

**MINUTES OF THE EASTERN VETERANS ADVISORY & PENSIONS COMMITTEE**  
**MEETING HELD FACE TO FACE AT ARC CAMBRIDGE – MON 8 DEC 2025 AT 1030**

| Present:               | Tenure   | Role:                                |
|------------------------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| Malcolm Johnston (MJ)  | Full     | Chair                                |
| Stewart Blackburn (SB) | Full     | Chair UKCVC/Norfolk                  |
| Barrie Griffiths (BG)  | Full     | Herts/Cambs                          |
| Stephen Heard (SH)     | Full     | Joint Vice Chair/Norfolk/Health      |
| Philip Wilson (PW)     | Full     | Essex                                |
| Ben Conway (BC)        | Co-opted |                                      |
| Barry Budgen (BB)      | Co-opted |                                      |
| Kath Hutton (KH)       | Co-opted | Joint Vice Chair/Suffolk/Welfare/Sec |
| Dial In:               |          |                                      |
| Ian Andrews (IA)       | Full     | Law                                  |
| Andrew Catton (AC)     | Co-opted | Suffolk/Law                          |
| Darren Hickie (DH)     | Co-opted | Thrive Together East of England      |
| Rob Catton (RC)        | Co-opted | Law                                  |
| Apologies:             |          |                                      |
| Diane Palmer (DP)      | Full     | Health                               |
| Not Present:           |          |                                      |
| Chris Ali              | Co-opted | Essex                                |

| Item  | Discussion   | Action |
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| <b>1. Welcome &amp; Introduction from Chair</b> | <p><b>a.</b> Apologies as listed above.</p> <p><b>b.</b> MJ welcomed BB as a new co-opted member. BB works in Beds and lives in Suffolk, so has a perspective on both and will hopefully fill our gapped Beds role. MJ will write to CA and ask him to step down as he has not engaged for some time. KH has found a potential Herts volunteer in Dr Gill Le Page and MJ to contact her.</p>   |        |
| <b>2. National/ Regional level issues</b>       | <p><b>a. Future of VAPCs and update from UK CVC &amp;</b></p> <p><b>b. Op Valour update.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SB updated that the UKCVC is continuing to fulfil the VAPC function, writing to the Minister every quarter with a summary of issues.</li> <li>There is a common thread from all areas over the lack of information on both the new Veterans Strategy and Op Valour.</li> <li>The new Minister seems keen to have contact with the coal face – the VAPCs would be an asset to provide this intelligence.</li> <li>SB does not believe that an aggressive approach to the Minister would work as it would be seen by the OVA as undermining its authority. The VAPCs should be as helpful as possible.</li> <li>The OVA team will expand with the appointment of the Op Valour regional field officers.</li> </ul> <p><b>c. Treatment of AF compensation scheme as income for benefits.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Members to be aware of new RBL campaign 'Credit their Service' to bring an end to the inclusion of military compensation as income in welfare benefit means tests.</li> </ul> |        |

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|  | <p>All agreed this was beneficial and that the VAPC offer support where possible.</p> <p><a href="https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/about-us/our-campaigns/campaigns/credit-their-service">https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/about-us/our-campaigns/campaigns/credit-their-service</a></p> <p><b>d. Thrive Together Update (DH).</b></p> <p>Regional Update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attended VALOUR regional centre briefing from OVA. 288 people on the call. Some confusion over the boundary of the 'Eastern' region. They want 1-2 key bidders for the regional centres but there are tight criteria and deadlines, and any collaborators need to already be in place.</li> <li>As at 5/12/25 121 people booked for the conference after good communications, several key speakers booked, but looking for a local govt and NHS speaker.</li> <li>Discussions with key groups over the remaining funding to allocate for Transport, Mobile awareness and Self-esteem and identity. Essex &amp; Suffolk Healthwatch and Poppy Factory have submitted bids.</li> <li>Held a face-to-face meeting for Thrive East funded projects.</li> <li>To support Norfolk CC with their next conference planned for March 26.</li> <li>Meeting with SSAFA about a closer partnership.</li> <li>Lots of activity from our partners</li> </ul> <p><a href="https://veteransvoice.co.uk/our-impact/our-monthly-impact">https://veteransvoice.co.uk/our-impact/our-monthly-impact</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Produced a mid-project review with some stats</li> </ul> <p><a href="https://veteransvoice.co.uk/our-impact/mid-programme-review">https://veteransvoice.co.uk/our-impact/mid-programme-review</a></p> <p>Key activities for next period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submit quarterly report to AFCFT.</li> <li>Meetings about VALOUR centres.</li> <li>Appoint new projects and sign off on partnership agreements.</li> <li>Invite close contacts to the professional network and roll out platform trial in Jan 26. Interest from other TT regions.</li> </ul> <p>Strategy milestones:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue sending Thrive Together newsletters</li> <li>Confirm Speakers for Conference – VAPC member suggestions welcome.</li> <li>Launch of Professional Network Platform in January.</li> </ul> <p>Risks / Issues / Escalations / Decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uncertainty about applications for VALOUR recognised centres.</li> </ul> <p>Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local Government Review – most positions are unclear, plus local elections being delayed, affecting ability of Local Authorities to endorse Op Valour applications and</li> </ul> |  |
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|                                 | <p>the concerns of the effects on local Covenant officers and where they will sit.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Also, proposals for local justice changes adds to the muddle.</li> <li>Also, ICB reorganisations – too much change all at once.</li> <li>Risk issues with Op Valour regional centres. £29M over 3 yrs is not enough to sustain 12 centres. Needs the right organisations to apply to take on the risks.</li> <li>The Op Valour Field Officers will be responsible for data gathering but other responsibilities not clear. How will they engage with front line services so that they do not detract from delivery and will they place an unrealistic burden on local covenant officers set again the confusion above?</li> <li>OVA has not consulted with major charities or LAs to determine the requirement for the regional centres – better solutions might have been identified.</li> </ul> <p><b>e. H4H update (BG):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BG is a trustee of H4H and briefed on the rollout of 24 new community builders and 3 community development managers. This is an asset based community model, weaving the Armed Forces community into existing local community networks at ground level.</li> </ul>   |  |
| <p><b>3. County Updates</b></p> | <p><b>a. Suffolk (KH).</b></p> <p>County Update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>31 Oct – Blind Veterans UK Regional meeting RAF Honington.</li> <li>4 Nov – organised Veterans Coffee afternoon at The Dell Care Home, Beccles also attended by veterans from other local groups.</li> <li>5 Nov – TT f2f meeting.</li> <li>12 Nov – Veterans Coffee at JP – 72 in attendance, including other support organisations – WWTW, NSFT, Royal Anglian Welfare Offr, Norfolk AFC, FwP</li> <li>13 Nov – Care Home visit, Lowestoft</li> <li>15 Nov – RNA Area 5 meeting</li> <li>20 Nov – Suffolk AFCPB <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health &amp; Wellbeing event at MoD Woodbridge 4 Dec</li> <li>Suffolk AF website updated</li> <li>RAF Honington supporting Veterans in Custody Wayland prison</li> <li>Veterans Xmas lunches RAF Honington &amp; RAF Marham led by RAF BF.</li> <li>Small rise in number of homeless veterans in the county</li> <li>Local govt review is hindering change</li> </ul> </li> <li>26 Nov - supported funeral of RAF vet with no family</li> </ul> <p>Key activities for next period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17 Dec – reinvigoration of the hospitals Healthcare AFC group – 1st meeting</li> <li>31 Jan – RBL Suffolk County Conference</li> </ul> |  |

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 Mar – Norfolk VCSE event</li> <li>• 12 Mar – Suffolk AFCPB</li> </ul> <p>Strategy milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Another new MD at James Paget but previous one has moved to NNU. New Chief medical Officer is ex TA Doctor. Continuing to reinvigorate support for AF service amongst the new executive team.</li> </ul> <p>Risks / Issues / Escalations / Decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business case submitted for extension of JP Armed Forces Support beyond 31 Aug 2026 – no progress.</li> <li>b. <b>Norfolk (SH).</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting Norfolk VCSE event 3 Mar</li> </ul> </li> <li>c. <b>Hertfordshire (BG).</b></li> </ul> <p>County Update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinvigorated Board with new Chair, new District AF Champions, motivated by Stu Mendleson of Muster Point.</li> <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>• Increased veteran-friendly GP practices (36 → 75).</li> <li>• All 6 Herts hospitals accredited as VA.</li> <li>• OP Community support line helped 55 referrals in six months.</li> <li>• JSNA carried out but much better analysis carried out by Stu Mendleson concluding Herts has fewer veterans proportionally than the UK average, but higher concentrations of hardship in specific districts.</li> </ul> <p>Key activities for next period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New initiative funded by Thrive Together to identify and support unpaid carers of veterans, and carers who are veterans (target 300 in next 12 months)</li> <li>• Develop new Board structure going forward focussing on repurposing 3 subgroups into task-and-finish groups or thematic working groups (e.g. housing, mental health, communications).</li> <li>• Introduce a Communications Subgroup to improve visibility, share updates, and coordinate messaging across districts.</li> <li>• Ensure continuity and stability in Covenant Board structure ahead of the 2028 LGR.</li> </ul> <p>Risks / Issues / Escalations / Decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ICB reorganisation and retirement of Harper Brown and other key AFC advocates.</li> <li>• LGR reorganisation and loss of Districts. Impact on AFC/Covenant Board.</li> <li>• Increasing focus on cadet activities despite cadets not being part of the AFC. SDR Report increasing cadets by 30% will not help with this miss-focus.</li> </ul> |  |
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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of engagement by most Armed Forces Champions as impetus wears of.</li> <li>• Op Valour draining LA "Covenant Officer" capacity through the requirement to deliver data.</li> <li>• Will Valour Field Officers add or detract from current work iso the AFC?</li> </ul> <p><b>d. Cambs &amp; Peterborough (BG).</b></p> <p>County Update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Priority is getting organisations, including Parish Councils, to sign up to Covenant.</li> <li>• Veteran Friendly Framework. Actively encouraging Cambs and Peterborough-based care homes to seek VFF accreditation.</li> <li>• Covenant Officer renamed Armed Forces Covenant Partnership Coordinator.</li> </ul> <p>Key activities for next period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging Cambs and Peterborough to undertake Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.</li> <li>• Next Cambs and Peterborough Partnership Bd – 12 Dec 25.</li> <li>• Voting for next Chair and Vice Chairs – One nomination for each role. No voting.</li> </ul> <p>Risks / Issues / Escalations / Decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single point of success/failure is Partnership Coordinator.</li> <li>• Funding of Partnership Coordinator officer after reorg? Currently funding spread between 7 Districts.</li> <li>• Continues to operate as a networking meeting.</li> <li>• Op Valour draining LA "Covenant Officer" capacity through the requirement to deliver data.</li> <li>• Will Valour Field Officers add or detract from current work iso the AFC?</li> </ul> <p><b>f. Essex (PW).</b></p> <p>County Update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Healthwatch Essex published a report entitled "Healthcare experiences of the armed forces community in West Essex".<br/> <a href="https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/library/#gallery-7">https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/library/#gallery-7</a><br/>       West Essex covers three districts: Harlow, Epping Forest and Uttlesford – it is therefore a large area with a diverse veteran community and with active, regular units at Carver Barracks, Wimbish.</li> <li>• The Veterans Working Group was re-branded the Armed Forces Community Working Group and met on 20/11/25.</li> <li>• 20/11/25 AFCWG received presentations from Scott Tatum on the initiative; "Fella's Fair – a healthy dose of humour"; a comedy night including Mental Health aspects, aimed at the veteran community. Katy Murray, from H4H Colchester has been in post since June. She updated the group on how she had carried out community development work in the local Colchester area and</li> </ul> |  |
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|   | <p>highlighted the activity hub hosted by the Delta Marriott Hotel, Colchester.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In July, Government announced that Healthwatch groups would be disbanded. Healthwatch Essex is confident that come 10/26, they will rebrand and carry on their work.</li> </ul> <p>Review of outstanding actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have yet to re-contact Col Jackson of Help Our Paras.</li> </ul> <p>Key activities for next period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue ongoing liaison with county partners.</li> <li>Support Datum Attitude's work in the county.</li> <li>Attend and monitor AFCWG meetings.</li> </ul> <p>Strategy milestones</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure ECC continues to liaise with schools in an effective way.</li> <li>Exert pressure on housing authorities to make housing available to service leavers, regardless of their geographical links.</li> <li>Support Luke French ECC/CMPB to reach CMPB's objectives.</li> <li>Support Scott Tatum/Lily Boag at Healthwatch in their AFCWG work.</li> </ul> <p>Risks / Issues / Escalations / Decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ECC lowers its commitment to CMPB.</li> <li>Continuing resistance from housing officers to offer accommodation to service leavers.</li> <li>Postponement of Combined Authority Mayors' elections to 2028 and subsequent knock-on impacts on Local Government Reform.</li> </ul> |  |
| <b>4. Functional / Common Interest Groups (CIG) Updates</b> | <p><b>a. Employment &amp; Transition – no report.</b></p> <p><b>b. Finance – no report.</b></p> <p><b>c. Health &amp; Wellbeing – CIG now on hold.</b></p> <p><b>d. Housing – CIG on hold.</b></p> <p><b>e. Veterans &amp; The Law (RC/AC).</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RC briefed that advice had been given to Suffolk Police to get veterans support information added to the electronic boards in custody suites.</li> <li>Veterans Aware has been implemented in 6 police forces, with 3 more interested. There may even be a full national rollout but this will be subject to the resolution of funding issues.</li> <li>They are compiling a best practice manual for dealing with the Armed Forces in police matters.</li> <li>There is consideration of putting the new NHS e-learning into place in the police forces.</li> <li>SB requested an update to be included in the next quarterly brief to the Minister at the end of Feb.</li> </ul> <p><b>f. Welfare – some items covered in 3a above.</b></p>   |  |
| <b>5. Personnel / Committee</b>                             | <p><b>a. All personnel management is on hold.</b></p>  |  |

| <b>Management Issues</b> |   |  |
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| <b>6. AOB</b>            | <p><b>a.</b> SB thanked members for their contributions. This meeting had demonstrated the wide variety of activity going on in this region and without the participation of our members, veterans in this region would be the worse off. The VAPC future continues to be frustrating, but members were requested to continue to promote and highlight good practices and anomalies.</p> <p><b>b.</b> MJ requested good news stories that showed we were in touch at ground level and could be sent up to the Minister.</p> |  |
| <b>7. DONM</b>           | <p>Proposed 2026 dates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mon 2 Mar (Virtual) 1400-1500</li> <li>• Mon 27 Apr (Virtual) 1400-1500</li> <li>• Mon 29 Jun (F2F) 1030-1230 venue tbc</li> <li>• Mon 7 Sep (Virtual) 1400-1500</li> <li>• Mon 26 Oct (Virtual) 1400-1500</li> <li>• Mon 7 Dec (F2F) 1030-1230 venue tbc</li> </ul>   |  |