

COUNTY COUNCIL
17 MAY 2023
REPORT OF THE ARMED FORCES CHAMPION AND VETERAN CHAMPION

This note will update members on some of the positive work that has been carried out to support the Armed Forces and their families in the County. 2023 is a particularly important year for us as we work towards retaining our gold award.

- Our frontline services continue to regularly revise their policies and activities to ensure the duties of the Armed Forces Covenant are met as far as possible. Officers engaged with the Covenant Team around the development of the draft statutory guidance and an officer group with representatives from education, health and housing has been established to ensure staff are made aware and comply with the new Covenant Statutory Duties. The group looks in depth at specific policy areas for which councils have the responsibility for to discuss any areas for improvement and identify any gaps.
- Our Armed Forces Outreach work continues to grow and have recently appointed a second case worker as cases increase and to provide cover. The service continues to be closely aligned with 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, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis.
- Over the past year we have received 245 referrals. (01/04/2022 - 31/03/2023) These have been referred via Northumberland Homefinder, Northumberland Homeless Options Team, Walking with the Wounded, SAFFA, the Royal British Legion, as well as a significant number of self-referrals.
- Our case workers have seen a considerable increase in referrals where veterans are homeless (sofa-surfing, sleeping in cars etc) or are facing homelessness (relationship breakdowns, landlords selling property's etc).
- The team 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's organisations for further help.
- Our case workers continue to raise grants via SSAFA and the service charities. These grants have assisted clients with carpets, white and brown goods, rental bonds, upfront rent, food vouchers and a mobility scooter. (Grants awarded to date the in the above timescale amount to £21,735)
- We are represented at regular meetings of RFCA and attended an interesting workshop in January to promote and, as a Gold Award organisation advised

on the covenant with other organisations. Some useful contacts were made. In March, the meeting was held in the Navy Museum in Hartlepool.

- Our Veteran Champion attends the Tenants' Force meetings at Concordia Cramlington which is accumulating info about veterans in housing.
- The Tenant Force Group is growing in numbers and is working with our team in housing to look at how the "housing experience" can be improved and tailored to specific needs of those who have served or are still serving.
- Our Forum meets quarterly and continues to grow in membership and interest.
- Our Northumberland Communities Together service continues to work closely with our Case Workers to ensure that any support has been appropriately triaged, assessed and that individuals needs addressed holistically. Our collaborative and multi disciplinary approach ensures the right services and support can be seamlessly wrapped around the individual.
- Using our placed-based approaches to asset-based community development we have helped establish a number of Armed Forces & Veterans groups and supported them to secure funding to enhance their local offer or introduce new initiatives and opportunities
- We have been working on developing and introducing a new consistent brand identity for Northumberland Armed Forces and Veterans Outreach (AFVOS) services across the County to help identify, connect and strengthen the partnership ties and networks. The new branding, collateral and digital resources will be launched in summer 2023
- An audit is being developed by our Thriving Together consortium to help map and record all AFVOS assets and ensure they have a digital presence on the Northumberland Frontline Directory, making it easy to find, refer or access opportunities and services in place to support Armed Forces Personnel their Families and Veterans
- An Armed Forces Engagement Officer was commissioned for a year, primarily to research and make recommendations to identify and reduce issues affecting homelessness within the Armed Forces Community. The aim now is to ensure the recommendations are implemented and outcomes monitored.
- A revised E-Learning package introduction to the new duties of the Armed Forces Covenant is available to all staff and councillors We have promoted the launch of the LGBT Veterans Independent Review.
- Our Public Health Team has carried out a Health Needs Assessment to review the health and wellbeing needs of the veteran and military family population in Northumberland. This was reported to our last Northumberland Forum which will now monitor the implementation and outcome of the recommendations as well as advise on any improvements to improve access to services.
- NCC is actively involved in Freedom Parades and ceremonies arranged to support the AF Community. The 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery based at Albemarle exercised their Freedom of Northumberland with over 300 personnel marching through Hexham on Saturday 16 July, followed by a civic ceremony. This marked their transition from 105mm guns to the multiple

launch rocket systems. The regiment also held a resubordination service at Hexham Abbey on 1 April.

- The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers marched through Morpeth on St. George's Day and arrangements are in hand for The Royal Regiment of Scotland to exercise the freedom of Berwick-upon-Tweed in September.
- Our Armed Forces Staff Network has now been running for nearly 2 years. The network 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 2022 annual staff survey was used to capture the views and comments of Armed Forces Reservists, Volunteers and Veterans within the workforce of Northumberland County Council. A detailed survey of results has been compiled providing opportunity to make an informed action plan for improvement.
- Last September we rededicated the war memorial outside of County Hall following the renovation works, and in November we held a very successful Remembrance Service which we broadcasted via our social media channels. We were able to hold the service in our new Memorial Garden at the front of County Hall and it was made special due to the participation of local schools who not only took part in the actual service, but along with help from councillors, staff and community groups helped produce poppies for our 'waterfall' display.
- In addition to the events mentioned above, we have been privileged to attend a number of events over the year including:
 - Presentation and civic reception at Albemarle Barracks in March 22
 - The Covenant in the Community Conference in Manchester in May 22
 - Coldstream Guards fantastic concert at Newcastle Cathedral in September 22
 - The NE Field of Remembrance at Gateshead in November 22
 - 3 RHA last ever live firing at Otterburn in November 22

We are confident that Northumberland is providing every support possible to our Armed Forces personnel, reservists, cadets, and their families and will continue to do so as we strive to retain our prestigious Gold Award.

The Following priorities reflect the ambitions and actions that we will seek to take to further enhance and evidence Northumberland's commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant and the Employer Recognition Scheme.

Future Ambition and Priority Actions:

1. Continue to develop and promote the new Northumberland Armed Forces and Veterans Outreach Services (AFVOS) branding across a network of community groups, charities and partner organisations operating across Northumberland. The adoption and promotion of a single consistent brand will help to weave, connect and strengthen our network of AFVOS and partner organisations and raise visibility of our Northumberland Commitment.
2. Conclude an audit of all Armed Forces and Veterans Outreach Services (AFVOS) operating across Northumberland so that we can showcase good practice, share insights and address any gaps in provision.
3. Develop an Armed Forces and Veterans Outreach Services (AFVOS) presence on the Northumberland Frontline Directory so that all organisations regardless of their size, geography or offer have an online presence to advertise their support offer, receive referrals or share information.
4. Establish a series of Armed Forces and Veterans Outreach Services (AFVOS) network event across the county that bring groups and organisations together to celebrate, collaborate and coproduce enhancements to our AFVOS offer. Facilitated by Thriving Together consortium.
5. Working with AFVOS, third sector and other partner organisations we will deliver a programme of mobile pop-up and enrichment events across the County that provides targeted support to Armed Services Personnel, their families, and Veterans. Themed around the priorities within the covenant these mobile events will bring specialist support together to provide a one stop shop of information, advice, guidance, and support.
6. Help establish an army of AFVOS Volunteers, to help build community capacity and resilience, through recognising and channelling the skills of our veterans' and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the many groups, activities and networks that exist across Northumberland.
7. Work with the Armed Forces Staff Network Group to develop an action plan for improvement based on the Annual Staff Survey results.

COUNCILLOR JEFF WATSON

ARMED FORCES CHAMPION

COUNCILLOR GORDON CASTLE

VETERAN CHAMPION