

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

**MAY 2021**

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.

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. NCC also provides the administrative support for the joint North East Armed Forces Forum on behalf of the 12 North East local authorities. 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

In normal times, 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.

However, by far the biggest achievement has been the outreach work carried out by our Outreach Workers who provide a single point of contact for queries / requests to access services from the Armed Forces Community. 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 the start of the Covid19 lockdown and the restrictions that came into force in March 2020 the Outreach Workers have received 215 referrals to date. These referrals have come via Northumberland Homefinder, Northumberland Homeless Options Team, SSAFA, Changing Lives, The Royal British Legion, Project Nova, Law Enforcement and a significant number of self-referrals.

Not all referrals have required immediate intervention, however we have seen considerable number of referrals involving veterans facing homelessness and rough sleeping primarily due to relationship breakdowns

Working in partnership with NCC's Homeless Options Team, we received 23 referrals from them during this period and all, but one has been successfully housed (one was housed in two days).

The outreach 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 organisations for further help.

Since the last update, further grants totalling £42,500 have been awarded via SAFFA and the service charities. These grants again

Since the last update further grants totalling £42500 have been awarded via SSAFA and the service charities. These grants again have paid for carpets, white and brown goods, removal costs, funeral costs, transport costs, rental bonds, upfront rent and food vouchers.

The pandemic has also affected our normal services with a virtual service being held for VE Day and VJ Day and a very successful virtual Remembrance Service which we broadcasted via our social media channels. The broadcast was watched by 50,321 people from as far away as Australia and received around 12,000 likes, comments and shares. Even if we can carry out a 'normal' service this year, we will continue to record and broadcast to reach a wider audience.

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

We attended the virtual promotional presentation given by the Navy on 25 November via Gateshead's Armed Forces Forum and hosted the same in February this year.

The military were brought in to assist the Northumbria Local Resilience Forum very early into the Covid response. They formed part of the Logistics Cell, which primarily looked at the provision of Testing Sites in the area, as well as the provision and delivery of PPE across our region. They were actively involved in the multi-agency command and control structures within Northumbria LRF, with particular focus on the potential delivery of mass testing across the region.

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**