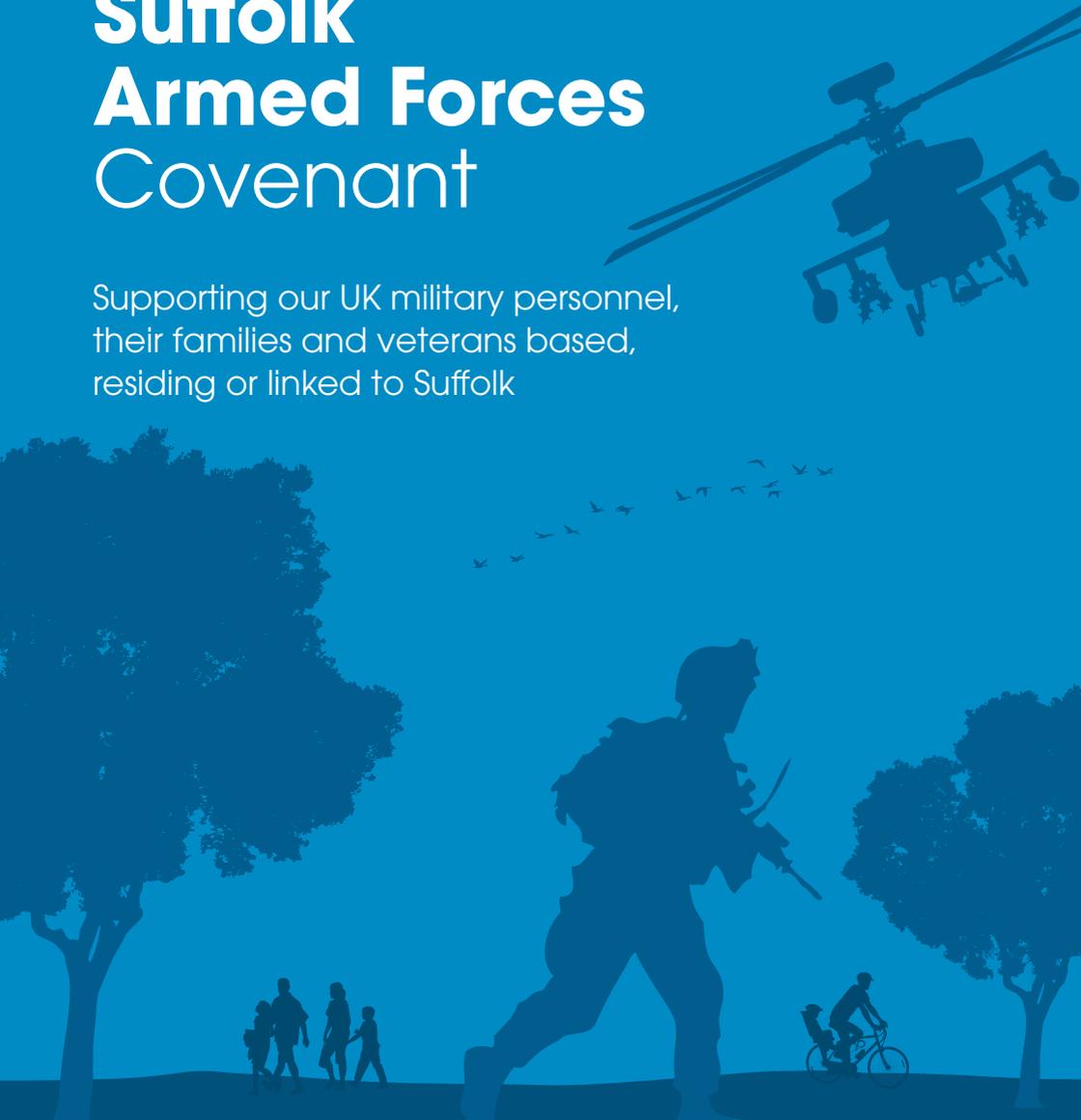


Suffolk Armed Forces Covenant

Supporting our UK military personnel,
their families and veterans based,
residing or linked to Suffolk



Annual Report
2024/2025



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FOREWORD / INTRODUCTION

Andy Smith (Suffolk Armed Forces Commissioner)

Suffolk's deep and historic connection with the Armed Forces remains a defining part of the county's identity. This report sets out Suffolk's continued commitment to serving personnel, veterans, reservists and their families, while recognising the county's growing role in national defence. With tens of thousands of veterans now living locally, one of the largest Armed Forces communities in the East of England, their contribution enriches Suffolk's economy, culture and civic life, reflecting the values at the heart of the Armed Forces Covenant.

In Suffolk, the Covenant functions as a practical, collaborative partnership rather than a symbolic promise. Local authorities, health and education services, charities, businesses and voluntary groups work collectively to ensure that no member of the Armed Forces community is disadvantaged by their service. The Armed Forces Commissioner plays a central role in this effort, acting as advocate, convenor and problem-solver, helping partners turn Covenant principles into meaningful action. The report acknowledges the strong foundations laid by former Commissioner Lee Holloway and emphasises the importance of continued engagement with personnel, veterans, families and service providers so that lived experience informs policy and delivery.

The report also highlights the essential work of Suffolk's Armed Forces Champions, whose leadership within district and borough councils embeds the Covenant at a local level. Their efforts ensure support is accessible, responsive and tailored to community needs. Appreciation is extended to the Office of the Lord Lieutenant and to Jim Brown for their ongoing expertise and advocacy.

Looking ahead, Suffolk's strategic location and defence infrastructure place it at the forefront of national and international security. This expanding role brings both opportunity and responsibility, reinforcing the need to support those who serve and those who settle in the county after service. The report outlines progress made in 2024–2025 and demonstrates the impact of shared purpose and partnership.

The UK Armed Forces Covenant has three key principles:

- to recognise the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the UK Armed Forces;
- that members of the armed forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and
- that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured or the bereaved

DELIVERY STRUCTURE

The Suffolk Armed Forces Covenant Board includes representation from local UK Armed Forces units, military welfare and veteran support agencies, statutory bodies and councillors and council officers.

Strategic context:

There are a range of identified issues which we seek to understand better and/or take practical action.

The three-year Suffolk Armed Forces Action Plan runs until the end of 2026 and is structured around four key themes:

1. Awareness and Communication (Community Engagement)
2. Health and Wellbeing
3. Education, Employment and Training
4. Housing

HEADLINES

Presented by theme, below is a summary of select activity that has taken place over the period January 2024 to the end of December 2025.

Awareness and Communication

The Terms of Reference for the Suffolk Armed Forces Covenant Board was rewritten, with the aim of providing clarity and a balance of representation across the armed forces community and local public bodies.

A job description for all Local Government Councillors who were appointed Armed Forces Champions, has proved to be a useful guide and commitment to role.

The Armed Forces Champions (Councillors and Officers) supported their respective local authorities to update their covenant pledges and championed participation in the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.



HEADLINES CONTINUED

The Suffolk Military Covenant web-portal was reformatted to simplify the content and make it smartphone friendly. The updated support sections include the veterans support and meet-up groups across the county.

The Royal British Legion 'Credit their Service' campaign, asked local authorities to review their policies when it came to means tested benefits and disregard any income directly linked to armed forces compensation or pensions. All of Suffolk's local authorities' policies met this expectation.



Community Engagement

During Armed Forces Week, local councils took it in turns to lead events in Haverhill (2024) and Ipswich (2025) and community led events took place in Brantham, Felixstowe and Hadleigh. During UK Armed Forces Week 2025, Combat2Coffee CIC co-hosted the first-ever Bigger Breakfast at Ipswich YMCA Rugby Club alongside their Patron and football legend, Terry Butcher. The morning brought together over 500 serving personnel, veterans, cadets, and family members. Al Carns, DSO OBE MC MP, then Minister for Veterans and Peoples Affairs also attended.

June 2024 marked the 80th anniversary of D-Day, the massive Allied amphibious invasion of Normandy during World War II. Whilst there were several small community events, the Suffolk D-Day 80 Service of Commemoration was organised by St Edmundsbury Cathedral in partnership with the Royal British Legion who act as the custodians of remembrance.

In June 2025, to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE80), on behalf of the Suffolk Lieutenancy, Commodore Rob Bellfield DL and St Edmundsbury Cathedral held a Choral Evensong. There were many VE80 commemorative events led by communities.

In August 2025, a Victory over Japan (VJ80) Suffolk Commemorative Service, attended by Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, was held at St Mary's Church, Bury St Edmunds. St Mary's contains the regimental chapel of the Suffolk Regiment, who suffered very badly as a result of their service in the Far East.



HEADLINES CONTINUED

The Royal British Legion branches across Suffolk were kept very busy through local D-Day 80 / VE Day 80 / VJ Day 80 and other remembrance activities. After seven years, Maj (Retd) Ken Rowbottom stood down as Chairman of the Suffolk County Branch and Denis Bloomfield took over (his third stint). In terms of The Poppy Appeal which isn't just around remembrance, it's a 12-month campaign, last year approximately £832,000 was raised in Suffolk. There is however a need for Poppy Appeal Organisers (volunteers).



6 Regiment Army Air Corps led on the Suffolk Show Military Village through the Suffolk Engagement role established in 2012. This gives the county's Armed Forces, including our American colleagues, an opportunity to showcase their capabilities to the public. 2025 marked their largest and best-supported Military Village. It was a fitting moment to sign off, as this was their final show for the Regiment.

In early 2025, the East Anglia Reserve Forces & Cadets Association and 6 Regiment Army Air Corps coordinated an employers' breakfast engagement event at Wattisham Flying Station, the home of the Attack Helicopter Force. 76 local employers attended receiving a presentation on the Reserve aviation capability, and a tour of the Apache helicopter. Two Regional companies signed the Armed Forces Covenant as have 150 covenant signatory organisations in Suffolk, some also participate in the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.

A new Naval partnership with Ipswich was founded in May 2025. HMS Trumpeter, an Archer-class patrol vessel, was granted the Freedom of Ipswich which signalled the beginning of a new formal affiliation between the Borough and the Royal Navy's warship.

In July 2025, 23 Parachute Engineer Regiment and elements of 28 Engineer Regiment (C-CBRN) exercised their Freedom of Woodbridge.

The RAF Police at RAF Honington twice hosted the Blind Veterans charity dinner for the region which provided a great opportunity for serving personnel and veterans to share a few stories.



HEADLINES CONTINUED

The Lord Kitchener Memorial Holiday Centre in Lowestoft offers holidays and short breaks for the UK Armed Forces community, including the Merchant Navy, and Emergency Services and last year began a £1 million fundraising appeal to restore this Grade II listed building. The team further developed their veteran's support via their twice monthly breakfast club and launched Heroes Hub, a monthly Drop-in.

In November 2025, Combat2Coffee was awarded The King's Award for Voluntary Service which recognises outstanding work by local volunteer groups to support their communities.



Health and Wellbeing

The Veterans Integrated Service (VIS) at the Norfolk & Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust (NSFT) provides holistic, Trust wide support for veterans, their families, and carers, delivered by trained staff and veterans. Instead of holding caseloads, it offers wraparound care alongside NSFT teams, Op Courage, and partner organisations. VIS promotes wellbeing through community and family activities and has trained 200 Community and Inpatient team members across NSFT in veterans' aware practice. It also runs a female veterans' group to strengthen social connection and peer support, welcoming all veterans to take part.

Suffolk County Council Public Health: Smoking and Vaping Health Needs Assessment identified the Armed Forces community as having greater smoking prevalence than many other groups. Awareness of the Feel Good Suffolk programme to follow.



SSAFA Suffolk provides confidential, face-to-face welfare support for serving personnel, veterans and families, offering advocacy, mentoring and help navigating NHS and wider services. The Branch has strengthened coordination with NHS partners through the Regional Hub model while maintaining a strong local focus. Volunteers support people facing mental health, financial, housing and family challenges, including in prisons. Demand remains high, and more caseworkers are needed to ensure fair access to support under the Armed Forces Covenant.

HEADLINES CONTINUED

Front Line Families is a collaboration between Suffolk Mind and Combat2Coffee that secured a large multi-year grant from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. The service offers training and one-to-one outreach support to serving personnel, veterans and their families across Suffolk. A grant from the Veterans' Foundation for Suffolk Mind family counselling services followed.



NHS Suffolk and North East Essex ICB strengthened support for serving personnel, veterans and families through targeted health and wellbeing events and partnerships with Wattisham Flying Station and Sutton Heath. Three multi-agency events reached around 300 people and connected them with 35 organisations offering mental health, lifestyle, sexual health, oral health, financial and preventative support. The ICB advanced prevention, early intervention and equitable access, supported Suffolk Mind's new 'Frontline' service, and secured county-wide engagement on the Veteran Friendly GP accreditation, reinforcing its commitment to the Armed Forces community.

The Forcer Protocol, signed by Suffolk Constabulary in 2025, is a UK-wide scheme that helps police locate missing veterans by giving rapid access to key pre-registered information (medical details, risk factors, and past missing incidents) that are submitted by families and carers.

Suffolk Family Carers secured major new grants to expand specialist support for Armed Forces family carers, including those caring for serving personnel, veterans, or have a family carers role supporting others. Their Serving Suffolk Families Team was a finalist in 2025 Suffolk Care Awards for outstanding community engagement.



Home Start Suffolk charity previously delivered a service families support group in Hadleigh and later secured a large Covenant Fund Trust grant to expand that learning through Catch Up, Coffee & Chat and a three-year Military Family Support Navigation Project.

Ipswich Town Football Club Foundation further developed its partnership with Combat2Coffee to provide a monthly Armed Forces Coffee morning group and several breakfast events hosted at the football stadium.

HEADLINES CONTINUED

Mid Suffolk Citizens Advice (charity) developed Veteran Connect, a service offering confidential and impartial support to veterans regarding benefits, debt, housing, healthcare, and employment issues. The service aimed to reach veterans living in rural areas of the district, engaging those who may face barriers to accessing support due to distance, isolation, or limited transport links. A one-year project pilot was supported by the Veterans' Foundation.

Whilst Op NOVA delivered by the Forces Employment Charity, provides support to veterans who are in contact with the Criminal Justice System, there is also active engagement by local service charity and council representatives at HMP Warren Hill. Additionally, RAF Honington personnel visited HMP Wayland (Norfolk).

The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust: Thrive Together Veterans Programme followed a previous programme where Bridge for Heroes in Norfolk led a new regional consortium that included Suffolk Family Carers, James Paget Hospital and Health Watch Suffolk.

A grant from the MoD Armed Forces Families (Early Years) Fund enabled Beaumont Community Primary School in Hadleigh to continue its Schools Emotional Wellbeing Hub to support service children.



Education, Employment and Training

In early 2024, Wattisham Airfield Child Care Centre was awarded a grant from the MoD's Armed Forces Families Fund (Early Years Programme) for an outdoor play area improvement project.

Families Together Suffolk charity continued their RAF Honington weekly group for families with children under five, securing an additional small grant from the Covenant Fund Trust.

RAFAKidz took over the RAF Honington nursery in early summer 2024 and later secured two MoD Armed Forces Families Fund grants to improve outdoor learning and provide sensory resources. Children now benefit from a well-equipped outdoor space, supporting their physical development, wellbeing, and enjoyment as they explore planting, growing, and a wider range of outdoor activities.

Local schools can claim £350 per pupil through the DfE Service Children's Pupil Premium. In 2025/26, 1,723 children across 213 Suffolk schools received this funding, including those from US Air Force families. Most recipients are in primary schools (61%), with 37% in secondary.

HEADLINES CONTINUED

The SCiP Alliance, led regionally by Anglia Ruskin University, promotes further and higher education pathways, as service children are less likely to progress to college or university than their peers.

Established in 2008, Operation Camouflage, a summer youth activities programme, is run by the Army Welfare Service and East Suffolk Council. Funded by local and military charities, it keeps costs low while fostering integration between service and non-military families.

DWP Armed Forces Champions marked 2024 Armed Forces Week with an Employment Fayre at Ipswich Town Football Club and went on to support 65 Suffolk veterans into work in 2025, addressing recruitment barriers and improving engagement. Caseloads rose from 30 in 2023 to more than 500 veterans and service families receiving benefits advice and support, demonstrating the impact of a dedicated resource and its growing reach and outcomes.

Combat2Coffee further developed their veterans in the Criminal Justice System engagement, establishing a café in the visitor centre at HMP Highpoint and reinstating their work at HMP Hollesley Bay.

A technical feed was established between the Suffolk Jobs Direct employment portal to Forces Families and the Career Transition Partnership jobs portals. Many local authorities and other 'Not for Profits' use Suffolk Jobs Direct to advertise their vacancies.

Suffolk County Council Public Transport secured funding to commission an increase in public transport services to support the growing armed forces community, especially Gurkha service families, at Sutton Heath (MoD Woodbridge).



HEADLINES CONTINUED

Housing

Through the Veterans in Custody engagement group at HMP Warren Hill, East Suffolk Council created and supplied a Veterans in Custody Housing Advice Pack.

In November 2024, government introduced regulations to exempt all former members of the regular armed forces from any local connection tests applied by councils in England, to facilitate their access to social housing. This extended homeless policy helps with veterans later life challenges.

The Ministry of Defence announced in November 2025 that Op Fortitude will also be extended through to March 2029. This housing hotline gives homeless veterans a single point of contact to get them the help they need via housing providers, charities and local authorities.

ENGAGEMENT

The UK Armed Forces Covenant and Defence Employer Recognition Scheme. Businesses, charitable, and public sector organisations of all sizes who wish to support the armed forces community can sign the covenant. You make your own promises on how you will demonstrate your support.



The covenant should be signed by someone in authority who will make sure that these promises are implemented, this could be the CEO or HR Director. It could also be co-signed by a member of the armed forces.

Defence Employer Recognition Scheme acknowledges employers who have provided exceptional support to the armed forces community and defence by going above and beyond their covenant pledges.



The scheme recognises the different levels of commitment provided by employers. This allows the Ministry of Defence to publicly thank and honour those organisations for their support. You can nominate yourself for a bronze award. Silver and gold awards are bestowed to organisations meeting specific criteria.

GET INVOLVED

An impressive number of organisations and individuals already support the military community, however, if you are planning something unique or you want to share your ideas, please drop the Suffolk Armed Forces Covenant office an email: militarycovenant@suffolk.gov.uk

Key Contacts

Organisation	Telephone Number
Wattisham Flying Station - Welfare	01449 728358
MoD Woodbridge Station – Welfare	01394 421 134
RAF Honington - HIVE Information Service	01359 268610
MoD Veterans Services (Helpline)	0808 1914 218
SSAFA (The Armed Forces charity)	0800 260 6780
The Royal British Legion (RBL)	0808 802 8080
Samaritans	116 123
Op Courage (Veterans and Families Wellbeing Service)	0300 034 9991
Combat Stress (Helpline)	0800 138 1619
Suffolk Mind	0300 111 6000
Royal Navy Benevolent Trust (Royal Navy / Royal Marine)	02394 216294
The Army Benevolent Fund (East Anglia office)	01206 817 105
Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund (RAFBF)	0300 102 1919



Please visit the website for more information:

www.suffolkmilitarycovenant.org.uk