**Hertfordshire Armed Forces Covenant Board meeting**
Friday 6th March 2026, 10:00-12:00
Beech Room, Hertfordshire Development Centre, Stevenage SG1 2FQ

**Attendance:**

- Luther Blissett OBE DL representing HM Lord-Lieutenant Robert Voss CBE CStJ
- Cllr. Ajanta Hilton - **Hertfordshire County Council** (Chair)
- Fiona Hill - **Independent** (Deputy Chair)
- Kate Brierley - **HCC Corporate Policy**
- Kyle Redford - **HCC Corporate Policy** (notes)
- Cllr. Alex Daar - **East Herts Council**
- Cllr Claire Parris, Andy Heath, Gemma Maret & Angela Griffith **- Stevenage Borough Council**
- Cllr Caroline Smith-Wright **- Dacorum Borough Council**
- Charlie Cadogan (sub for Katie Stirland) **– Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust**
- Paul Gilham, **East Anglia Reserve Forces and Cadets Association**
- Deirdre Golden & Gary Davies **– SSAFA**
- DCI Bianca Broadbent & DS Kayleigh Simm **– Hertfordshire Constabulary**
- Kristen Buckle & Austin Mason **– DWP**
- Lauren Fox **– Forces United Veterans Together**
- Steve Probyn **– Carers in Herts**
- Adam Twidell **– Sandridge Parish Council**
- Charmaine Dixon **– MOD Veterans Services**
- Stu Mendelson **– Muster Point, Stevenage**

**Attendance (Online):**

- Cllr. Sarah Nelmes, **Three Rivers DC**
- Gp Cpt Barrie Griffiths (Retd), **East of England Veterans Advisory Committee**
- Charlotte Jones, **Naval Families Federation**
- William Brown, **East Anglia RFCA County Forum**

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| **1** | **Welcome and introductions**<br><br>Cllr. Ajanta Hilton opened the meeting by acknowledging the ongoing conflict in Iran and its impact noting that the Armed Forces community, including those deployed in connection with the conflict, remains firmly in the thoughts of this Board.<br><br>The Chair went on to welcome Board members, guests, and newer attendees; noting the breadth of organisations represented — councils, policing, health, military, and veterans' organisations, which emphasised the importance of the Board as a strategic forum for addressing any disadvantage faced by the Armed Forces community across Hertfordshire. New attendees were invited to introduce themselves. | **Actions** |
| **2** | **Apologies**<br><br>• HM Lord-Lieutenant Robert Voss CBE CStJ<br>• Gp. Cpt. Neil Towers (Northwood HQ)<br>• Stephen Boyling, Veterans Services Field Team Manager representing MOD Veterans Services (formerly Veterans UK) (sending sub)<br>• Donna Schultz CEO Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce<br>• Cllr Linda Smith, Hertsmere BC Armed Forces Champion<br>• Katie Stirland, Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust (sending sub)<br>• Helen Gledhill, Hertfordshire Public Health (sending sub)<br>• Cllr Dawn Gamble, St Albans Council Armed Forces Champion<br>• Cllr Val Bryant, North Herts Council Armed Forces Champion (sending sub)<br>• Dr Oliver Pugh, Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust<br>• Ian Pearce, Carers in Herts (sending sub)<br>• WO2 Stan Nilsson, 254 Multi-Role Medical Regiment<br>• Doug Bainbridge, Pathfinders-Chapter: Veteran's Therapy Group<br>• Cllr Dee Hart, Broxbourne BC Armed Forces Champion | |
| **3** | **Notes and actions from the previous meeting** 23 October 2025 | |

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| | The minutes were approved without amendment. | |
| | **(Post meeting note) Actions from the previous meeting:** | **Update:** |
| | All Board members to promote the Employer Recognition Scheme and veteran-friendly care home accreditation as models for others. | Ongoing. There are now two Care Homes in Hertfordshire accredited as veteran friendly. |
| | HCC officers to explore continuity of NHS engagement on AFC issues following Harper Brown's departure. | Cllr. Hilton has written to the Chief Executive of the Integrated Care Board requesting a new representative and is awaiting a response. |
| | All Board members to support veteran-friendly GP accreditation promotion. | Ongoing. There are now 71 veteran friendly accredited GP practices in Hertfordshire. |
| | Kyle Redford to monitor outcomes of the Healthwatch survey. | The HWH report was published in 2025, and recommendations are for the NHS to implement. "*The ICB, along with our partners, are committed to ensuring members of the Armed Forces Community have fair and easy access to health and social care services. We are now working with Change Grow Live (a health and social care charity) to improve services specifically for Hertfordshire AFC with these recommendations in mind including working with GP practices and local Trusts to ensure they have good information available for the community to access and encourage patients to register as members of the armed forces community."* |
| | Ian Pearce to update the Board on progress of the Carers in Herts project. | Regular updates from Ian are included in the Hertfordshire Armed Forces community newsletter |
| | Chair to review proposed Board structure and incorporate feedback on subgroup reform and communications. | After careful consideration of all feedback, the current arrangements will continue: two formal Board meetings each year with the existing membership. Therefore, there are no plans for an annual conference. The Chair's priority is to make the best use of Board members' time by keeping meetings focused on partnership working, developing collaborative approaches to funding bids such as Valour, and sharing best practice particularly in supporting veterans in need. To enhance networking opportunities, we will move the networking element to the |

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| | | end of each meeting, ensuring everyone can make full use of those valuable connections to support our Armed Forces Community. | |
| | Chair to establish monthly strategic coordination meetings with Chair, Deputy Chair, Public Health leads, and Secretariat. | Regular updates are now in place. However, to address the issues raised about the NHS we do need a representative from the ICB, and this is not yet in place. | |
| **4** | **Lord-Lieutenant's Address**<br>The Lord-Lieutenant was unable to attend due to an important meeting in London later that morning. Luther Blissett OBE Deputy Lieutenant represented the Lord-Lieutenant at the meeting. | | **Correction post distribution** |
| **5** | **Updates for the Board:**<br><br>**5.1 Confirmation of Board Arrangements**<br>Kate Brierley confirmed the email sent to Board members in January that the existing membership structure, meeting cycle, and reporting mechanisms will remain in place.<br><br>**5.2 Revised Terms of Reference (paper)**<br>An updated Terms of Reference has been circulated to all members in advance of the meeting. Revisions aim to reflect the Board's current strategic priorities, clarify partner responsibilities and strengthen alignment with national Covenant guidance. Subject to any comments the ToR will be adopted up to 2028.<br><br>**5.3 New Communications Approach**<br>The Board were reminded of the new communication approach introduced by the Chair late last year; a new email format moving to a more dynamic and joined-up communications approach on a 6-week cycle. Board members are asked to share news, issues, known challenges, case studies, and events, ensuring everyone on the Board is aware of what's happening across the county, where support is needed and where help can be offered. There are currently 380 subscribers to the newsletter.<br><br>**5.4 Op Community update** | | **5.2 All Board members** are invited to comment on the revised Terms of Reference by 2 April 2026<br><br>**5.3 All Board members** requested to regularly send in appropriate articles to the Hertfordshire Heroes mailbox<br><br>**5.4 All Board members** requested to |

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| | The Board were reminded that Op Community helpline in Hertfordshire is scheduled to end **31 March 2026**, following the conclusion of its extended funding period. Originally launched as an NHS pilot, the service was continued locally and delivered by the **Hertfordshire Community Navigation Service (HCNS)** to provide tailored support to veterans and their families. Although the helpline itself will close, HCNS will continue to support veterans referred into its wider service. Community link workers have received additional training and resources to help them understand and respond to the specific needs of the Armed Forces community, ensuring that individuals continue to receive informed and appropriate guidance.<br><br>**5.5 Local Government Reorganisation**<br>A reminder that the consultation about Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire closes on 26 March. Read full details and Have your say about this once in a generation change. Hertfordshire Leaders Group (HLG) recently considered the arrangements for the Hertfordshire Armed Forces Covenant Board, prompting discussion about arrangements post-LGR. Although no preferences were expressed, HLG were keen that local Remembrance events continue once District/Borough Councils no longer exist post May 2028 and this may be a useful agenda item for the October Board meeting to consider.<br><br>**5.6 Action Plan 2026/27**<br>It is recognised best practice for the Board to continue with an annual Action Plan so all Board members can get involved dependant on their resources and priorities. KB proposed that the following elements be included in the next iteration of the Board's Action plan:<br>• Recommendations from Joint Strategic Needs Assessment<br>• Recommendations from Healthwatch Hertfordshire report<br>• Prepare for expansion of Armed Forces Covenant Duty<br>• Valour programme<br>• Carers in Herts project<br>• BAU e.g. Remembrance, HH website, schools Christmas competition, military village at the County Show | remove any promotion of the Op Community service from leaflets and websites.<br><br>**5.6 All Board members** to are invited to comment on the proposed elements of the Action Plan by 2 April 2026. |
| **6** | **Partner Presentation: Hertfordshire Constabulary** | **All Board members** are invited to promote |

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| | DCI Bianca Broadbent delivered an in-depth presentation outlining Hertfordshire Constabulary's introduction of the **Forcer Protocol** and its implementation through the **Safe and Found Online** platform. This initiative represents a significant advancement in how the police respond to missing-person incidents including members of the Armed Forces community, and forms part of a wider commitment to strengthening veteran-aware practice within policing.<br><br>DCI Broadbent began by explaining the purpose and origins of the Forcer Protocol, emphasising that it was specifically developed to **reduce the risk of harm** to veterans, reservists and serving personnel who may go missing; noting that such incidents can escalate rapidly due to factors such as PTSD, mental health conditions, cognitive vulnerabilities, or crisis-driven behaviour linked to transition challenges. The new protocol is designed to ensure that officers can **respond quickly, safely and with better contextual understanding**, improving both response times and outcomes.<br><br>A key component of this approach is the integration with the **Safe and Found Online** portal. DCI Broadbent highlighted that the system enables carers, family members or veterans themselves to pre-populate a secure digital profile containing critical information. This can include **recent photographs, physical descriptions, known health risks, triggers, and other situational details**. When a missing-person report is made, the police can access this information instantly, supporting rapid risk assessment and allowing searches to begin without the delays typically associated with gathering initial details.<br><br>Board members responded positively to the presentation, praising the Forcer Protocol as a **practical and timely innovation** that directly addresses some of the safeguarding gaps previously identified in complex cases. Members agreed that this initiative strengthens the county's broader commitment to veteran-aware service delivery and demonstrates effective cross-sector collaboration between policing, digital safeguarding partners, and the Armed Forces community. | the Forcer Protocol and Safe & Found Online within their organisations and networks to increase uptake and awareness among veterans in need |
| **7** | **Partner Update: Northwood HQ** Written Submission from Group Captain Neil Towers | |

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| | The Chair introduced an update from **Group Captain Neil Towers**, who sent apologies for his absence. The update provided the Board with an informative overview of current activity and pressures at **Northwood Headquarters**, which continues to operate as a key strategic hub for UK defence operations.<br><br>Group Captain Towers began by noting the success of a **recent visit to Northwood HQ by HM The King**, describing it as a positive engagement opportunity that served to **boost morale** among personnel. Other updates were:<br><br>• A successful tree planting local engagement event took place in January with colleagues from Hertfordshire County Council, Three Rivers Council and Northwood HQ all working together, another 1500 trees will be planted at the end of the year<br>• The broader team on Northwood are working hard with so many operations taking place around the world. Focus remains Ukraine, Israel and now Iran.<br>• The recruitment process for the Community Engagement and Support Officer previously held by Clare Smith is underway.<br>• Finally, and very sadly Group Captain Towers asked the Board to be informed of the tragic death of Ella Phillips who worked as his Executive Assistant. Ella died suddenly of a cardiac arrest last week. She was 23. The team are devastated but are working through the challenges this presents. Some of the Board will have interacted with Ella.<br><br>Cllr. Hilton offered sincere condolences to Group Captain Towers and to everyone at Northwood HQ. On behalf of the Board Cllr. Hilton expressed sympathy to Ella's family, friends and colleagues, and acknowledged the impact this will be having across the organisation and those Board members who knew Ella. | |
| **8** | **Partner Update: East Anglia Reserve Forces & Cadets Association** | **District and Borough Councils** are invited to explore opportunities to promote CFAV (Cadet |

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| | Paul Gilham, Head of Engagement, delivered a detailed and highly informative overview of the work of the **East Anglia Reserve Forces & Cadets Association (EARFCA)**. His presentation highlighted the breadth of the organisation's remit, the scale of its regional responsibilities, and the increasing strategic importance of its work at a time of evolving Defence priorities.<br><br>**8.1 Reserve Forces Support**<br><br>Paul explained that EARFCA plays an essential role in **connecting Defence with local society**, operating across **twelve regional associations** that collectively support the Reserve Forces estate, employer engagement activity, and civil–military integration.<br><br>He highlighted that a significant part of EARFCA's work involves **building strong relationships with employers** to ensure reservists receive the support they need to balance civilian careers with military commitments. This includes promoting HR policies that protect reservists' rights, encouraging flexible working arrangements, and recognising the skills and experience reservists bring to the workforce.<br><br>Paul also noted that the current themes emerging from the **Strategic Defence Review** indicate a likely increase in societal involvement with Defence, including expectations for communities and employers to play a more active role in supporting national resilience. EARFCA is preparing for this shift by strengthening engagement structures and raising awareness of the value and contributions of reservists.<br><br>**8.2 Cadet Forces**<br><br>Turning to the Cadet Forces, Paul emphasised that cadet programmes remain one of the most impactful youth development initiatives within the region. They focus on **skills development, leadership, confidence-building and providing structured, positive alternatives** for young people, particularly in areas experiencing deprivation or limited extracurricular opportunities. | Force Adult Volunteer) recruitment locally. |

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| | However, Paul stressed that the ability to expand or even maintain these programmes is significantly constrained by the **shortage of Cadet Force Adult Volunteers (CFAVs)**. Demand from young people is high, with some units operating waiting lists, but insufficient adult volunteers limit the number of cadet places available. This shortage represents a critical bottleneck.<br><br>He reiterated that **volunteers do not need a military background**, which is a common misconception. EARFCA provides comprehensive training, and safeguarding remains fundamental to all roles. To address the shortfall, EARFCA is running **targeted volunteer recruitment campaigns** in areas with the lowest CFAV numbers, including outreach to community groups, employers, and civic organisations.<br><br>**8.3 Estate and Mobilisation Planning**<br><br>Paul briefed the Board on estate management pressures, noting that some elements of the reserve and cadet estate may be subject to **repurposing under large-scale mobilisation scenarios**. This reflects emerging national Defence planning assumptions and the need to ensure estate flexibility during periods of heightened operational demand.<br><br>He also warned that the **loss of cadet centres due to insufficient volunteer capacity** poses a wider community risk. Cadet centres not only support youth engagement but also act as important touchpoints for community cohesion, skills development, and future military recruitment. Closures could therefore have consequences for long-term resilience and local engagement with Defence.<br><br>The Board acknowledged the importance of EARFCA's estate stewardship and recognised the need for closer collaboration with local authorities to mitigate risks where possible.<br><br>The Chair thanked Paul for his clear and comprehensive update, noting that the issues raised—particularly around volunteer shortages and estate pressures—align closely with wider discussions around resilience and partnership capacity across Hertfordshire. | |
| **9** | **Case Study: Supporting a Veteran with Complex Needs** | |

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| | Lauren Fox delivered a detailed, impactful presentation on a complex case involving a veteran with multiple unmet needs.<br>Key learning points included:<br>• **System fragmentation**: agencies working in isolation led to repeated failures and duplicated assessments.<br>• **Inconsistent information** and lack of national data sharing created delays and unsafe assumptions.<br>• **Lack of veteran-aware practice**, particularly within healthcare and safeguarding environments.<br>• **Addiction, cognitive difficulties, homelessness, and inconsistent NHS engagement** compounded crisis cycles.<br>• High dependence on individual workers filling systemic gaps, risking burnout and inconsistency.<br>The Board acknowledged the sobering nature of the case and noted its direct relevance to both the Armed Forces Covenant and Hertfordshire's potential Valour hub design. | |
| **10** | **VALOUR: Working Towards a Hertfordshire Presence**<br><br>**10.1 National Context**<br>Kate Brierley provided an overview of the Government's Valour Programme, explaining:<br>• It will establish a national network of veteran support centres.<br>• Aims include improving coordination, strengthening data, and reducing duplication.<br>• Regional centre awards are expected soon; local hub funding will follow.<br><br>**10.2 Stevenage Borough Council's Approach**<br>Gemma Maret & Andy Heath presented SBC's developing proposal for a **Hertfordshire Armed Forces Community Hub**, highlighting:<br>• The hub would be **hosted in Stevenage** but designed as a **countywide offer**.<br>• Importance of early engagement with partners and the Armed Forces community — nothing is fixed at this stage.<br>• Internal capacity checks completed; SBC has allocated a 6-month support post and appointed a dedicated AFC & Valour Officer Angela Griffith<br>• Commitment to transparency about funding eligibility, roles, and expectations.<br><br>**10.3 Phased Delivery Model** | **All Board members** welcome to express an interest in joining this collaborative approach to establishing a Valour presence in Hertfordshire via Hertfordshire Heroes mailbox. |

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| | The phased plan has and will include:<br>1. **Internal alignment** and feasibility<br>2. **Partner engagement** and role definition<br>3. **Model design**, evidence building, and service mapping<br>4. **Funding application readiness** (governance, letters of support, sign-off)<br>This staged approach aims to avoid over-promising and protect partner capacity.<br><br>**10.4 Board Discussion**<br>Members raised questions regarding:<br>• Relationship between Hertfordshire's hub model and the future regional Valour centres<br>• Need to avoid duplication of existing pathways<br>• Ensuring any single front door still reflects the complexity of partners' statutory responsibilities<br>• The potential need for veteran-informed assessment processes, particularly within health and housing<br>The Board expressed support for continued exploration, with emphasis on collaborative design and sharing of learning.<br><br>Board members were invited to share any planned or potential local bids for Valour funding, ensuring visibility and coordination across the county. Cllr. Hilton remains committed to exploring future collaborative opportunities with Board members and partners to develop a Valour presence in Hertfordshire, and all interested parties are invited to work together to support this aim.<br><br>**10.5 Chair's Closing Remarks**<br><br>Cllr Hilton encouraged partners to continue **maintaining open, proactive lines of communication**, particularly as Hertfordshire moves into the next stages of designing its future Valour-aligned support model. She emphasised that every organisation represented at the Board has a role to play, and that transparent collaboration will be essential to creating a system that is accessible, coordinated and recognisably veteran-aware across all localities.<br><br>She concluded by reiterating the Board's fundamental responsibility: **to ensure that no member of the Armed Forces community faces disadvantage because of their service**. This includes not only veterans, but also | |

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| | reservists, serving personnel, and their families. The Chair stressed that upholding this principle requires continued partnership effort, shared learning, and a commitment to delivering support that is both compassionate and efficient. | |
| **11** | **Networking Session**<br><br>Members stayed for informal networking over refreshments, using the time to strengthen cross-organisational relationships and discuss collaboration opportunities in more depth. | |
| **12** | **Close**<br><br>The meeting closed at 12:00. | |