

## Hertfordshire Armed Forces Covenant Board meeting

Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2025, 10:00-12:00

Location: Beech Room, Hertfordshire Development Centre,  
Stevenage



### Attendance: (In person)

- His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire Mr Robert Voss CBE
- Cllr Ajanta Hilton, Chair
- Fiona Hill, Deputy Chair
- Kate Brierley, Hertfordshire County Council
- Kyle Redford, Hertfordshire County Council
- Cllr Caroline Smith-Wright, Dacorum Borough Council
- Cllr Alex Daar, East Herts Council
- Cllr Dawn Gamble, St Albans District Council
- Cllr Doug Bainbridge, Hertfordshire County Council
- Tony Kelly, Royal Air Forces Association
- Nick Brown, Hertfordshire ABF – The Army's official charity
- Ian Pearce, Carers in Herts
- Cllr. Alan Chesterman, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council
- William Brown, East Anglia Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association County Forum
- Luther Blisset DL & Lauren Fox, Armed Forces United (part of THE FORMER PLAYERS CLUB CIC)
- Stu Mendelson & Steve Black, The Muster Point, Stevenage
- Helen Gledhill, Hertfordshire Public Health
- Donna Schultz, Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce
- Stan Nilsson, 162 Hospital Squadron, Royal Army Medical Corps
- Cllrs. Daniel Allen & Val Bryant, North Herts District Council
- Cllr Nigel Williams, Stevenage Borough Council (substituting for Cllr Claire Parris)
- Ricky Bartlett, Hertfordshire Constabulary

### Attendance (Online):

- Barrie Griffiths, East of England Veterans Advisory Committee
- Chidera Aguiyi, JSNA Researcher, Hertfordshire Public Health (Speaker)
- Cllr Dee Hart, Broxbourne Borough Council
- Philippa Darby & Kristen Buckle, DWP Armed Forces Champion Lead
- Deirdre Golden, SSAFA – The Armed Forces charity
- Cllr Jennifer Pattinson, Watford Borough Council

### Apologies received from:

- Group Capt Neil Towers, Northwood HQ
- John Phillips, Project Nova
- Harper Brown, Herts & West Essex ICB
- Kristina Carrington, MOD Employer Engagement
- Cllr Linda Smith, Hertsmere Borough Council
- Cllr Claire Parris, Stevenage Borough Council (substituted by Nigel Williams)

### Board members not in attendance:

- Angela Fox, Citizen's Advice
- Dr Oliver Pugh, HPFT
- Cllr Sarah Nelmes, Three Rivers District Council
- Lorriane Lees, Veterans UK
- Leslie Billy, Viewpoint
- Lt Cdr Rubin P Nash RN, HMS Wildfire

- Sue Rose, Royal British Legion
- Katie Millman, Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust
- Adam Twidell, Sandridge Parish Council

1	<b>Welcome from the Chair and introductions</b> Cllr. Ajanta Hilton	<b>Actions</b>
	<p>Cllr Hilton opened her first meeting as Chair with a strong message: “The Covenant must be a lived reality.”</p> <p>She emphasised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her responsibilities for public health and community safety across the county.</li> <li>• Her commitment to grassroots engagement.</li> <li>• The importance of ensuring no member of the Armed Forces community is disadvantaged when accessing services.</li> </ul> <p>She highlighted recent achievements across the county:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revalidation of Hertfordshire County Council’s Gold Award as a Forces Friendly Employer.</li> <li>• Accreditation of Forest Care Village as veteran friendly.</li> <li>• Her proactive outreach to veteran organisations.</li> </ul> <p>Cllr Hilton invited His Majesty’s Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire Mr Robert Voss CBE to speak.</p> <p>HM Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, opened by acknowledging the county’s proud military legacy, despite its modest size in terms of active military presence. He highlighted the strategic importance of <b>Northwood Headquarters</b>, which he described as: “Probably the most important military base not only in the country but probably in Europe.” This recognition reinforced Hertfordshire’s national and international relevance in defence infrastructure and military operations.</p> <p>The Lord Lieutenant shared a powerful reflection on the growing public commitment to remembrance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Lieutenancy will attend <b>44 Remembrance services</b> across Hertfordshire this year.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Board members to promote the Employer Recognition Scheme and veteran-friendly care home accreditation as models for others.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These services span large towns and small villages, demonstrating widespread community participation.</li> <li>• He underscored how remembrance has become a deeply embedded part of civic life, with thousands of people—young and old—turning out to honour service and sacrifice.</li> </ul> <p>The Lord Lieutenant praised the role of local organisations, especially the Royal British Legion, in sustaining and growing remembrance culture. He emphasised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The importance of inclusive and accessible events.</li> <li>• The value of cadet involvement in fostering intergenerational understanding.</li> <li>• The need to ensure every community feels connected to remembrance, regardless of size or location.</li> </ul> <p>He emphasised that remembrance is not just ceremonial—it is a living expression of gratitude, solidarity, and historical consciousness.</p>	
<b>2</b>	<b>Apologies and substitutions</b> Cllr. Ajanta Hilton	
	Apologies and substitutions were accepted as detailed above.	
<b>3</b>	<b>Minutes and actions from the previous meeting held 5 March 2025</b> Cllr. Ajanta Hilton	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minutes from 5 March 2025 were accepted as a true reflection of the meeting.</li> <li>• All actions have been completed.</li> </ul>	
<b>4</b>	<b>Update from Health subgroup</b> Kate Brierley for Harper Brown, NHS HWE ICB	
	<p>Harper Brown’s contributions to the Health Subgroup and the Board were acknowledged with heartfelt thanks as he moves on from his role at the ICB before the end of the year.</p> <p>Harper’s update included the following achievements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased veteran-friendly GP practices (36 → 75).</li> <li>• All six Hertfordshire hospitals accredited as veteran aware.</li> <li>• NHS staff training programme launched.</li> <li>• <i>OP Community support line</i> helped <b>55</b> referrals in six months.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HCC officers to explore continuity of NHS engagement on AFC issues following Harper</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suicide prevention collaboration with police underway.</li> <li>• Healthwatch survey underway.</li> </ul> <p>The Board raised concerns about Harper's exit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NHS restructuring and the loss of Harper's leadership.</li> <li>• Need for continued NHS engagement on AFC issues.</li> </ul>	<p>Brown's departure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Board members to support veteran-friendly GP accreditation promotion.</li> <li>• Kyle Redford to monitor outcomes of the Healthwatch survey.</li> </ul>
5	<p><b>A JSNA Briefing examining the health and wellbeing needs of Military Veterans and members of the Armed Forces Community in Hertfordshire</b> Chidera Aguiyi, Hertfordshire Public Health</p> <p><b>Updates from Hertfordshire Public Health supporting the Armed Forces Community</b> Helen Gledhill, Hertfordshire Public Health</p>	

Chidera highlighted key findings from the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment conducted earlier this year:

- 25,000 veterans in Hertfordshire (2.7% of population), over 50% aged 75+.
- Economic inactivity at 62% (linked to age profile).
- Veterans face higher risks of gambling, loneliness, and suicide.
- Barriers to mental health access due to poor signposting and coordination.

Recommendations are:

- Improve veteran identification and data collection.
- Support underrepresented groups (women, ethnic minorities).
- Promote trauma-informed care and peer support.
- Enhance awareness of housing entitlements and veteran-friendly services.

Limitations are:

- Lack of granular data on PTSD, depression, and anxiety.
- Veterans often do not disclose military background, affecting service access.

Helen Gledhill, Head of Strategic Partnerships, Hertfordshire County Council Public Health introduced herself as the new PH representative on the Board and outlined the following:

Helen's team expanded remit following an internal organisational review now holds strategic commissioning responsibilities for:

- *Drug and Alcohol Services*: Including treatment, prevention, and recovery pathways.
- *Homelessness and Multiple Disadvantage*: Commissioning support services for individuals facing overlapping challenges such as mental health, substance misuse, and housing instability.
- *Domestic Abuse*: Coordinating multi-agency responses and commissioning specialist support services.

These areas are particularly relevant to the Armed Forces community, given the known prevalence of trauma, addiction, and housing vulnerability among veterans.

Helen acknowledged a significant issue:

“The numbers are really quite low... but that’s not an accurate picture.”

- Veterans are underrepresented in service data, particularly in supported accommodation and substance misuse services.
- This underreporting is attributed to poor identification mechanisms and stigma, which prevent veterans from disclosing their status.
- Helen committed to improving data capture and analysis to better reflect the true scale of need.


Helen emphasised a shift from siloed service delivery to integrated commissioning:

- Cross-departmental collaboration is essential to address the complex, multi-dimensional needs of veterans.
- *Public Health* will work with *Adult Care Services*, *Children’s Services*, and external partners to embed *Armed Forces Covenant* (AFC) considerations into all relevant strategies.
- This includes ensuring that AFC needs are explicitly recognised in *Equality Impact Assessments* for new partnerships and programmes to ensure HCCs adheres to the *Armed Forces Duty*.

Helen endorsed the proposal for monthly strategic coordination meetings of health professionals to:

- Monitor progress on AFC-related actions.
- Share intelligence and data.
- Drive delivery of public health outcomes for the *Armed Forces* community.

Helen also highlighted the importance of aligning this work with the *Suicide Prevention Strategy*, noting that veterans are a priority group due to elevated risk factors.

6	<b>The Muster Point (Stevenage veterans' group): from inception to now</b> Stu Mendleson, The Muster Point	
	<p>The Muster Point is a veteran-led hub in Stevenage providing peer support, advocacy, and community connection. Founded by Stu Mendelson and Steve Black, it offers a safe space for veterans to rebuild trust, access services, and engage in recovery and employment pathways. Stu shared his personal journey:</p> <p><a href="#"> "The Covenant is a promise, not a slogan."</a></p> <p><b>Key Message:</b> <i>"The Covenant is a promise, not a slogan... Duncan's legacy should drive real, lasting change."</i></p> <p>Stevenage Borough Council in response have developed a two-year Armed Forces Action Plan and introduced mandatory training and a local <i>AFC forum</i>. Muster Point now part of multi-needs working group.</p>	
7	<b>Project to develop resources for veterans in Hertfordshire to help navigate public services</b> Lauren Fox, Armed Forces United, Former Players Club CIC	
	<p>A community initiative led by Lauren Fox and Luther Blissett OBE DL, using sport and storytelling to support veterans. It connects veterans with local services, raises awareness of unmet needs, and challenges stigma through lived experience and grassroots engagement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Originated from football-based engagement.</li> <li>• Lauren presented a complex case study of a vulnerable veteran navigating housing and healthcare.</li> <li>• Highlighted gaps in communication, charity scrutiny, and local collaboration.</li> <li>• Called for better coordination and storytelling to drive change.</li> </ul> <p><b>Key Insight:</b> <i>"Veterans are falling through the cracks. We need one door, one story, connected support."</i></p>	
8	<b>Outline plans for supporting carers, with funding from the 'Thrive Together' programme</b> Ian Pearce, Carers in Herts	

	<p>Ian introduced a new initiative funded by the Armed Forces Covenant's <i>Thriving Together Fund</i> to identify and support unpaid carers of veterans, and carers who are veterans in Hertfordshire.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Current carers registered:</b> 52</li> <li>• <b>Target:</b> 300+ within 12 months</li> </ul> <p><b>Key Activities:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Training</b> for Carer Support Advisors and frontline staff on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carer rights</li> <li>• Veteran-specific needs</li> <li>• Mental health and trauma</li> <li>• Signposting</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. <b>Outreach</b> to veteran hubs and breakfast clubs (e.g. <i>The Muster Point, Forces United</i>)</li> <li>3. <b>Veteran Carers Representation Group</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First meeting: 17 November 2025</li> <li>• Survey distributed to gather insights</li> </ul> </li> </ol> <p><b>Challenges:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many carers don't self-identify.</li> <li>• Engagement is low without dedicated outreach.</li> </ul> <p><b>Strategic Importance:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligns with JSNA findings on loneliness and mental health.</li> <li>• Aims to reduce isolation and improve support for carers.</li> </ul>	<p>Ian to update the Board on progress of this project.</p>
9	<p><b>Proposals for changes to the Board arrangements</b> Kate Brierley, Hertfordshire County Council</p>	

<p>Kate introduced the proposal by reflecting on the evolving landscape of Armed Forces Covenant delivery and the operational challenges facing the Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Board, established in 2012, now includes 45+ members, making coordination and delivery increasingly complex.</li> <li>• The expanded legal duty under the Covenant and upcoming local government reorganisation in 2028 necessitate a more agile and strategic structure.</li> <li>• Subgroups (<i>Health, Housing, Education</i>) have had mixed success, with Health being the most active, while others struggled due to limited professional input and inconsistent engagement from district councils.</li> </ul> <p><b>Three-part structural reform is proposed:</b></p> <p><i>1. Smaller Strategic Board</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To meet twice yearly, in online format.</li> <li>• Focused on high-level coordination, strategic oversight, and monitoring progress.</li> </ul> <p><i>2. Annual In-Person Conference</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A county-wide event to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Showcase grassroots initiatives.</li> <li>○ Share lived experience stories.</li> <li>○ Facilitate networking across sectors.</li> <li>○ Inform strategic priorities through workshops and listening exercises.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><i>3. Removal of Formal Subgroups</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instead of standing subgroups, the Board would consider thematic or task-based working groups formed around specific issues or projects.</li> <li>• This would allow more flexibility and responsiveness to emerging needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chair to review proposed Board structure and incorporate feedback on subgroup reform and communications.</li> </ul>
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Feedback highlights from Board members included strong support for an Annual Conference but not online meetings.

- An annual conference is seen as a vital platform for:
  - Public education and awareness.
  - Cross-sector collaboration.
  - Amplifying voices of veterans and carers.
  - Engaging new stakeholders, including businesses and community groups.

“Stories like Stu’s are powerful. We need to get them out to a wider audience.”

- Several members, expressed concern that removing subgroups could:
  - Undermine delivery capacity.
  - Reduce momentum between meetings.
  - Limit opportunities for focused, pragmatic problem-solving.

Suggestions for improvement were:

- Retain or reform subgroups into task-and-finish groups or thematic working groups (e.g. housing, mental health, communications).
- Introduce a *Communications Subgroup* to improve visibility, share updates, and coordinate messaging across districts.
- Ensure continuity and stability in Board structure ahead of the 2028 local government reorganisation, to avoid disruption and duplication.
- The proposal aims to balance strategic agility with delivery accountability.
- It recognises the need for:
  - More inclusive engagement (e.g. grassroots, third sector, carers).
  - Better use of data and lived experience.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A structure that can adapt to national policy shifts and local reform.</li> </ul> <p>Cllr Hilton thanked the Board for their views and advised that they would all be considered in due course.</p>	
<b>AOB</b>	<b>Security Alert – Hitchin Reserve Centre</b>	
	<p>Stan Nilsson, 162 Hospital Squadron, Royal Army Medical Corps reported a recent incident involving threatening behaviour by a member of the public to those attending the Reserve Centre including Cadets. Police responded swiftly and a security review underway. No one was hurt but several were shaken. Important to be aware ahead of Remembrance events.</p>	
<b>10</b>	<b>Close Cllr. Ajanta Hilton</b>	
	<p>Cllr. Hilton concluded the meeting by reaffirming her commitment to regular strategic coordination, proposing monthly meetings involving:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Chair and Deputy Chair</li> <li>• Public Health leads.</li> <li>• Secretariat and key delivery partners</li> </ul> <p>These meetings are intended to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain momentum between formal Board sessions.</li> <li>• Monitor progress on priority actions.</li> <li>• Ensure alignment across departments and partners.</li> <li>• Respond dynamically to emerging needs and opportunities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chair to establish monthly strategic coordination meetings with Chair, Deputy Chair, Public Health leads, and Secretariat.</li> </ul>

<p>This marks a shift toward continuous engagement and delivery, rather than relying solely on biannual Board meetings. The Chair encouraged all members and partners to actively contribute to the <i>Armed Forces Covenant newsletter</i>, which serves as a key communication channel.</p> <p>Cllr. Hilton closed with a strong reaffirmation of the Board’s purpose:</p> <p>“We want to keep this group very fluid”, and reiterated her dedication to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensuring the Covenant is not just a pledge, but a practical reality.</li><li>• Supporting veterans, service personnel, and their families through improved access to services, recognition, and community integration.</li><li>• Amplifying the voices of those with lived experience to inform policy and delivery.</li></ul> <p>Cllr Hilton reflected a clear intention to lead with empathy, urgency, and accountability, and to position Hertfordshire as a national exemplar in Armed Forces Covenant delivery.</p>	
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