

COUNTY COUNCIL
1 MAY 2024
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.

- 2023/24 has been a particularly important year for us as we worked towards retaining our MOD Employer Recognition Gold Award. We are very pleased that this work paid off and our prestigious award has been revalidated for a further 5 years.
- Since the last annual report, we are delighted to announce that we now have our full complement of Armed Forces Case Workers, appointing Ellen Harland (Ex Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps) in June 2023. With Ellen's clinical and mental health background she is an absolute asset to the support and assistance that NCC provide to our armed forces community in Northumberland.
- Our rebranded Armed Forces and Veterans Outreach Service (AF&VOS) 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Over the past year, the case workers have received 248 referrals. These have been referred via Northumberland Homefinder, Northumberland Homelessness and Housing Options Team, Walking with the Wounded, SSAFA, the Royal British Legion, as well as an increased number of self-referrals. The increased number of self-referrals has proved that promotion of the AF&VOS via the recently revised NCC website is now paying dividends for those who require assistance.
- We continue to see a considerable increase in referrals where veterans are homeless (sofa-surfing, sleeping in cars etc) or are facing homelessness due

to relationship breakdown and financial problems (particularly due to the increase in private rental costs).

- During the last fiscal year, our case workers have assisted 63 veterans and service leavers obtain properties in Northumberland, which is exceptional given the current shortage and extremely high demand for social housing. However, the location of the AF&VOS case workers within the housing department enables them to discuss cases with housing management to enable the best outcomes for their clients.
- In the previous twelve months our case workers have successfully housed six estranged spouses with their housing needs. We believe spouses have sacrificed their lives to support loved ones who have served, and should not be treated any different.
- We continue to assist service leavers, veterans and family members with their medical applications, employment support, mental health needs and benefits, as well as signposting and referring them to other appropriate veteran's organisations.
- AVFOS key workers have been delivering a series of community pop up and enrichment events along with Voluntary and Statutory partners across Northumberland. The targeted approach which utilises mobile units provides veterans and vulnerable residents access to information, advice and guidance along with practical support right on their doorstep.
- We are represented at regular meetings of Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (RFCA) and other organisations. 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 and we continue to chair the North East Forum.
- 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
- NCC is actively involved in Freedom Parades and ceremonies arranged to support the AF Community. The Royal Regiment of Scotland marched through Berwick-upon Tweed in September and The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers marched through Ashington in April, for St. George's Day and their 350th anniversary.
- Our Armed Forces Staff Network has now been running for nearly 3 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.

- In November we held a very successful Remembrance Service which we broadcasted via our social media channels. 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.
- We have honoured two Northumberland Veterans celebrating their 100th birthdays.
- In addition to the events mentioned above, we have been privileged to attend a number of events over the year including:
 - RAF Boulmer 70th Anniversary Event (May 2023)
 - Royal Gun Salute in York (July 2023)
 - Field of Remembrance in Gateshead (November 2023)
 - March and salute - 204 Battery, Kingston Park, 101 Regt RA at Alnwick (January 2024)
 - North of England Gold Award Association Defence Insight Briefing North (April 2024)
- Working with our services and Blyth Battery and others, we are now planning our 'Northumberland Remembers' Event at Blyth Beach to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-Day on 6 June 2024. The day will start with family attractions and entertainment from 4pm until 8pm when the formal Service will begin and include the lighting of the Beacon at the Dave Stephen's Centre, followed by the National Tribute.
- On June 25th, the AF&VOS will host an armed forces awareness day next to Blyth Battery coinciding with Armed Forces Week. We have numerous armed forces organisations attending and we hope the advice available will illustrate the support the continued we provide to the armed forces community.
- We now aim to:
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - Establish a series of Armed Forces and Veterans Outreach Services (AFVOS) network events across the county that bring groups and organisations together to celebrate, collaborate and coproduce enhancements to our AFVOS offer. Facilitated by Thriving Together consortium.

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.

COUNCILLOR JEFF WATSON
ARMED FORCES CHAMPION

COUNCILLOR GORDON CASTLE
VETERAN CHAMPION