

Veterans Newsletter NI

A Remarkable Quarter for NI veterans



Issue #6

June 2026

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Communities Minister dedicates a new Veterans Telephone Line

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As we move into what we hope will be a brighter summer season, although the weather has yet to convince us! We take this opportunity to reflect on an incredibly active and inspiring quarter across the veteran community in Northern Ireland.

From charity walks, coffee mornings & breakfasts, clubs and commemorations, it has been a busy time in Northern Ireland both reflecting on the past, and looking to the future.

Left: NI Veterans Commissioners Office team (L-R), Alan Murphy, David Johnstone & Rachael Harger pictured at the conclusion of the six day Somme 110 Charity Walk, at Port Stewart War Memorial. 6 June 2026

Over the past few months, we have witnessed remarkable achievements, meaningful commemorations, and powerful displays of community spirit. From the dedication of the new Veterans Support Line by Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons MLA, to the Somme 110 charity walk that united veterans and supporters across all six counties of Northern Ireland, the veteran community has continued to demonstrate resilience, camaraderie, and pride.

It has certainly been an eventful few months. We saw the Veterans Commissioner arrive at Inver Park alongside a giant trophy celebration ending the football season, while history was made as 2nd Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment took part in the St. Patrick's Day parade in full public view for the very first time. Meanwhile, our World War II veterans once again reminded us of their enduring legacy as they officially opened the new walkway at Gracehill.

Across generations, both old and new, veterans throughout Northern Ireland continue to make huge strides, supporting one another, strengthening communities, and ensuring that service and sacrifice are never forgotten.

In this edition, we bring you news from veterans and veteran organisations, updates on developments across the sector, and information on opportunities available within the community. We hope you find this newsletter both informative and inspiring, and we thank everyone who continues to contribute to the strength and success of our veteran family.

We hope you enjoy this edition.

The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office

Remembering Operation Telic: Northern Ireland's Enduring Contribution and Sacrifice

On May 22, 2026, Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone attended the 15th anniversary commemoration event at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, marking the anniversary of Operation Telic in Iraq and the formal end of the conflict.

Sponsored by Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly MLA and expertly emceed by Doug Beattie MC MLA – who during the Iraq invasion served as Regimental Sergeant Major of the Royal Irish Regiment – the evening provided a poignant opportunity for reflection, remembrance and camaraderie among those connected to the campaign.



Op TELIC Veterans join cadets from Campbell College Pipes & Drums at the 15th Anniversary of Op TELIC Event held at Stormont 22 May 2026.

Veterans, families and guests shared memories of service during a complex and dangerous period in modern military history, reflecting on the realities faced by the young men and women who deployed, the sacrifices they made, and the lasting impact on families who remained at home supporting loved ones from afar.

For many from Northern Ireland, Iraq was not their first experience of conflict. The British Army entered Iraq with decades of hard-earned operational experience from Northern Ireland, particularly in dealing with asymmetric warfare, insurgency tactics and urban conflict. Techniques developed on the streets of Belfast and Londonderry – including intelligence-led operations and rapid “snatch” handovers designed to minimise exposure to attack – would later be adapted for use in Basra and other hostile environments in Iraq.



Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, NI Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone and Chairman of the Royal British Legion (RBL) Northern Ireland, Colin Ward, lay a wreath during an act of remembrance at the Op TELIC 15th Anniversary event.

That institutional experience often placed British forces ahead of some of their American counterparts in the early stages of the conflict. Soldiers and reservists from Northern Ireland understood the unpredictable nature of insurgency warfare and the constant threat posed by hidden enemies operating among civilian populations. Lessons learned during Operation Banner proved invaluable in navigating the dangers of southern Iraq.

Yet Iraq presented its own brutal evolution of warfare. The improvised explosive device (IED) threat became one of the defining dangers of the campaign – sophisticated, relentless and deadly. Roadside bombs, vehicle-borne explosives and coordinated ambushes placed immense physical and psychological strain on personnel operating daily outside the wire. For many veterans, memories of those patrols, convoys and split-second decisions remain vivid today.



Royal British Legion Standard Bearers at the Op TELIC 15th Anniversary event at Stormont

Northern Ireland's contribution to Operation Telic was particularly significant given the size of the region. There was an enormous reservist commitment from Northern Ireland to Iraq, with men and women stepping forward from civilian careers and family life to serve alongside regular forces in demanding operational roles.

Once again, as a small nation, Northern Ireland demonstrated its capability, willingness and tenacity. The professionalism, resilience and dedication shown by its servicemen and women earned widespread respect throughout the armed forces and reinforced the proud tradition of military service that exists across the Province.

The event, organised by the Royal British Legion Northern Ireland, was an important occasion to bring veterans together in remembrance of this significant chapter of service and sacrifice.

The evening was further enhanced by the moving musical accompaniment provided by the Pipes and Drums of Campbell College, whose excellent performances throughout the event added greatly to the atmosphere of reflection and respect. A short commemorative act of remembrance also took place, offering a solemn moment to honour those who served, those who sacrificed, and those whose lives were forever changed by the conflict.

We extend our sincere thanks to the Royal British Legion for arranging such a meaningful event, and to Emma Little-Pengelly and Doug Beattie for helping make it possible in such a special and symbolic place for Northern Ireland, as well as to all those involved in making the evening so memorable.

Above all, the commemoration served as a powerful reminder of the enduring bonds of service, the importance of remembrance, and the shared commitment to recognising and supporting our veteran community here in Northern Ireland.

As keynote speaker, David Johnstone spoke candidly and from the heart about his own experiences deploying to Iraq in a reservist capacity. He reflected not only on the pressures faced by those serving in theatre, but also on the unseen burden carried by loved ones back home.

Behind every deployment was a family holding life together – partners managing households alone, maintaining jobs, raising young children and carrying the emotional weight of uncertainty while loved ones served thousands of miles away. Commissioner Johnstone acknowledged that military service is never borne solely by the individual in uniform; it is shared by entire families and communities.



NI Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone – an Iraq veteran himself, and Rachael Harger from the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioners Office, attend the RBL (NI) Op TELIC 15th Anniversary Event at Stormont. 22 May 2026



NI Veterans Commissioner addresses assembled guests in the Great Hall at Parliament Buildings



Dignitaries and members from the Royal British Legion Northern Ireland gather outside parliament building alongside veteran Doug Beattie MC MLA, and Deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly.

Helicopter Saturday – A Spectacular Finale to the Irish League Season - 25 April 2026

Saturday 25th April delivered one of the most dramatic and memorable finales in recent Irish League Premiership history, with three clubs still in contention for the coveted Gibson Cup as the final day of the season unfolded.

As supporters across Northern Ireland nervously watched events develop, few could have anticipated the extraordinary scenes that would follow the final whistle at Inver Park, Larne – with the league trophy arriving by RAF helicopter, carrying none other than Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone on board.

The remarkable finale came about after concerns emerged regarding the challenge of delivering the Gibson Cup quickly and securely to whichever club secured the title on such a tightly contested final day. Following discussions between the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL), the Royal Air Force and the Veterans Commissioner's Office, an innovative solution was agreed as part of the RAF's ongoing community outreach programme.

Reflecting on the experience, Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone said:

"I became aware of a major challenge with delivering the trophy to the winning team. After discussions with NIFL and the RAF, it was agreed that an RAF helicopter would ensure the Gibson Cup would arrive to the winning team moments after the final whistle. It was great for the Veterans Commissioner's office to play a part in making this happen and for the RAF to demonstrate their professional ability to assist in this way."

Representatives including Steve Mills, COO of NIFL, Ciara Murray from Sports Direct, and Commissioner Johnstone gathered with the flight crew at RAF Flying Station Aldergrove as the afternoon's drama unfolded across the Irish League grounds.

Once it became clear that Larne F.C. would be crowned champions, red ribbons were quickly attached to the Gibson Cup before the RAF Jupiter helicopter lifted off in glorious sunshine bound for Inver Park.



The flight crew take an opportunity to capture a picture with the coveted trophy of the day the Gibson Cup. A huge thank you to the RAF and the crew who made the day possible.



Ciara Murray from Sports Direct, Steve Mills, COO of NIFL and NI Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone prepare for take off to Larne



Ciara Murray from Sports Direct, Steve Mills, COO of NIFL, add red ribbons to the Gibson Cup

What followed was a truly unforgettable spectacle. As jubilant Larne supporters celebrated their club's title success, the helicopter descended dramatically onto the centre circle carrying the trophy that would crown their historic achievement. The roar from the crowd as the aircraft touched down created a moment that will undoubtedly live long in Irish League folklore.

The event also highlighted the strong relationship between the Armed Forces and the wider community in Northern Ireland, showcasing the professionalism, adaptability and commitment of RAF personnel in supporting a unique sporting occasion.

Special thanks were extended to Flight Lieutenant Guy Spence for his hospitality at Flying Station Aldergrove, alongside the helicopter crew of Lieutenant Commander Rob, Flight Lieutenant Jez and Master Air Crewman Mike for ensuring the safe and successful delivery of the trophy.

Recognition was also given to Sean Reynolds, Harv Smyth and Al Carns MP for their assistance in helping make the occasion such a fitting and memorable conclusion to the Irish League season.

The day served not only as a celebration of footballing success, but also as a powerful demonstration of partnership, community spirit and the unique ability of the Armed Forces to support and engage with public life in imaginative and positive ways.

For everyone fortunate enough to witness it, "Helicopter Saturday" will remain one of the great modern moments in Northern Ireland football history.



NI Veterans Commissioner and Steve Mills COO of NIFL accompany the Gibson Cup 'en route' to Larne



Inver Park from the Helicopter coming into land



The RAF Helicopter lands at Inver Park, Larne, to hand over the Gibson Cup to the winning team of the day



Congratulations to Larne F.C. on winning the Gibson Cup 2026
Photo courtesy of Larne F.C.

Somme 110 Sponsored Walk – 60 Miles, 6 Counties, One Remarkable Journey

At the beginning of June 2026, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office completed an epic six-day, 60-mile sponsored walk across all six counties of Northern Ireland in aid of two outstanding charities – the Somme Association and Air Ambulance Northern Ireland.

Led by Head of Office Alan Murphy, the initiative brought together veterans, cadets, schools, community organisations, and supporters from across the Province to commemorate the 110th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. Walking from war memorial to war memorial, the event served as a powerful reminder of the sacrifice made by thousands of men who stood shoulder to shoulder in the trenches, regardless of background or religion.

Day One – County Antrim

The walk began in Cullybackey, where participants received a warm send-off from the local community before travelling through Ballymena and onwards to Broughshane. Pupils from Buick Memorial Primary School lined the streets waving flags and cheering on the walkers, while Broughshane Royal British Legion provided welcome refreshments at the end of the opening day.



Above: Veterans at the Ballymena War memorial as part of the Somme 110 Sponsored Walk. Left: Day 2 veterans pictured in front of the War memorial in Kilkeel



Day Two – County Down

Starting in Annalong, walkers travelled the coastal route towards Kilkeel, stopping at several memorials along the way, including that of Victoria Cross recipient Robert Hanna. Cadets from Kilkeel High School Combined Cadet Force joined veterans for the day, before everyone finished with a barbecue hosted by Veterans Hairtlan Hub at the Schomberg Society.



Above: Day three veterans complete their leg of the walk from Armagh city to Portadown.

Day Three – County Armagh

County Armagh brought some of the toughest conditions of the week, with some torrential rain soaking walkers on route from Armagh to Portadown. Despite the weather, spirits remained high, and Portadown Royal British Legion ensured everyone was well looked after with hot food and refreshments at the finish line.



Left: UDR Veteran, Glen Espie accepts a donation from a young boy while passing through Newmills during the Somme 110 Charity Walk - June 2026



Day Four – County Fermanagh

Beginning in Brookeborough, walkers were joined by UTV's Paul Clark and welcomed by local schoolchildren who turned out to support the event. The route to Enniskillen included meetings with the Minister for Veterans and People, Louise Sander Jones MP, while the day concluded with a moving moment of reflection at the Enniskillen War Memorial.

Day Five – County Tyrone

Travelling from Dungannon to Cookstown, walkers finally enjoyed some kinder weather conditions. Along the route, veterans reflected on sacrifice both past and more recent, including moving personal stories connected to Northern Ireland's Troubles. Cookstown Royal British Legion and the Women's Section provided a tremendous meal at the end of the day, which quickly became legendary amongst participants.



Above: Veterans pictured at Cookstown War Memorial, in conclusion of Day Five of the Somme 110 Walk.

Throughout the six days there was a tremendous sense of camaraderie, reflection, and community spirit. Despite sore feet, aching muscles, and challenging weather, the walk brought people together to remember the sacrifices of the past while supporting two incredibly worthwhile causes.

Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone thanked everyone who participated, donated, or supported the initiative, describing it as a fitting tribute to those who served and sacrificed, while also supporting the vital, life-saving work carried out every day by Air Ambulance Northern Ireland.

Special thanks go to everyone who walked, donated, provided refreshments, assisted with transport, or cheered participants on from the roadside. Your support helped make this a truly memorable and meaningful occasion.

Donations remain open until 1 July 2026:

www.paypal.com/gb/fundraiser/charity/5826916



Day Six – County Londonderry

The final stage began in Castlerock before continuing through Coleraine and onwards to Portstewart. After one final tea and traybake stop in Coleraine, participants were piped along the Portstewart promenade towards the final war memorial, where Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone thanked everyone involved for their support throughout an unforgettable week.

Right: Veterans pictured at Coleraine War Memorial on the final day of the Somme 110 Walk.

Below: The Finale as veterans reach Portstewart War Memorial – The 'FRV' (Final Rendezvous) for the conclusion of the Somme 110 Walk.



Above: Veterans partaking in Day Four of the Somme 110 Walk pictured at Enniskillen War Memorial.



Celebrating a Remarkable Milestone for Lt Cdr George Spencer RN Retd

On 25 May 2026, the Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone, had the immense honour of attending the 100th birthday celebrations of Lt Cdr George Spencer RN Retd, a distinguished Second World War D-Day veteran who proudly served with the Royal Navy.

To commemorate this extraordinary milestone, George officially opened a new countryside walkway in his historic home village of Gracehill – a fitting tribute to a remarkable man whose service and legacy continue to inspire.

Over recent months, the Office of the Veterans Commissioner was delighted to support George's family and local veteran Eddie Waring in planning this special occasion. It was wonderful to see George surrounded by family, friends, and a host of distinguished guests, including Mr James Perry representing the Lord Lieutenant for County Antrim, the Mayor of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Councillor Jackson Minford, deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, and representatives from the Royal Navy.

The event was made even more memorable by the tremendous turnout from the local Gracehill community, who came together to celebrate George's incredible life and service on this very special birthday.

Our sincere thanks go to everyone who helped make the day such a fitting celebration for a truly exceptional veteran. To top it all off, the sunshine made a welcome appearance, adding to the warmth and joy of the occasion



Above: Lt Cdr George Spencer RN Retd pictured on his centenary birthday – 25 May 2026.



Above: Dignitaries gather for the opening of Castle Walk by D Day veteran Lt Cdr George Spencer RN Retd, including Deputy First Minister – Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, Mayor for Mid & East Antrim Jackson Minford and senior Royal Navy officers.



Above: Lt Cdr George Spencer RN Retd pictured alongside a plaque marking the opening of The Castle Walk.

Below: Lt Cdr George Spencer photographed with NI Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone, NIVCO Head of Office, Alan Murphy and Piper Francie Strain.



Minister Lyons Hosts Visit of UK Veterans Minister to New Veterans Support Line NI

Communities Minister Gordon Lyons MLA has welcomed UK Minister for Veterans and People, Louise Sandher-Jones MP, during a visit to the newly established Veterans Support Line NI team in Belfast.

The visit highlighted the Department for Communities' ongoing commitment to improving support for veterans, serving personnel and their families in Northern Ireland – a commitment strengthened following the successful motion at Stormont in November 2025 to adopt the Armed Forces Covenant.

Pictured Right: Minister for Veterans & People, Louise Sandher-Jones MP & Minister for Communities NI, Gordon Lyons MLA.



The Veterans Support Line NI provides a dedicated, trauma-informed service offering advice and guidance on benefits eligibility, housing support and wider services available to the Armed Forces community. The service includes a freephone helpline and accompanying text service designed to ensure veterans can access support quickly and confidentially.

Speaking during the visit, Minister Lyons said:

"I am pleased to welcome Minister Sandher-Jones and highlight the important work being done by the Veterans Support Line NI.

"This service offers a clear, trauma-informed pathway for veterans to engage with the Department's services, supported by staff who understand the unique challenges associated with military service."

The establishment of the service reflects the Department's continued work to deliver meaningful support to the veteran community following the Assembly's endorsement of the Armed Forces Covenant. The Covenant aims to ensure that no member of the Armed Forces community faces disadvantage due to their service.

Minister for Veterans and People Louise Sandher-Jones MP praised the collaborative approach behind the initiative, saying:

"The Veterans Support Line NI is a significant step forward in making sure those who have served, and their families, can access the support they need quickly and with confidence.

"No veteran should face barriers when it comes to housing, welfare or wider support, and this service will play an important role in helping people navigate that system.

"I'm grateful to Minister Lyons and his team for the strong partnership behind this work, which will make a real difference for the veterans community here in Northern Ireland."

The Veterans Support Line NI can be contacted free of charge on 0800 158 5556 or by texting ADVICE to 07860 042576.

Veterans Welfare Services NI Becomes Veterans Services Northern Ireland

Updated contact details for Veterans Services NI



Coleraine - 0757 096 4330	(North Field Team)
Holywood- 0738 705 0603	(East Field Team)
Portadown- 0738 705 0640	(South Field Team)
Enniskillen - 0738 705 0505	(West Field Team)
Front Door - 0738 705 0564	(Veterans Services NI HQ)

Veterans Welfare Services Northern Ireland is now Veterans Services Northern Ireland – a new name with the same trusted support for veterans and their families across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

While our name and contact numbers have changed from landlines to new mobile numbers to improve accessibility and ease of contact, our services remain exactly the same.

Veterans Services Northern Ireland provides one-to-one welfare support through a dedicated network of Welfare Managers across NI and ROI. We work with veterans from all three Armed Forces, alongside statutory organisations, voluntary groups, and service charities to help promote independence while maintaining dignity.

Support includes welfare advice, mental health support, physiotherapy services, and connections to a wide range of military charities and support organisations.

Veterans Services Northern Ireland aims to be the central point of contact for any veteran or family member seeking support during times of need.

For updated contact details and support information, please get in touch with Veterans Services Northern Ireland.

The Veterans Services NI can also be contacted by email: dbsafvs-vs-ni-roi@mod.gov.uk

Veterans From Regenerate Veterans Group Gather in Portrush for Annual Sandcastle Challenge

Veterans from across Northern Ireland travelled to Portrush last weekend for the fourth annual Regenerate Veterans Sandcastle Challenge.

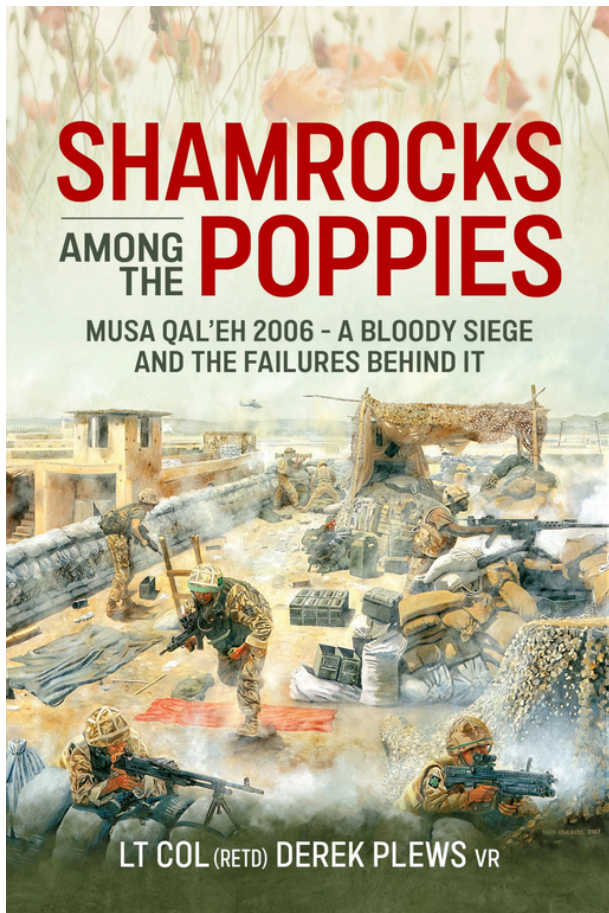
Four teams competed on the beach, with Paul and Team "Sandtastic" winning with their D-Day-themed tank creation on the anniversary of 6 June.

The weekend also included a BBQ, an evening at the Services Club alongside fellow veterans and families, and a traditional Ulster fry in Ballymoney.

Organisers thanked all supporters, including Blairs Holidays, Universal Meat Company, Sizzlin' Sausage, C Company 2 Royal Irish and DART, for helping make the event another success.



Shamrocks Among the Poppies Brings the Story of Musa Qal'eh to Life



Ahead of its official launch on 27 June 2026, retired Lieutenant Colonel Derek Plews joined the NI Veterans Commissioner for a special podcast discussion about his military career and his powerful new book, Shamrocks Among the Poppies.

The book tells the harrowing and remarkable story of the siege of Musa Qal'eh in Afghanistan in 2006 through the words and experiences of the men who fought there, in particular the soldiers of the Royal Irish Regiment.

Shamrocks Among the Poppies recounts how a small group of Royal Irish Regiment soldiers, alongside other British troops, found themselves isolated, heavily outnumbered and under relentless attack while defending a rundown mudbrick compound against determined and well-armed Taliban insurgents intent on their destruction.

Over five weeks, the soldiers endured repeated assaults in brutal conditions, facing constant danger while holding their position against overwhelming odds. The book offers a graphic and deeply personal account of life inside the compound, capturing both the intensity of combat and the resilience, courage and camaraderie of those involved.

As well as documenting the events of Musa Qal'eh itself, the book also explores the wider political and military context surrounding the UK's decision to increase its focus on Afghanistan while still heavily committed to operations in Iraq.

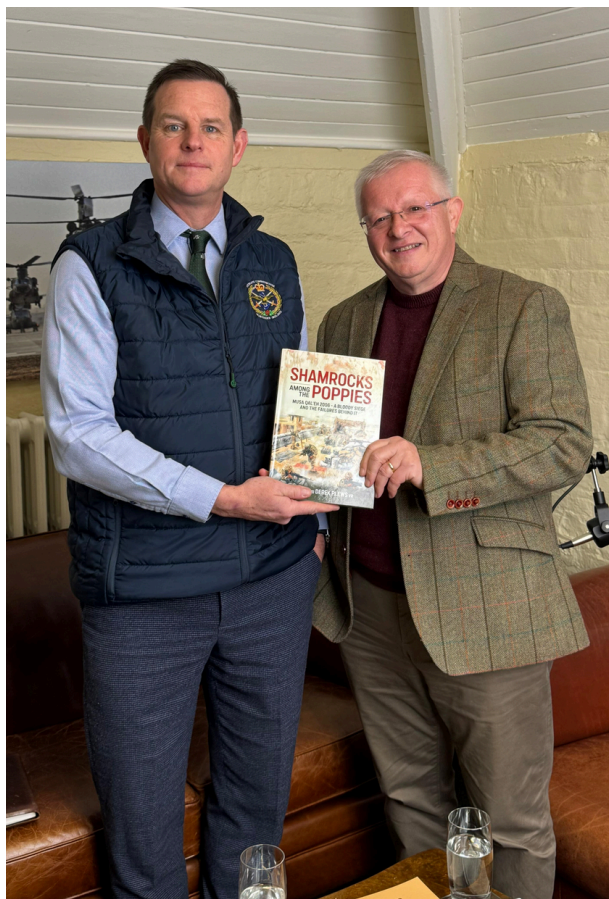
Speaking during the podcast, Derek Plews reflected on the importance of recording these stories and ensuring that the experiences of the Royal Irish Regiment soldiers who took part in the operation are preserved for future generations.

The conversation with the Veterans Commissioner provides a fascinating insight not only into the writing of the book, but also into Derek's own military service and the enduring impact that the events of Musa Qal'eh had on those who served there.

Shamrocks Among the Poppies is expected to be an important contribution to the historical record of the conflict in Afghanistan and a fitting tribute to the courage and sacrifice of the men involved.

You can watch or listen to Derek's Podcast for 'Once a Warrior, Life Beyond the Uniform' - on Apple Podcasts, Amazon, Spotify, Podbean, Youtube or on the Northern Ireland Veteran's Commissioners Website:

www.nivco.co.uk/podcasts/



Lt Col (Rtd) Derek Plews pictured with NI Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone during recording of his Podcast for 'Once a Warrior, Life Beyond the Uniform' where Derek talks about his new book 'Shamrocks among the Poppies' and the importance of telling this real life story.

Beyond the Battlefield Delivers Enhance Project Awareness Workshop



Beyond The Battlefield

On 25 March, Alan and Rachael from the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office, and others from various Veteran organisations here in NI, attended a session delivered by Beyond the Battlefield, showcasing its Enhance Programme supporting veterans across Northern Ireland, particularly in regards to homelessness.

The programme provides wraparound support for veterans who are vulnerably housed or at risk of homelessness, including benefits advice, housing and employment support, health assistance, referrals to specialist organisations and dedicated caseworker support through a 24-hour helpline.

Representatives from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive also provided valuable insight into housing allocations and some of the challenges veterans can face when seeking accommodation and support.



Above - Alan Murphy, Head of Office represents the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioners Office at the Beyond the Battlefield ENHANCE Workshop at Harbour House, Portavogie

The session highlighted both the complexity of supporting vulnerable veterans and the commitment shown by Beyond the Battlefield in delivering tailored support to those in need.



Since the session, Beyond the Battlefield has also been awarded a £500,000 grant through the UK Government's Reducing Veteran Homelessness Programme to expand its homeless centre in Portavogie, with eight new en-suite bedrooms.

The expansion will provide additional safe and supportive accommodation for veterans experiencing homelessness, while also creating dedicated space for face-to-face trauma and PTSD counselling services.



Above - Bobby Gillespie delivers the ENHANCE Project Awareness and Referral Workshop to representatives from various Veterans Groups.



To contact Beyond the Battlefield for further information :
Email: info@beyondthebattlefield.org
Tel: 02891 248 466



www.readingforce.org.uk

For Organisations



Join Today

For Families



Join Today

Hello fellow bookworms, & those yet to dive in!

My name is Jen, and I am the new Reading Force Ambassador in NI.

Some of you know me already, from Coleraine Veterans Club, the Giants' Retreat, the Serving & Ex Serving Women's Network in NI, and/or Connect to Protect. I am absolutely delighted to now be joining the Reading Force team, to carry on the great work started by Paula, and then Laura, at Reading Force NI.

At Reading Force, we provide free books and special resources to families, children and young people. We do this directly within the community, through partner organisations and in person at events running across NI. We can also help to start up new book clubs that aim to foster new connections. All forces families, reserves and ex-forces families, whether at home together or separated by deployment or training or for other reasons – can take part in Reading Force for free.

As a community, I know we are all passionate about supporting every member of our armed forces family as much as we possibly can; and I know too that this can be particularly difficult once a family has left the services. To help with that, I am keen to collaborate with organisations, to bolster your support to families with our free books and resources. If you think I might be able to help compliment your support service, then please get in touch.

I hope to be at as many events as I can be, so please invite me along to your event and I'll be there with my bag full of free books and other resources!

Here's to the next chapter,

Jen x

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Veterans Commissioner Supports Great Tommy Sleepout in Lurgan

In March, the Veterans Commissioner visited both the Great Tommy Sleepout outside the Royal British Legion in Lurgan and an earlier event in the month at Thales, Belfast, to support the initiative raising awareness of the challenges faced by some veterans.



Staff from Thales took part in Belfast alongside Scotty Gray and veteran Peter White taking part in Lurgan, helping highlight the importance of supporting former service personnel experiencing hardship.

The Commissioner was keen to meet as many participants as possible and raise the profile of this event, attending both camps to show support and help raise morale. Having taken part in the Great Tommy Sleepout himself last year, he understands the importance of highlighting the challenges of sleeping outdoors & homelessness and the importance of raising awareness for the Armed Forces community.

The Great Tommy Sleepout continues to play an important role in encouraging support for veterans and their families.



Above - Councillor, Alderman Mark Baxter joins Scotty Gray and veteran Peter White alongside NI Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone as they support the Great Tommy Sleep Out raising awareness of veteran homelessness.



Left - NI Veterans Commissioner joins employees of Thales on the Great Tommy Sleep out 12-13 March, Belfast, 2026

THALES



Nominations Open for 2026 Northern Ireland Veterans Awards

Nominations are now officially open for the 2026 Northern Ireland Veterans Awards, which will take place at the Crowne Plaza Belfast on 22 October 2026.

Now in its fifth year, the awards celebrate the outstanding achievements of veterans, organisations, businesses and community champions making a positive impact across Northern Ireland.

Award categories include Veteran of the Year, Community Group of the Year, Health & Wellbeing Award, Employer of the Year, Volunteer of the Year and the Lifetime Achievement Award, alongside several others recognising dedication and service within the Armed Forces community.

Organisers are encouraging individuals, businesses and organisations to submit nominations and help shine a spotlight on those continuing to serve their communities long after military service.

All shortlisted finalists will receive a complimentary ticket to attend the awards ceremony.

Further information and nomination details are available at www.theveteransawards.com/region/northern-ireland-2026/.



Brooke House Awarded £1 Million Through UK VALOUR Programme

Investment will strengthen support for veterans and families across Northern Ireland

Brooke House Health and Well-being Centre has been awarded £1 million by the UK Government's Office for Veterans' Affairs through the VALOUR programme, helping expand support services for veterans and their families across Northern Ireland.

The funding will support the development of a regional Veterans' Recognised Centre, improving access to psychological support, trauma-informed care and practical services.

Chief Executive Joan Clements BEM described the funding as "a significant recognition" of the work already being carried out by Brooke House and its partner hubs.

"This investment will allow us to strengthen access to psychological support and trauma-informed care, while developing a coordinated regional network to ensure that no veteran or family member is left without the help they need."

What is the VALOUR Programme?

The VALOUR programme is a UK-wide initiative designed to strengthen support networks for veterans and their families. It focuses on improving access to services including mental health support, housing advice and employment guidance.

The word "valour" means courage and bravery, particularly in military service, reflecting the commitment and sacrifice made by veterans.

A Growing Network of Support

Established in 2018 at Colebrooke Park, County Fermanagh, Brooke House provides specialist therapeutic support for police and military veterans affected physically or psychologically through service.

Its services combine evidence-based psychological therapies with nature-based approaches such as horticulture, music and creative arts. The centre also offers tailored residential programmes for veterans and their families.

Brooke House later led the Thrive Together programme in Northern Ireland, creating a regional network of support hubs offering drop-in sessions, welfare advice and pathways into specialist wellbeing services.

The organisation has also developed a volunteer befriending network to support socially isolated veterans and families across Northern Ireland.

In November, Brooke House received the Health and Well-being Award at the Northern Ireland Veterans Awards.

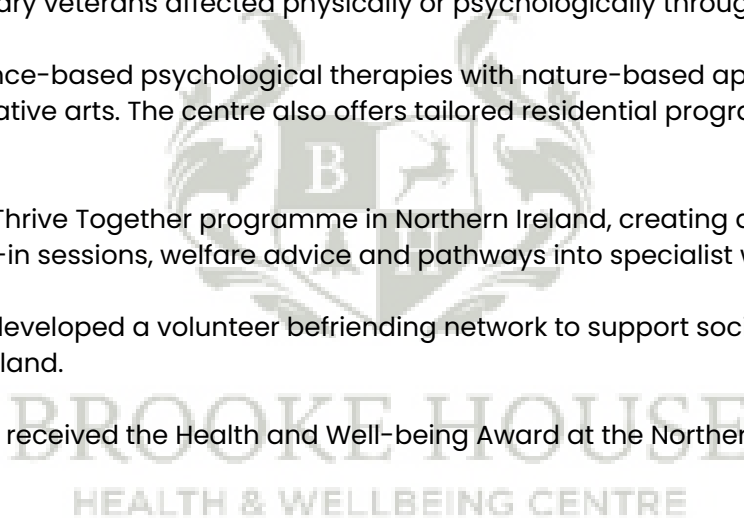
Looking Ahead

The new funding will help Brooke House expand trauma-informed services and strengthen partnerships delivering support in areas such as housing and employment.

The investment positions Brooke House to continue improving recovery pathways and wellbeing support for veterans and their families throughout Northern Ireland.



Brooke House Health & Well-being team pictured at the 2025 NI Veterans Awards after winning the Health and Well-being category.



Veterans Take Flight Through Model Aircraft Club at Newtownards Airfield



Photo courtesy of Newtownards Chronicle & Co. Down Observer – Pictured: George Mullan, Alex Baillie, Fiona Sinclair, Catherine Haves, Karen Francey, Scott Millar, Glenn Barr, Alderman Trevor Cummings (Council Veterans Champion), & Craig Kane at the launch of Help for Heroes Model Plane Project

A group of Armed Forces veterans are building friendship, confidence and shared connections through a growing model aircraft club at Newtownards Airfield. Supported by Help for Heroes, the initiative brings together veterans and members of the wider Armed Forces community to build and fly model aircraft in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

Representatives from the charity's community development team recently visited the airfield to meet participants and hear about the positive impact the group is having. The project is led by Craig Kane and supported by Help for Heroes community builders Alex Baillie and Glenn Barr. What began as a shared interest in aviation has quickly developed into an important social outlet, helping members develop new skills, form friendships and support one another.

During the visit, Ards and North Down Veterans Champion Alderman Trevor Cummings also met with the group to discuss how the project could continue to grow in the future. One of the highlights of the evening saw a model aircraft, decorated in Help for Heroes colours, take to the skies against the backdrop of Scrabo Tower.

Organisers hope the initiative will continue to attract more veterans and members of the Armed Forces community in the months ahead.

New Veterans' Hub Set to Open in Ballymena

Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone recently met with Lawrie Philpott to discuss progress on the new Veterans' Support Group hub in Ballymena. Premises have now been secured and are currently undergoing renovation ahead of an opening in the near future. Once complete, the hub will provide a welcoming and supportive space for veterans across Ballymena and the surrounding areas.

The new facility will offer veterans a comfortable environment to connect, socialise and take part in a range of activities, representing an important step forward in strengthening local support for the Armed Forces community. Further updates are expected soon as work continues on the project.





Welsh Veterans Commissioner Supports Aid Convoy to Ukraine

Welsh Veterans Commissioner, James Phillips, recently joined a humanitarian aid convoy delivering vital support to Ukraine in partnership with V-Aid, a Swansea-based veterans charity and member of the unfunded Thrive Together network.

The convoy, involving ten vehicles, formed part of a wider initiative organised by the Scottish-based charity Pickups for Peace (P4P). The mission not only delivered essential aid to communities affected by the conflict, but also helped explore future opportunities for veterans across Wales to become involved in similar initiatives.

Looking ahead, discussions are already underway with Valour partners around supporting a future vehicle handover, potentially as part of a September convoy, continuing efforts to stand alongside and support the people of Ukraine during this ongoing crisis.



Above: Welsh Veterans Commissioner, James Phillips joins a Ukrainian Military Officer during a recent convoy to deliver vital support to Ukraine.

Open Minds Programme Launches to Support Veterans' Mental Health



The Open Minds programme is a new initiative designed to create lasting change for veterans across Northern Ireland by tackling stigma, improving understanding and providing practical support for mental wellbeing. Developed by veterans in partnership with Inspire Wellbeing, the programme has been spearheaded by veteran Michael Donaldson.

Built around three key elements, Open Minds aims to equip professionals, families and communities with the confidence and knowledge needed to better support veterans.

The first element focuses on training for professionals, offering tailored workshops and resources for those who may encounter veterans in the workplace or through frontline services, including healthcare staff, HR teams, managers and service providers. The training provides practical guidance on recognising signs of mental health changes, responding with empathy and connecting veterans to the right support, while helping to foster inclusive environments where veterans feel understood and valued.

The second element is a nationwide anti-stigma campaign designed to challenge misconceptions surrounding veterans' mental health. Through real stories from veterans and their families, the campaign highlights resilience, recovery and the importance of seeking help. Public awareness materials, including posters, videos and social media content, aim to encourage open conversations and break down harmful stereotypes.

The final element is a digital toolkit, accessible anytime and anywhere, which complements the training programme. The toolkit includes checklists, conversation starters, referral pathways and practical advice to help professionals, families and communities support veterans more effectively.

The programme has already enjoyed a successful start, with the Department for Communities embracing the training and providing very positive feedback ahead of the opening of the Veterans Support Line in June.



Above: Pictured are veterans, family members of veterans, veteran organisations, Inspire staff and Project Lead, Michael Donaldson who worked collaboratively to create the Open Minds programme.

To find out more about the Open Minds programme, please email Michael Donaldson at m.donaldson@inspirewellbeing.org.

Royal Hillsborough Hosts Historic Royal Irish Regiment St Patrick's Day Celebration



2nd Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment on parade outside Royal Hillsborough Castle & Gardens

This year's Royal Irish Regiment St Patrick's Day Parade and Presentation of Shamrock marked a significant moment in the regiment's history as Royal Hillsborough hosted the event for the very first time in a community setting.

Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone attended the celebrations alongside soldiers, officers, cadets, veterans and families for what remains one of the most important and symbolic traditions within the regiment's calendar.

Organised by the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment (2 R IRISH), the Presentation of Shamrock is a long-standing military tradition dating back more than a century. The custom originated with Irish regiments serving in the British Army, where shamrock was presented to soldiers on St Patrick's Day as a symbol of Irish identity, pride and service. Over the years, the ceremony has become an enduring tribute to the courage, heritage and sacrifice of Irish soldiers across generations.

The parade through Royal Hillsborough and subsequent presentation ceremony provided a proud and memorable occasion for all involved, while also strengthening the connection between the Armed Forces community and the wider public.

The Veterans Commissioner congratulated everyone involved in organising the event and helping make the day such a special and historic occasion.



Above: Those partaking in St Patrick's Day celebrations 2026 photographed alongside the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone

Right: Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner joins Councillors from Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council including Veterans Champion for the area, Alderman James Tinsley



The Ulster Defence Regiment Benevolent Fund: Here When You Need Us Most

Since 1972, the Ulster Defence Regiment Benevolent Fund has been proud to stand behind those who once stood for us. Dedicated to supporting former UDR members, their widows, widowers, and dependents, the Fund continues to provide vital assistance during times of need – confidentially and compassionately.



Do you know a loved one, friend, or neighbour who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment? If so, they could be eligible for support through our wide network of trusted partners, offering financial, healthcare, mental health, and wellbeing services.

Financial Advice and Support

- Guidance on benefits and claims
- Emergency financial support
- Assistance with priority household bills
- Support towards essential living costs
- Help with specialist medical equipment costs
- Funding for home adaptations to improve quality of life

Healthcare Support

- Free membership of the UDR Benevolent Fund healthcare scheme
- Fast access to a consultant
- Financial assistance with consultant fees and diagnostic tests
- Contributions towards dental and optician fees
- Support for a range of therapies
- Access to discounts on products and services

Mental Health Care Support

In collaboration with Brookehouse and the Veterans Welfare Service NI, we offer clinical psychology support, physiotherapy, and group therapy interventions such as horticulture, equine, music, art, and nature-based therapies.

Wellbeing Support

We also provide organised events and services including:

- Family and disabled soldiers' support groups
- Apartment respite breaks
- Christmas luncheons
- Befriending services for those who need a listening ear

If you or someone you know could benefit from our help, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Save our number, you never know when you might need it.

Contact Us:

Phone: 07720 677 838

Email: udrbenfund@outlook.com

Website:

www.udrbenevolentfund.com

Confidential, compassionate support, when you need it most.



NI Veteran & Family Support

This list does not include all services available in Northern Ireland, please contact the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioners Office for further information of available veteran services.

Local Veteran Support

Veterans Services NI
(Formerly Veterans Welfare Service NI)
E: dbsafvs-vs-ni-roi@mod.gov.uk
Tel: 0738 705 0564

Northern Ireland Veterans
Commissioner's Office
E: commissioner@nivco.co.uk
Tel: 02825 483169

Andy Allen Veteran Support NI
www.aavsn.com
Tel: 02890 747071

Decorum NI
www.decorumni.co.uk
Tel: 02891 457565

Ely Centre
www.elycentre.com
Tel: 02866 320977

Military & Police Support
West Tyrone (MAPS)
www.mapswesttyrone.org.uk
Tel: 02882 245459

MUVE - Mid-Ulster Victims
Empowerment
www.muve.org.uk
Tel: 02886 763349

Serving & Ex Serving Womens
Network
E: jen@cw-ni.co.uk
Tel: 07740580123

South East Fermanagh
Foundation
www.seff.org.uk
Tel: 02867 723884

South & East Tyrone Welfare
Support
Email: setw@btconnect.com
Tel: 028 8772 6152

RAFA Contact Centre:
0800 018 2361

NI Region:
Wg Cdr N Williams
07739 191958

Regenerate Veterans Group
Email:
regenerateveterans@outlook.com

Veteran Health & Wellbeing

Beyond the Battlefield
www.beyondthebattlefield.org
Tel: 02891 228389

BLESMA -
The Limbless Charity
www.blesma.org
Tel: 07766258461 or
07741744617

Brooke House
www.brookehouse.co.uk
Tel: 02889 531223

Combat Stress
www.combatstress.org.uk
Tel: 02890 269990

Defence Medical Welfare
Service NI (Veterans)
E: referralsNI@dmws.org.uk
Tel: 0800 999 3697

Help for Heroes
www.helpforheroes.org.uk
Tel: 0300 3039888

Inspire wellbeing
www.inspirewellbeing.org
Tel: 02890 328474

Royal British Legion
www.britishlegion.org.uk
Tel: 0808 802808

Walking With The Wounded
walkingwiththewounded.org.uk
Tel: 01263 863900

Benevolence Funding & Finance

Army Benevolent Fund
www.thesoldierscharity.org
Tel: 02892 678112

Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund
www.rafbf.org
Tel: 03001 021919

Royal Navy &
Royal Marines Charity
www.rnrma.org.uk
Tel: 02393 871520

SSAFA -
The Armed Forces Charity
www.ssafa.org.uk
Tel: 02890 327740

UDR Benevolent Fund
www.udrbenfund.org.uk
Email: info@udrbenfund.org.uk
Tel: 07720 677838

Make the Call
www.nidirect.gov.uk/makethecall
Tel: 0800 2321271

Pensions

Forces Pension Society
www.forcespensionsociety.org
Tel: 02078 209988

Veterans UK
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk
Tel: 0808 1914218

Jobs/Training

Forces Employment Charity
E: a.sturgenor@forcesemployment.org.uk
Tel: 07805 725242

Connect Through Service
www.trust-cts.com
Tel: 07796 084069

Legal Support

Reid Black Solicitors
www.reidblack.com
Tel: 02895 922744