

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ARMED FORCES CHAMPION AND
VETERANS' CHAMPION**

04 MAY 2022

As part of its responsibilities under the Armed Forces Community Covenant, an annual report to Council is required to update members on some of the positive work that has been carried out to support the Armed Forces and their families in the County.

Northumberland County Council (NCC) is regarded as one of the most proactive authorities in providing support to serving personnel, reservists, cadets, adult Instructors and their families. We received the MOD Employers Recognition Silver Award in 2015 and the Gold Award in 2018 and we continue to strive to justify this prestigious award.

Our Armed Forces Forum acts as a mechanism to review the actions taken by the Council and partners to implement the Covenant objectives and provide an opportunity to share best practice. Our next meeting is 6 May. NCC also provides the administrative support for the joint North East Armed Forces Forum on behalf of the 12 North East local authorities. The next meeting is 11 May. Both forum groups have dedicated remits and wide membership including all services, charities, business links, career transition partnership and many more.

Our frontline services regularly revise their policies and activities to ensure those objectives are met as far as possible. Examples include:

- An inclusive HR Policy offering Reservists and Cadet Force Adult Volunteers and Instructors up to 2 weeks additional paid holiday for training.
- Our job vacancies carry the Armed Forces Covenant logo and guaranteed interviews are offered to service leavers subject to meeting relevant criteria. Our vacancies are promoted through Careers Transition Partnership.
- Our Housing Policy gives increased priority for service families.
- The Council's contract for the substance misuse service and the Suicide Prevention Plan identifies the armed forces veterans and their carers as a vulnerable group.
- The Council disregards for benefit assessment purposes, the income received by War Widows and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme payments.
- Council Tax relief is paid by the MOD to service personnel who are abroad on operational tours, subject to criteria.

The work of our outreach worker continues to go from strength to strength. We have recently withdrawn from the Gateshead Outreach Service and will now align our Armed Forces Outreach work with that of Northumberland Communities Together

whilst maintaining a strong working and integrated approach with housing services. Through our integrated working arrangements and partnerships across Private, Public and VSCE sector organisations we have and will continue to identify and respond to emergent needs of our Armed Forces Communities including those of serving personnel, reservists, veterans and their families.

Northumberland Communities Together has provided support to over 25,000+ vulnerable residents in need of support and assistance. Members of our Armed Forces Communities have been amongst those seeking support. Whilst often the needs have been reflective of others within those communities, at other times they have been highly complex, specific and unique to an Armed Forces population. Mental health concerns and isolation, along with financial hardship, poverty and deprivation have been recurring issues.

Throughout the pandemic one aspect of life has been brought crashing into sharp focus 'the importance of community'. As we look towards our recovery, we will ensure that the sense of community, unity and togetherness that we witnessed will not be lost. This project will help

- Empower Armed Forces communities to become more engaged in their local area.
- Provide opportunities for isolated members of the Armed Forces community to take part in activities that improve general wellbeing.

We will use the Community Hubs to help drive forward on our aspirations and actions to deliver on the following three priorities:

1. Understanding our Armed Forces communities, serving personnel, veterans, reservist, and their families and what they need
2. Transforming services and support for Armed Forces communities in Northumberland
3. Showcasing veterans and promoting our rich Armed Forces History throughout all our communities

We will do this through an integrated and coherent Community Hub programme of activity which will build upon our successful place-based approaches to establish Force for Change Community Hub that connects and helps the Armed Forces Community understand what becoming more engaged in the local area means. We will virtually connect 5 Hubs across Northumberland ensuring equality of access

- West Northumberland
- Castle Morpeth
- Ashington & Blyth
- Cramlington, Bedlington & Seaton Valley
- North Northumberland

We will strive to identify what barriers and challenges exist and provide community led interventions and services such as Military Meet Ups, Force for Change Coffee Morning, Armed Forces Families & Veterans Health Clinics, etc.

Links continue between the Outreach Workers and the Personnel Recovery Centre at Catterick Garrison to effectively support those medically discharged from the armed forces and returning to Northumberland.

Since May last year, the Outreach Worker has received 198 referrals to date. These referrals have come via Northumberland Homefinder, Northumberland Homeless Options Team, SSAFA, Walking with the Wounded, The Royal British Legion, Veterans UK, HMP Northumberland, DWP and a significant number of self-referrals.

Not all referrals have required immediate intervention, again we have seen considerable number of referrals involving veterans facing homelessness due to private landlords selling their property's. Also, during the last year the number of veterans sleeping rough, or sofa-surfing has increased, again primarily due to relationship breakdowns

Working in partnership with NCC's Homeless Options Team, we received 31 referrals from them during this period with the vast majority obtaining local authority/housing association property's, veterans supported accommodation and private rentals.

We continue to assist service leavers and veterans with their housing and medical applications, employment support, mental health, benefits, as well as sign posting and referring to other veteran organisations for further help.

Since the last update, further grants totalling £17,300 have been awarded via SAFFA and the service charities. These grants again have paid for carpets, white and brown goods, removal costs, priority rent arrears, transport costs, rental bonds, upfront rent and food vouchers.

An Armed Forces Engagement Officer has been commissioned, primarily to research and make recommendations to identify and reduce issues affecting homelessness within the Armed Forces Community. It is envisaged that this role will bring real positive change for our clients. Working with STOLL who provide housing and support for veterans, we are taking part in the 'No Homeless Veterans' Campaign and officers from the housing team will be attending the launch of this campaign at the House of Lords.

Our Public Health Speciality Registrar is carrying out a Health Needs Assessment to review the health and wellbeing needs of the veteran and military family population in Northumberland. This will be reported to the Forum in May with recommendations for how to improve services or access to services for both of these populations. One example is to encourage more GP practices to sign up to the Royal College accreditation: [RCGP veteran friendly accreditation](#), particularly in areas such as Alnwick where there is a relatively large number of veterans receiving military pensions and compensations. Another theme looks to explore opportunities to strengthen links between veterans and local health improvement assets to improve both physical and mental health.

NCC is actively involved in Freedom Parades and ceremonies arranged to support the AF Community. We work closely with the Services, Town and Parish Councils and local churches to help organise events to promote the Armed Forces and celebrate significant anniversaries. Now that we are coming out of the pandemic, such activities can resume and we are excited to report that the 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery based at Albemarle will be exercising their Freedom of Northumberland by over 300 personnel marching through Hexham on Saturday 16 July, followed by a civic ceremony.

Officers have been part of an MOD working group looking at the impact of the Armed Forces Covenant amongst local authorities and provided feedback on the recent survey undertaken by Forces in Mind Trust. This looked in depth at specific policy areas for which councils have the responsibility for: housing, education, adult social care, employment and health and how the covenant pledges are being delivered. It also considered barriers to delivery and impact.

The Armed Forces Officer and I are attending the Armed Forces Covenant Community Conference 2022 on 18 May.

An Armed Forces Staff Network was launched to coincide with Armed Forces Day 2021. This is open to all staff who are currently serving or have served previously in the Regular or Reserve Forces, as well as cadet instructors, families of those who serve or have served, and staff who work with veteran support services or work alongside armed forces colleagues. It provides a forum for mutual support and opportunities to make contacts, share experiences and arrange events which will include those where the Council supports the military calendar.

The pandemic continued to affect our normal services this past year, but we held another very successful virtual Remembrance Service which we broadcasted via our social media channels. Hopefully this year we will be able to hold our service face to face in our new Memorial Garden at the front of County Hall which will be completed over the next couple of months.

Flags were flown to mark Armed Forces week, Merchant Navy Day and the battle of Britain.

We arranged a presentation about the Armed Forces Covenant for our Town and Parish Council representatives, our own councillors and some service staff on 6 April by the MOD North of England Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association. This will be repeated for businesses in Northumberland to raise awareness and encourage participation in the scheme and also inform a training module for all staff and councillors.

The military were brought in to assist us during Storm Arwen by assisting in carrying out welfare visits and were actively involved in the multi-agency command and control.

We are confident that Northumberland and the North-East are providing every support possible to our Armed Forces personnel, reservists, cadets, and their families and will continue to do so.

JEFF WATSON

ARMED FORCES CHAMPION

GORDON CASTLE

VETERAN'S CHAMPION