



**Surrey County Council
Armed Forces Covenant**

Audit of Progress

January 2018

Independent Audit by Brigadier Paul Evans OBE DL

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Armed Forces Covenant	4
2.1 Key Principles	4
2.2 Audit Comments	4
2.3 Proposed Action	5
3. SCC Armed Forces Community Covenant	5
3.1 Armed Forces Community Covenant	5
3.2 SCC Commitments	5
3.3 Audit Comments	6
3.4 Proposed Action	6
4. SCC Armed Forces Covenant - Governance	6
4.1 Surrey Civilian Military Partnership Board	6
4.2 Audit Comments	7
4.3 Proposed Actions	8
4.4 SCMPB Task Groups	9
4.5 Audit Comments	9
4.6 Proposed Actions	10
4.7 Armed Forces Champions	10
4.8 Audit Comments	10
4.9 Proposed Actions	11
4.10 Transformation within SCC	11
4.11 Audit Comments	12
4.12 Proposed Actions	13
5. SCC Leadership Role	13
5.1 Boroughs and Districts	13
5.2 Audit Comments	13
5.3 Proposed Actions	13
5.4 Forces Connect South East	13
5.5 Audit Comments	14
5.6 Proposed Actions	14
6. Engagement and Communications	15
6.1 Engagement	15
6.2 Audit Comments	15
6.3 Proposed Actions	15

6.4 Communications	16
6.5 Audit Comments	16
6.6 Proposed Actions	17
6.7 Contact Centre	17
6.8 Audit Comments	17
6.9 Proposed Actions	17
7. Employer Recognition Scheme	18
7.1 Gold Award	18
7.2 Audit Comments	18
7.3 Proposed Actions	19
8. Concluding Comments	19
9. Recommended Actions	20
9.1 Short Term	20
9.2 Medium Term	21
9.3 Long Term	22

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The Chairman of Surrey County Council (SCC) has agreed that it would now be an appropriate time to conduct an initial audit of the commitments made by SCC when signing the Armed Forces Community Covenant in 2012¹. The Chairman considers it important to confirm the extent of the progress made to date and the actions necessary to demonstrate continuous development and improvement. The Chairman remains determined to keep the Armed Forces Covenant current by focusing on the future needs of Surrey based Service personnel, both Regular and Reserve, their families and veterans as well as Cadets. He has further stipulated that the audit, which should as far as possible be evidence based, should also review the structure of the organisations established under the Surrey Civilian Military Partnership Board (SCMPB) to meet SCC current and future Covenant obligations.

It is planned that, following this initial audit, future audits will be conducted with more rigour. There is also an expectation that this and certainly future audit reports will be shared with the MoD, 11 Infantry Brigade and Boroughs and Districts, particularly Armed Forces Champions.

2. Armed Forces Covenant

2.1 Key Principles

The Armed Forces Covenant includes two key principles²:

- No member of the Armed Forces should face disadvantage in the provision of public and commercial services compared to any other citizen.
- In some circumstances special treatment for the Armed Forces may be appropriate, especially for the injured or bereaved.

2.2 Audit Comments

SCC has acknowledged that, where it is appropriate and justified, members of the Armed Forces Community may be considered to receive special treatment for example in supporting job applications from ex-service personnel. SCC recognise that former Service personnel have talents, knowledge and experience that are likely to be beneficial to the Council, particularly in terms of their communication skills, motivation, excellent problem solving abilities, team working and leadership abilities. More importantly, SCC has worked hard to ensure that all members of the Armed Forces community are not disadvantaged in any way and continue to

¹ SCC Armed Forces Community Covenant – Signed document

² Armed Forces Covenant

strive to ensure that they are made aware of what public and commercial services are available to them and how best they can be accessed. SCC has also offered training to support partners of Service personnel, with help to build their confidence, their experience in CV writing and the job application process. It is clear that SCC is now displaying a consistent approach to ensuring that the Armed Forces Covenant key principles underpin all the work they do in support of the Armed Forces community.

2.3 Proposed Action

From time to time, it would be both appropriate and beneficial to remind staff, who interface and engage with the Military community, of the positive approach the Council is taking and the continuing importance of delivering the Armed Forces Covenant key principles.

3. SCC Armed Forces Community Covenant

3.1 Armed Forces Community Covenant

Following the launch of the Armed Forces Covenant, which set the moral obligation between the Nation, the Government and the Armed Forces, the MoD introduced a Corporate Covenant designed to ensure that the Armed Forces community face no disadvantage in their engagement with business. At the same time the MoD introduced a Community Covenant to empower local authorities and communities to support members of the Armed Forces community and improve the public's understanding of issues that affect them. Following a review of the brand, the MoD decided to remove the distinction between the three elements of the Covenant in favour of a single brand, Armed Forces Covenant.

3.2 SCC Commitments

When signing the then Armed Forces Community Covenant, SCC committed the Council to a number of specific commitments:

- To deliver the welfare needs of Armed Forces personnel, veterans and their families within Surrey.
- To consider the needs of the Armed Forces community in future service and infrastructure planning.
- To provide leadership within the County to ensure that Reservists employees are valued for their contribution.
- To provide and publicise effective customer services.
- To provide support to activities that recognise and remember the role and contribution of the Armed Forces and veterans.

3.3 Audit Comments

These commitments, highlighted within a 2016 Resident Experience Board Report ³ remain the main focus of effort for SCC, particularly for the two SCMPB Task Groups and subsequently the Forces Connect South East (SE) work. It will remain important to monitor success on a continuous basis, share appropriate best practice and ensure that support for the Armed Forces community is embedded within the DNA of the Council and, by example and leadership, within the Surrey Boroughs and Districts. It is also recognised that the annual Surrey Armed Forces Covenant Conference and annual successes document are both excellent ways to report on progress made during the previous year. This is good practice which should continue in the future.

3.4 Proposed Action

SCC and SCMPB must ensure that the future audit process is designed not only to record progress against commitments made but also to ensure that there is continuous improvement, to a point where additional commitments may be included, thus placing emphasis on what SCC is 'good for' as well as what it is currently and previously 'good at'.

4. SCC Armed Forces Covenant - Governance

4.1 Surrey Civilian Military Partnership Board

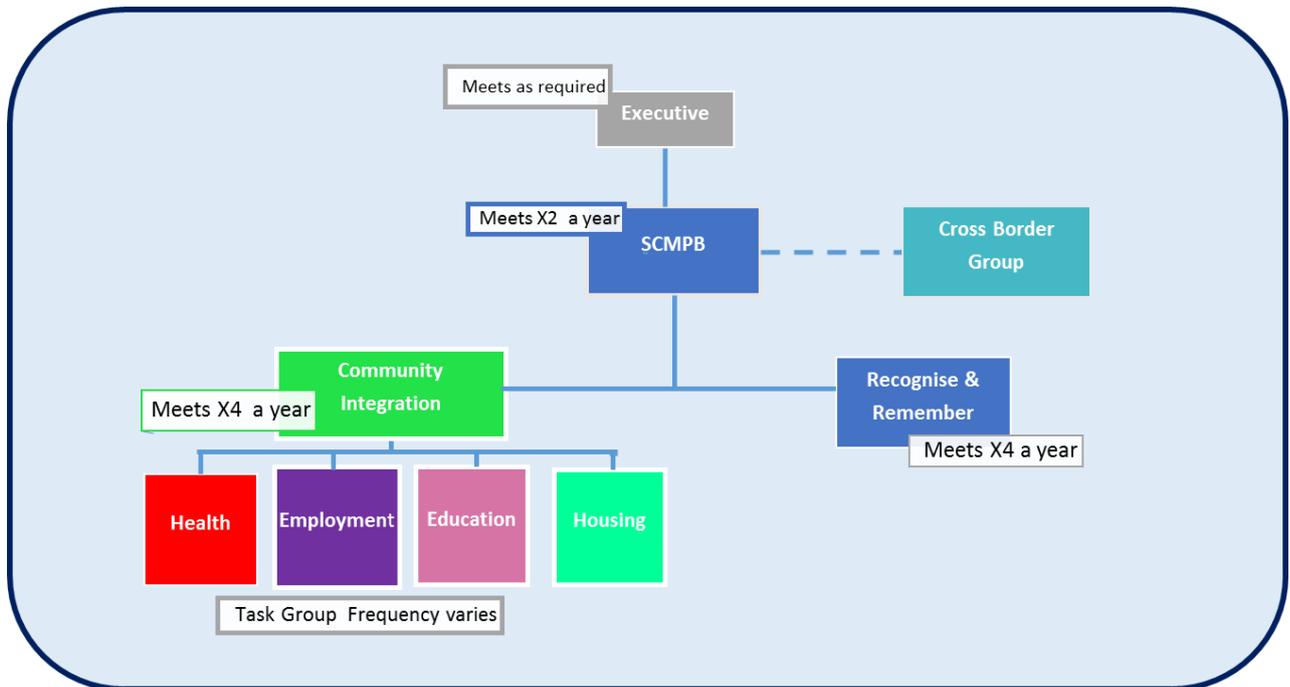
SCC recognised that, in order to deliver the Armed Forces Covenant and specifically their commitments, responsibilities and obligations, they had to establish strong and effective governance arrangements. Their immediate priority was to form a Surrey Civilian Military Partnership Board (SCMPB) chaired by the Chairman of the County Council comprising experienced representatives from the military and civilian communities, including the Police, Fire and Rescue Service, business and the main Service charities. Surrey County Council's Community Partnership and Safety Service support the work of SCMPB and lead the implementation of the Covenant throughout the Council. This team has been awarded a Customer Service Excellence accreditation, which is a nationally recognised award for customer engagement excellence.

A SCMPB Executive Committee was also established, focused on specific issues and in particular the review of applications for grants from within the County for the MoD's Armed Forces Covenant Fund programme. SCC remain a strong supporter of this funded programme and, indeed, has positively encouraged organisations that have, or our planning to develop, effective interface relationships between the military and civilian communities to make an application. This approach has resulted in Surrey based projects gaining significant success both in terms of the quantity and value of awards. SCMPB Executive has clearly taken their responsibilities very

³ SCC Resident Experience Board Report – May 2016

seriously, to a point where only high quality and fully costed applications, that meet the awards criteria, receive the highest recommendation to the MoD. To date and since the start of the initiative in 2012, the MoD has funded Surrey based projects to a total value of £918,621. There are further applications currently in the process of being prepared.

The current SCC Armed Forces Covenant structure is shown diagrammatically below:



4.2 Audit Comments

The Community Partnership and Safety Service, comprising experienced staff, have worked with commendable enthusiasm and, quite rightly, deserve high praise for their efforts on behalf of SCC, particularly in terms of maintaining a consistent approach over the years. By way of example, they played a pivotal role in the planning and preparation of the recently successful Memorial Dedication for the 100 Surrey Fire Fighters who lost their lives in WW1 and WWII.

To highlight the value of the SCMPB Executive, their meeting held on 13 July 2017⁴ included an assessment of Armed Forces Covenant Fund applications to the MoD, a review of the SCMPB governance structure, an update on the progress of the SCC Armed Forces Covenant audit and a progress report following the launch of the Forces Connect SE programme.

Each year, SCMPB develops and publishes a list⁵ of their Armed Forces Covenant priorities for the coming twelve months. The list, which is more than just an amalgam of the Task Group Action Plans, includes measures to deliver key actions, deadlines

⁴ SCMPB Executive – 13 July 2017 – Briefing Pack

⁵ SCMPB Executive Priorities for 2017-2018

and a progress status. The actions for the period 2017 – 2018 are grouped under key headings:

- Engagement – To enable effective support and engagement between the Armed Forces and civilian communities, particularly through local authorities, in order to promote a greater understanding and awareness of issues affecting the Armed Forces community.
- SCC – To ensure effective and consistent delivery of the Covenant within the Council.
- Reservists and Former Service Personnel – To promote the benefits of employing Reservists and former Service personnel in Surrey.
- Veterans – to support veterans in Surrey and ensure that links to the Service charities as appropriate.
- Youth – Support South East Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (SERFCA) and 11 Brigade priorities relating to young people, particularly Cadets and to promote Cadet Adult volunteering initiatives.
- Governance – Ensure an effective operation and delivery structure to implement the Covenant.
- Recognition and Remembrance – Commemorate and celebrate key military events.

In addition, SCC have produced and published a comprehensive list⁶ of activities undertaken in 2016 – 2017 which serves to demonstrate the Council's continued commitment to the Covenant and their determination to maintain momentum by ensuring that support to the Armed Forces community remains at the forefront of the services they deliver.

The absolutely critical role and commitment of the SCC Chairman, as the SCMPB Chairman, should not be underestimated, particularly in terms of the Council's ability to deliver their Covenant commitments. Successive Chairmen have played a critical role in developing the reputation SCC currently enjoys with local Military commanders, SERFCA and the MoD.

4.3 Proposed Actions

Greater effort could be made to promote the Council's Armed Forces Covenant priorities for the coming years not only to SCC staff and the Boroughs and Districts but also to the Military, including the chain of command and particularly the Task Force Commanders. Members of the SCMPB Executive must retain a clear understanding that limited MoD funds will only be committed to the most deserving projects that have clear, measurable and delivery outcomes. The value of the

⁶ SCC – Summary of Activities 2016-2017

SCMPB Executive's comments on proposed bids to the Covenant Fund is recognised and consideration should be given to encouraging the MoD to ensure that applicants speak to the local Civilian Military Partnership Board prior to them completing a submission.

4.4 SCMPB Task Groups

Tasks Groups were created to deliver to the Armed Forces community the following fundamental facilities enjoyed by others within the County:

- Healthcare – The same standard of and access to healthcare.
- Education – Children should have the same standard of and access to education, including early year's services.
- Housing – The same access to social housing and other housing schemes and not be disadvantaged in that respect by the requirement for mobility whilst in Service.
- Benefits –The same access to benefits.
- Family Life – To sustain family life, family members should have the same access to childcare, training and employment opportunities.
- Transition – Support should be available for all Service personal in order to assist their transition from Service to civilian life.
- Support After Service – In accessing services, former members of the Armed Forces should expect the same level of support.
- Recognition – Appropriate recognition for the unique Service which they have given and continues to give to the Nation and the unlimited liability which Service personnel assume.
- Participation as Citizens – Able to participate as citizens.

4.5 Audit Comments

Minutes of the regular meetings of the Task Groups⁷ confirm the effort that has been made to focus attention on key programmes that have the best possible prospect of being delivered. The Task Groups' work is guided by their Action Plans⁸ which are reviewed regularly to ensure that their efforts remain relevant and that progress is maintained. The Task Group Chairman continue to report progress at all SCMPB and SCMPB Executive meetings.

⁷ Current SCMPB Task Group Minutes

⁸ Current SCMPB Task Group Action Plans

4.6 Proposed Actions

Given that the Task Groups have been a demonstrable success, SCMPB could now consider amending the structure with a possible outcome being a reduction to a single Task Group, to better reflect a natural change of emphasis and success over the past five years. Such a move should be seen as a clear manifestation of real progress. Thought should be given to the possibility of subsuming the Task Groups responsibilities within a revamped SCMPB Executive, with appropriately revised Terms of Reference.

4.7 Armed Forces Champions

SCC appreciated very quickly that, for Armed Forces matters, there was a compelling need to develop resilient relationships with the 11 Boroughs and Districts of Surrey not only to promote effective communications but also to identify and resolve issues at a local level. The County Council and all Boroughs and Districts agreed to introduce Armed Forces Champions, who were already elected Councillors in various roles including Chairman, Executive Member, Leader and those with a keen interest in the Armed Forces. Their role, which was originally to raise the profile and needs of the Armed Forces community within the Council and local authority area, has matured considerably over time to a point where there is now a complete understanding that the Champions play a pivotal role within their communities and in maintaining the strongest possible links with the newly created Task Force Commanders who have been given specific community integration responsibilities by their military chain of command. Many of the Boroughs and Districts have established Armed Forces Panels to support the work of the Armed Forces Champions and to monitor the implementation of Covenant commitments locally. A job description⁹ for the Armed Forces Champions, which has been developed within the SCMPB Recognise and Remember Task Group and approved by SCMPB, has been recognised as best practice by the MoD and shared with other Counties. The job description has been updated recently to reflect slight changes in the role of the Champions.

4.8 Audit Comments

Establishing Armed Forces Champions and Task Force Commanders has, without doubt, improved civilian and military awareness and integration. This is evidenced in the military support to civic events throughout the County, for example Remembrance Day parades and Armed Forces Flag raising events. There is also clear evidence of the enthusiasm of Boroughs and Districts to recognise the contribution the military are making within the community, for example Freedom Parades in Woking and Guildford and the successful Service and Parade hosted by Mole Valley to bid farewell to DMRC Headley Court.

To enhance links between the Armed Forces Champions and the Task Force Commanders, SCMPB agreed to host regular meetings with an agenda focused on strengthening relationships and communication, charting success, identifying areas where improvements can be achieved and agreeing priorities and actions for the

⁹ Surrey Armed Forces Champions – Job Description

coming months. SCMPB produced conference notes, including a list of key points¹⁰ made during table discussions. The list is reviewed at subsequent conferences to confirm the level of progress made against the issues discussed.

4.9 Proposed Actions

Following agreement, the revised roles and responsibilities for the Armed Forces Champions should be circulated to all Boroughs and Districts and offered as best practice to the MoD and other counties. SCMPB should accept a responsibility to review the actions from the Armed Forces Champions and Task Force Commanders meetings and any other specific meetings and seminars organised to meet the obligations agreed within the current and any revised SCC Armed Forces Covenants.

4.10 Transformation within SCC

SCC education, highways, children, adults and human resources departments have been encouraged to identify a member of staff to act as their military point of contact (Service Champion). Individuals come together to review needs and report progress within their respective Departments. SCC has also been working closely with managers in Adult Social Care, Social Workers and Contact Centre staff to train them and raise the awareness of the important role the Service charities provide in support of veterans.

Impressively, the Human Resources (HR) Department has recognised the need to improve how current and potential Armed Forces employees are supported by the Council. They have developed an Armed Forces Employment Work Plan¹¹ which includes a series of deadlines to complete the work. The main elements of this challenging Plan, which will culminate in the introduction of an HR best practice policy, are:

- Supporting Reservists deployed on active service, on their return to work and in their day to day lives.
- Attracting former Service personnel, including those who have held senior positions, to apply to work in SCC and support their applications for employment, while maintaining effective links with the MoD's Career Transition Partnership initiative.
- Ensuring that SCC develop a culture of supporting the Armed Forces community by identifying and removing any stigma.
- Sharing the Armed Forces HR best practice policy across the County with the District and Borough Councils and, where appropriate, with other counties.

¹⁰ Military Task Force Commanders/Armed Forces Champions – Conference notes

¹¹ Armed Forces Employment Work Plan 2017-2018

4.11 Audit Comments

SCC have prepared a dossier of case studies within their annual 'Successes' document¹² which they have shared with the MoD and more widely with the civilian and military communities within the County. Within the 2016-2017 document SCC are able to record specific success in:

- The education of young people – a regular newspaper containing guidance for schools with Service children, an annual census of the number of Service children in Surrey and establishing strong links with local Cadet units.
- Employment – promoting the Reserves, Employer Recognition Scheme Awards and discounts to the Armed Forces community.
- Housing – supporting the exemption to the Local Connection criteria in the Housing Allocation Scheme for Armed Forces personnel.
- Health, wellbeing and welfare – supporting the needs of military young carers and the training of staff who operate the Contact Centre as well as creating an Armed Forces Lead Network within each of Surrey's Clinical Commissioning Groups.
- Recognition and remembrance – support to the "Surrey in the Great War" war memorials initiative and numerous public military events, including during Armed Forces Week and Remembrance events
- Local authorities – developing effective cross border relationships with neighbouring Councils and the launch of the Forces Connect SE work to ensure that the key Covenant requirements and objectives are embedded within the mainstream service delivery through the sharing of best practice.
- Conferences and seminars – supporting an annual Covenant conference, twice yearly Armed Forces Champions and Task Force Commanders meetings and hosting specific events when required, for example a meeting of military welfare professionals.

Additionally, Surrey has been recognised at a national level for providing good practice, and has had for the past two years case studies included within the National Armed Forces Covenant Annual report¹³, which is debated in Parliament. Surrey was also interviewed as part of the Local Government Association and Forces in Mind Trust Research looking at how best to implement the Covenant within local authorities. Best practice from Surrey was highlighted within the 'Our Community Our Covenant'¹⁴ report.

¹² SCMPB – Armed Forces Covenant Successes 2016-2017

¹³ Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, Ministry of Defence

¹⁴ Our Community – Our Covenant, Forces in Mind Trust

4.12 Proposed Actions

Continuous effort, monitoring and reporting will be necessary to ensure that the Armed Forces Employment Work Plan is effectively delivered and communicated to Armed Forces employees. Continuing to capture and publicise case studies will remain important not only to confirm progress but also to highlight the genuine benefit from taking a fully integrated approach.

5. SCC Leadership Role

5.1 Boroughs and Districts

Although the Boroughs and Districts are autonomous in terms of decision making, SCC has, for Armed Forces matters, consistently assumed a positive leadership role. SCC has encouraged for them to enter into individual Armed Forces Covenant arrangements while providing coordination of appropriate initiatives, particularly where it is beneficial to share best practice, an example being the Roles and Responsibilities of the Armed Forces Champions.

5.2 Audit Comments

All 11 Boroughs and Districts have signed individual Armed Forces Covenants as have a number of companies within the County. SCC, working in close partnership with the MoD's Defence Relationship Management team, are proactively encouraging companies and other organisations to sign Covenants. Surrey Police and The Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner have recently signed individual Covenants with the MoD.

5.3 Proposed Actions

Benefit would be gained from receiving from SERFCA/DRM a register of organisations and companies who have signed individual Covenants and those who have received one of the MoD's Employer Recognition Scheme awards. Sight of such a register would enable the SCMPB to track and record progress and, more importantly, to target effort in support of a continuous improvement programme.

5.4 Forces Connect South East

Taking a wider perspective and at the same time acknowledging their leadership role, SCC recognised that there was an opportunity to work with adjacent counties and authorities, primarily to improve the understanding staff have of their responsibilities towards Armed Forces personnel, veterans and their families. Having secured the support of Surrey Boroughs and Districts, East Sussex, West Sussex, Kent and Hampshire County Councils, Brighton and Hove and Medway Councils, RBL, SSAFA and the Sussex Armed Forces Network, SCC took their thinking to the MoD in the form of an application for funds from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund.

They successfully gained an award of £321,000 which included £40,000 to support the roll out of best practice to other counties. MoD funding will be used to develop training packages for front-line staff and increasing information and referral pathways.

The project known as Forces Connect South East (SE)¹⁵ has the aim of:

- Promoting a greater understanding and awareness of the issues affecting the Armed Forces Community within public authorities to ensure the Covenant is embedded and mainstreamed in service delivery, through sharing and building on best practice.

5.5 Audit Comments

The project is now underway and is being well led by SCC who have introduced appropriate governance arrangements to ensure that the two year programme is delivered to time and cost and that resources are correctly apportioned and effectively managed. The Member Board which has been established is chaired by the Chairman of SCC, and quarterly returns are made to the MoD to report on progress and spend. An external evaluation specification is currently out to tender which will provide an independent view on the outcomes of the project. The authorities who have committed to the project have agreed to work to achieve a number of specific outcomes:

- Having a good understanding of the needs of the Armed Forces community and the expectations associated with effective delivery of the Covenant.
- Clear integrated pathways that ensure the Armed Forces community benefit from improved access and signposting to relevant information, advice, guidance and support to ensure no disadvantage.
- Ensuring that a partnership approach between the Armed Forces community and local authorities is embedded within their ways of working.
- Ensuring that the delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant within public sector organisations across the South-East region is embedded and sustained.
- Reducing, for the Armed forces community, any disadvantage in accessing important public services such as housing, schools and adult social care.

5.6 Proposed Actions

Agreed outcomes from the programme must be monitored on a regular basis to ensure that they remain relevant and that consistent and effective progress continues to be made. It is suggested that a continuous audit will also be required, particularly to identify and share best practice, which in some cases may well be outside the scope of the project. Ultimately SCC will be required to confirm to the

¹⁵ Forces Connect South East - Overview

MoD that the project is not only delivering genuine benefit in terms of the performance of staff but also and, perhaps more importantly, that the Armed Forces community is much more effectively supported across the South East and, increasingly, given the additional funding from the MoD, across the United Kingdom. Clear evidence of success will need to be gathered to support publicity which the MoD will no doubt wish to assemble to confirm the value of the Armed Forces Covenant Fund. Compelling evidence will also be necessary in the event that a further application for funding becomes justified.

6. Engagement and Communications

6.1 Engagement

SCMPB has consistently recognised the importance of bringing the civilian and military communities together in order to identify, discuss and where possible resolve key integration issues. An annual conference¹⁶, targeted seminars and regular meetings between the military Task Force Commanders and the Armed Forces Champions have done much to improve the general understanding of the challenges faced by the military community and a greater awareness of the support that is currently available and how to access that support. By way of example, SCC facilitated a meeting of military welfare officers within Surrey on 16 March 2017. A range of issues were discussed, recorded in the Minutes¹⁷ and briefed to SCMPB.

6.2 Audit Comments

Key issues captured within the feedback¹⁸ process from the Annual Conference are recorded within a document known as the You Said, We Did¹⁹. This process ensures that, once identified, issues are not forgotten but instead are prioritised and allocated to a military or civilian lead with specific responsibility to develop the issues and report progress at appropriate future meetings. From time to time, SCMPB has published a series of case studies²⁰ and updates on successful projects²¹ to highlight the support to the Armed Forces community and the support provided by the Military, for example in response to the severe and damaging floods in 2014.

6.3 Proposed Actions

SCMPB should continue with the sequence of integrated conferences, seminars and meetings as a means of retaining the interest in the Armed Forces Covenant programme and as a mechanism to confirm progress while, at the same time,

¹⁶ SCMPB Armed Forces Covenant Conference 2016 - Agenda

¹⁷ Military Welfare Officers Meeting – 16 March 2017

¹⁸ SCMPB Surrey Community Covenant Conference 2016 - Feedback

¹⁹ You Said, We Did Document - 2016

²⁰ SCMPB Case Studies

²¹ SCMPB Project Updates

identifying current issues that need to be resolved. Continuing to publish case studies will remain important in terms of highlighting the benefits of maintaining and, hopefully enhancing, the relationship between the civilian and military communities. Progress of the actions resulting from the You Said, We Did initiative should be briefed regularly to the SCMPB Executive.

6.4 Communications

SCC appreciate the value of effective communications within the Council, with the Boroughs and Districts and with the wider community, to include Service personnel, their families and veterans. Using the search facility on the SCC website, it is possible to navigate to the comprehensive section devoted to the Armed Forces.

SCC have, through their links with the local press, taken the opportunity to publicise military events and successful integration projects across the County. SCC have also funded a SCMPB stand which has been deployed to a number of key civic events to highlight the role of SCMPB, particularly to the Armed Forces community by signposting available support and advice. A press release²² was also circulated to publicise that, the efforts made by SCC to support the Armed Forces community, had been recognised by the MoD with the award of the Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award.

To support Surrey's Members of Parliament²³ and Councillors²⁴, SCMPB have written a comprehensive briefing documents designed to help them and their staff deal with Armed Forces Covenant related issues raised by Service personnel, veterans and their families. The briefing document usefully includes information on how to contact Borough and District Armed Forces Champions, the Service charities and both Regular and Reserve units within Surrey. The remainder of the document provides advice on how to obtain information on the following key matters:

- Housing – getting on the waiting list.
- Employment – re-training, interview skills, mentoring Career Transition Partnership and CV writing.
- Debt – financial advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau and Service charities.
- Health – getting on a GPs and dentist waiting list.
- Education – school admissions, Service Pupil Premium and early year's provision.

6.5 Audit Comments

Maintaining effective and frequent communications with all sections of the community, including the Military, will be critical to the work to better integrate the communities.

²² Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award – Press release

²³ SCMPB – Briefing for MPs and Case Workers – February 2016

²⁴ SCMPB – Key Contact Information for Surrey Councillors - 2016

6.6 Proposed Actions

Every opportunity should be taken to publicise events, activities and successful projects. Ensuring that information is cascaded to all levels will be critical in future campaigns to maintain interest, enthusiasm and commitment. Consideration should be given to including, on the SCC Home Page, a direct link to the Armed Forces pages. It is also suggested that relationships are developed with the Surrey Communications Group to see how they may best help support the work going forward.

6.7 Contact Centre

SCC have taken the step to ensure that staff manning their Contact Centre are trained to deal with requests for help from the Service community²⁵. Staff employed to operate the Contact Centre are trained to understand that the Armed Forces community can often be different. They now appreciate that, within the Armed Forces community, there is a strong sense of pride and, as a direct consequence, may be reluctant to seek help. They appreciate that Service personal and their families move frequently within the United Kingdom and overseas, often at very short notice and are therefore regularly isolated from the immediate support of their families. Contact Centre staff also understand that Military bases and families' accommodation are often in isolated locations and that the Armed Forces community are generally not familiar with the processes for accessing local authority and other public services. These differences combine to produce a potentially significant impact in terms of help to resolve education concerns, access to health care and benefits, employment opportunities and housing issues.

6.8 Audit Comments

Contact Centre staff have been briefed specifically on the need to familiarise themselves with the support for the Armed Forces, signposted within the community web pages. They have been asked to establish if a caller has a military background or are a spouse or partner of a person serving in the Armed Forces or a veteran. They are further trained to signpost individuals to the appropriate Service charities and to maintain records which alert SCC to any particular trends. Following a successful intervention, a case study has been developed setting out how asking the question as to whether the person had served, led to a successful referral to a service charity who was able to provide support. To date the SSAFA Surrey has received 69 referrals from the Contact Centre and there is evidence from feedback that their intervention has been both welcomed, necessary and successful.

6.9 Proposed Actions

SCC and particularly the Contact Centre must ensure that they are not duplicating the advice which is now available from the recently launched MoD initiative, Veterans Gateway, which brings together the Service charities in a combined effort to support veterans. Staff will need to be briefed on the objectives of the Veterans Gateway and have immediate access to their helpline details. Consideration should be given, within the SCC website Home Page, to introducing a direct link to the Contact Centre details.

²⁵ The Armed Forces Community in Surrey – SCC Contact Centre

7. Employer Recognition Scheme

7.1 Gold Award

The efforts made by SCC, particularly in support of their Reservist employees and their families was recognised by the MoD in the award of Silver Employer Recognition Scheme Award in 2015. The next year, following evidence that further significant progress had been made, the MoD awarded SCC the Gold Award. SCC remain a strong advocate of support to Reservist employees and in particular to ensuring that, without in any way being disadvantaged, they are able to complete their full training and, when required, their mobilised operational duties. The Council's approach has been not only to encourage staff to join the Reserves but also and of equal importance to create an environment where Reservists want to continue their service while employed by SCC. SCC is now the local authority representative on the Gold Alumni Group which acts as a sounding board for the Chief of Defence People at the MoD and looks at sharing best practice nationally between Gold Award holders from a range of business sectors.

In order to recognise the contribution made by Reservist employees not only to the military but also to their individual responsibilities within SCC, the Chairman invited all Reservists to a Reception during Armed Forces Week 2017²⁶. The Reception was held at the Guildford Fire Station which provided a most welcome opportunity for SCC Reservists to meet their counterparts serving in the Surrey Police and Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

7.2 Audit Comments

SCC appreciate that their status as a Gold Award recipient is time limited and that, in 2019, they will need to justify to the MoD why they should retain the award. SCC is committed to providing the necessary evidence to convince the MoD that they are continuing to act as an exemplar and therefore fully deserving of a second Gold Award. A further award would also enable SCC to continue its leadership role, particularly in encouraging the Borough and Districts as they strive to demonstrate continuous improvement and the gaining of their own Employer Recognition Scheme Awards. SCC takes full advantage of the benefits available to them as a Gold Award holder, including membership of the Gold Alumni Group and attendance at the Sandhurst Leadership Challenge.

There is much evidence to confirm that SCC remains a strong supporter of the Reserves in general and Reservist and Cadet Forces Adult Instructor employees in particular²⁷. By way of example:

- SCC's Leave Policy allows for up to 10 days paid leave to be taken to complete annual training requirements. Special leave for Reservists must be granted.

²⁶ SCC Chairman's invitation to Reservist employees

²⁷ SCC Gold Award Nomination – How SCC Supports Defence

- SCC’s willingness to release Reservists for mobilised operational duties both within the United Kingdom and overseas.
- SCC’s positive approach to the employment of Reservists, veterans and Cadet Forces Adult Instructors, thus making SCC attractive to potential employees.
- SCC’s established relationship with the MoD’s Career Transition Partnership organisation to promote appropriate vacancies to those leaving the Services.
- SCC’s work placement initiative for Service personnel who are to be, or have been, medically discharged from the Services, leading in some cases to a full time employment opportunity.
- SCC’s approach to promoting volunteering, including as Cadet Adult Forces Instructors.
- SCC’s support to families of employees who have been mobilised or deployed through the Employee Assistance Programme.
- SCC’s plan to review and enhance their HR policies to better support the commitments made within the Armed Forces Covenant, Reservists and the Armed Forces community.

7.3 Proposed Actions

SCC must appreciate that the MoD will, quite rightly, seek compelling evidence of performance in their support of Reservists and, more generally, the Council’s approach to the delivery of their Armed Forces Covenant commitments. The MoD will not only seek clarity of what has been achieved but also will wish to understand SCC plans for the future in terms of policy and procedures in support of Reservist employees. SCC must continue to demonstrate that they retain a firm understanding of the importance of recruiting and retention in the Reserves and the relationship between these critical and equally important and inextricably linked requirements. Equal effort must therefore be given to support staff who may have an aspiration to join the Reserves and to measures that encourage Reservist employees to remain within the Reserves during their careers with SCC. Every opportunity should be taken to highlight Reservist employees and their contribution to SCC and the Military with emphasis on the much published fact that they are “twice a citizen”.

8. Concluding Comments

This audit confirms that SCC have taken seriously and diligently their responsibilities and commitments agreed when signing the Armed Forces Covenant some five years

ago. The amalgam of the findings from this initial audit indicate that consistent and enthusiastic progress has been maintained , when it might have been assumed that, over time, we could have witnessed gradual reduction in both commitment and effort. On the contrary, this audit serves to demonstrate a determination within SCC and particularly the high achieving Community Partnership and Safety Service, to strive for continuous improvement in the support and services they provide for the Armed Forces community. Maintaining an appropriate level of resources committed to this work has been and will continue to be of critical importance as will be SCC's willingness to accept a strong leadership responsibility with the Boroughs and Districts. There can be little doubt that the commitment, interest and leadership of the current and previous SCC Chairman have had a significant impact on the progress of the SCC Armed Forces Covenant objectives and the welfare and wellbeing of the Armed Forces community within Surrey. SCC should be rightly proud of what has been achieved within a relatively short period of time. Without in any way wishing to appear complacent, SCC should recognise that continuous effort is required or at least applied more effectively in the future. The short, medium and long term actions recommended within this audit are designed to support the work of SCC which, if delivered conscientiously, will help to support SCC's publically stated continuous improvement aspirations.

9. Recommended Actions

9.1 Short Term - Achieve the following within 6 months:

- Remind staff of the key Armed Forces Covenant principles, SCC's obligations and their collective and individual responsibilities when engaging with the Armed Forces community.
- Retain Customer Service Excellence accreditation.
- Confirm SCMPB priorities for 2018-2019 and publicise more widely within SCC, Boroughs and Districts and all elements of the Military.
- Agree the revised roles and responsibilities for the Armed Forces Champions and circulate to Boroughs and Districts, to the MoD and to other counties, particularly through the Forces Connect SE project.
- Receive a quarterly update from SERFCA/DRM setting out the register of organisations and companies who have either signed individual Covenants or have received MoD Employer Recognition Awards.
- Introduce a direct link to the Armed Forces pages from the SCC Home Page.

- Introduce a clearer direct link to the Contact Centre details from the SCC Home Page.
- Develop the Forces Connect SE cross border initiative.

9.2 Medium Term - Achieve the following within a period 6 – 12 months:

- Ensure that SCMPB remains relevant to military requirements within Surrey.
- Liaise with the MoD to encourage them to consider revising guidance to ensure applicants speak to the local Civilian Military Partnership Board in advance of submitting an application.
- Review the structure and responsibilities of the Task Groups reporting into the SCMPB, taking into account any future role of SCMPB Executive.
- Develop clear and measurable Armed Forces Covenant objectives for example:
 - More effectively promoting SCC as an Armed Forces friendly organisation.
 - Greater recognition of the valuable skills and experience that Service leavers and veterans bring to the Council.
 - Promote and provide employment opportunities for Reservists, veterans and spouse and partners.
 - Support the rehabilitation of wounded, injured and sick Service personnel.
- When new objectives are agreed, consider signing a revised Armed Forces Covenant at an appropriate high profile event involving the MoD.
- Introduce a process for SCMPB or SCMPB Executive to review the key issues raised by Armed Forces Champions and Task Force Commanders.
- Enhance HR policies within SCC to better support the requirements of the Armed Forces Covenant and the commitments made, particularly within the main elements of the Armed Forces Employment Work Plan.
- Continue to capture and publicise case studies to support the benefits of adopting an integrated approach at all level within the County.
- Continue the programme of conferences, seminars and meetings with the Armed Forces community.

- Maintain a high profile in terms of publicising events, activities and success stories.
- Continue to highlight the contribution made within the workplace by Reservist employees.
- Ensure the appropriate alignment with the MoD's Veterans Gateway initiative.
- Progress the Forces Connect SE cross border initiative and share best practice with other counties.

9.3 Long Term - Achieve the following in the period 12 – 24 months:

- Deliver the Forces Connect SE cross border initiative.
- Capture evidence necessary to confirm to the MoD that the Forces Connect SE programme has been delivered effectively and that genuine benefit has been gained by the Armed Forces community in the South East.
- Introduce a process that will ensure the best practice is shared not only within the South East but also with other counties.