacts on the delivery of these priorities.

Other options considered.

28. Not applicable

Key considerations for the Council

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

29. This report has not been considered by a scrutiny committee.

Consultation and feedback

30. No consultation has been undertaken on this report.

Financial and Risk Implications

31. There are no immediate financial implications from this report.
32. There are no immediate risk implications from this report.

Current Risk Score:

Likelihood		Impact		Risk Score	
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Projected risk score if recommended actions are agreed and delivered:

Likelihood		Impact		Risk Score	
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Legal and Procurement Implications

33. There are no legal implications in this report.

34. There are no procurement implications in this report.

HR / Workforce Implications

35. There are no workforce implications in this report.

Equalities Implications

36. There are no equalities implications in this report.

Community Safety Implications

37. There are no community safety implications in this report.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

38. There are no climate change or sustainability implications in this report.

Health and Safety Implications

39. There are no health and safety implications in this report.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

40. Effective delivery of the council's duties and commitments under the AF Covenant should deliver:

- positive impacts on health and wellbeing
- positive impacts on preventing ill-health (physical and mental health)
- positive impacts on reducing health and social inequalities.

Social Value

41. There are no social value implications in this report.

Background Papers

42. None

Appendices

None