

Veterans Newsletter NI



Issue #2

January 2025



Newly appointed Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, David Johnstone

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HMS Caroline

The Ladies of the Serving and Ex Serving Women's Network get festive on HMS Caroline.

News, Updates, Survey Opportunities & More.

New Year, New Commissioner, New Opportunities

We are excited to bring you the second edition of the Northern Ireland Veterans Newsletter, your go to source for the latest news and updates from our vibrant veterans community. As we embrace the winter season, we reflect on the achievements and events that have brought us together, showcasing the resilience and camaraderie that define our community.

In this edition, we are thrilled to announce the winners of the NI Veterans Awards! Celebrate the outstanding contributions of individuals and organisations dedicated to supporting our veterans. We highlight the various events that took place across Northern Ireland. From community gatherings to the very important period of Remembrance, these events have fostered connections, enabled recognition of service, and strengthened our network of support.

As we look back on the autumn and winter of 2024, We are proud to share stories and insights from these gatherings, showcasing the spirit of unity and collaboration among our veterans.

Thank you for your continued support and engagement. Together, we are building a stronger, more connected veterans community in Northern Ireland. We hope you enjoy this edition of the newsletter and look forward to sharing more updates in the future.

Warm regards,
The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office

Introducing the New Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner: David Johnstone



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David Johnstone officially took up his post as the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner on 6 January 2025. He brings with him an impressive 26-year career in military service (Reserves) and a wealth of leadership experience gained not only from his military background but also from his time in semi-professional football and business management.

Appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 18 December 2024, David's unique background positions him as a strong advocate for veterans across the region.

David's military journey began in 1988 with the Royal Irish Rangers (Reserve), leading to his commissioning from Sandhurst in 1991. Rising to the rank of Major, his distinguished career included pivotal service in Iraq during Operation Telic 4 in 2004, where he served as second in command of his company in Basra. Known for his adaptability, David's military timeline reflects both tradition and modernity—spanning the era of the SLR rifle to more recent operations.

After leaving the Army Reserves in 2014, David focused on a successful career in property consultancy, where he facilitated developer funding and fostered relationships with investors. Beyond his professional life, David is deeply involved in football, serving as General Manager and Youth Development Manager for a local Irish League club, blending his passion for the game with community engagement.

As Veterans Commissioner, David is dedicated to strengthening the support system for Northern Ireland's veteran community. With plans to enhance communication through initiatives such as podcasts, he aims to preserve and share veteran stories for future generations. He is committed to improving accessibility and collaboration across veteran services while ensuring Northern Ireland's veterans are represented at the national level.

David's combination of military, professional, and community leadership ensures a capable and passionate advocate for veterans, ready to build upon the office's success and address the needs of the veteran community across Northern Ireland.



Meeting the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,
Hilary Benn - January 2025

Email: commissioner@nivco.co.uk



Meeting the Minister for Veterans & People
Alistair Carns DSO OBE MC MP - January 2025

Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA) creates a dedicated Northern Ireland position

In November 2024, the Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA) in the Ministry of Defence created a dedicated Northern Ireland position to coordinate and cohere veteran support and manage engagement across Northern Ireland. Karen Hutchinson has been appointed to this important role, bringing valuable experience from her previous work at the Veterans Welfare Service Northern Ireland.



Karen will be working with a range of stakeholders across Northern Ireland to help ensure that veterans and their families know how they can access high quality services that meet their needs.

Karen will continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office, the Veterans Welfare Service Northern Ireland and third sector charitable organisations, adopting a collaborative & informed approach. Karen will be present at the upcoming Information Roadshows in Cookstown and Lisburn, providing an opportunity for attendees to connect with her directly.

She looks forward to contributing to the ongoing progress in Northern Ireland and being part of a national effort that recognises the need for continued support for all veterans. This appointment marks a significant step forward in ensuring that Northern Ireland's veterans' needs are heard and addressed within the broader UK strategy.

Left: Karen Hutchinson - Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA) alongside Paul Burns - Veterans Welfare Support NI and David Johnstone - NI Veterans Commissioner

Veterans News Hub NI

Your Source for Veteran Information

The Veterans News Hub NI is a Facebook page dedicated to providing the latest news, events, and opportunities for veterans in Northern Ireland. Coordinated and managed by the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office, the page aims to deliver up-to-date, impartial, and relevant information as it happens.

By following our News Hub NI page, you can stay informed about important events and resources available to veterans in the region. To follow the page and receive the most current updates, simply scan the QR code provided.

We believe that together we can make accessing information easier for veterans and their families. If you have news or events to share, we encourage you to reach out via email at commissioner@nivco.co.uk. Join us in staying connected and informed!



Honouring Veterans Voices During Remembrance 2024



Left: Royal Air Force Veterans including WWII Veteran, Fred Jennings, film 'Veterans Voice' - What Remembrance means to them; at the Ulster Aviation Society.



Above: Royal Navy Veterans who volunteered to film 'Veterans Voice' - What Remembrance means to them; Aboard HMS Caroline

In 2024, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office (NIVCO) focused on highlighting and amplifying the voices of veterans during the period of remembrance. In the absence of a Commissioner at the time, the team felt it was essential for veterans themselves to lead the conversation.

This commitment was reflected in the annual remembrance video, Veterans' Voices, which gave veterans from the Navy, RAF, and Army the opportunity to share their personal reflections on what remembrance means to them. The video served as a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made and the significance of honouring those who served.

Team members from NIVCO also participated in various remembrance events, including ceremonies at the Garden of Remembrance at Westminster, the Royal Albert Hall, Belfast City Garden of Remembrance, and closer to home in Cullybackey and other local communities.



Above: Alan Murphy, Head of NIVCO lays a wreath on Remembrance Sunday at Belfast City Hall, on behalf of the NI Veterans Commissioners Office.
Right: Rachael Harger and Veteran Andrew Steed attend the opening of the Belfast Field of Remembrance.



This time of year is a poignant one, bringing a mixture of pride, loss, and reflection for many veterans. It is a chance to remember the brothers and sisters in arms who did not return or who came home forever changed. The NIVCO remains steadfast in its commitment to honouring their stories and sacrifices, ensuring they are never forgotten.

To view the NIVCO, Veterans Voices Video , please visit:

<https://www.nivco.co.uk/voices-of-remembrance-ni-veterans-personal-reflections/>

Veterans Honoured at Special Remembrance Event at Windsor Park

On Saturday, 9th November 2024, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office (NIVCO), in partnership with Linfield Football Club, hosted a heartfelt Remembrance event at Windsor Park, welcoming 100 veterans for a day of gratitude, reflection, and community.

Sport globally serves as a powerful mechanism to bring people together, and Linfield FC exemplifies this by holding an act of remembrance each year. This year, in collaboration with NIVCO, the event focused on recognising the service of veterans, both young and old.

The day began with an inspiring talk and Q&A session led by David Jeffrey MBE, former footballer and manager, followed by a meal and hospitality ahead of the match between Linfield and Ballymena United.

A highlight of the event was the special pitch-side act of remembrance, a moving tribute to the courage and sacrifice of those who have served. This moment brought together different generations of veterans, united by a shared love of football and a deep connection to service.

Regardless of which team veterans were cheering for, the opportunity to come together, be recognised, and enjoy a unique day out was warmly welcomed by all who attended.

NIVCO hopes to work with Linfield FC again in 2025 to replicate this very special moment. A huge thank you to Linfield FC for helping to make this memorable event possible.



Pictured: L-R, Alan Murphy, Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioners Office, David Jeffrey MBE, former footballer and manager & Veteran Brian McKee.



Pictured: Veterans attending the Remembrance weekend football event at Windsor Park; listen to Q&A session led by David Jeffrey MBE.



Pictured: Linfield FC's annual act of Remembrance this year allowed veterans attending the NIVCO & Linfield 'Veterans Special Remembrance Event' to line the edge of the pitch prior to play. This poignant occasion saw a standing ovation and a warm applause from both sets of supporters.

Celebrating Excellence: The 2024 Northern Ireland Veterans Awards

On Wednesday, 23 October 2024, the Crowne Plaza in Belfast played host to the highly anticipated Northern Ireland Veterans Awards, an initiative spearheaded by veteran Jason Gillard. This marks the third year of the awards, which follow the successful model established in other devolved nations. A heartfelt thank you goes out to Jason and his dedicated team for their tireless efforts in bringing this event to life. Without Jason's endless enthusiasm and positive mindset, this celebration of veterans would not be possible.



This year's **Veteran of the Year Award**, sponsored by Thales UK, goes to the remarkable **Charlie Marno**. Charlie's commitment to the veteran community is nothing short of extraordinary. Despite facing personal challenges, including a diagnosis that ended his military career, Charlie has continuously inspired others by sharing his journey with resilience and honesty about physical and mental health.

Pictured Left: Charlie Marno, Recipient of Veteran of the Year 2024 & Alana Colenso from Thales (2024 Main sponsor of the NI Veterans Awards)

The evening was filled with pride as outstanding achievements of veterans who continue to inspire and lead by example were celebrated. Congratulations to the honouree in the Role Model of the Year category, with the award going to Frank McCracken.

Veterans who have gone above and beyond for their communities were also recognised. **The Community Award** was presented to the exceptional **Stevie Scarborough** for his remarkable contributions.

In the fitness sector, veterans making waves in the industry were celebrated. This year's **Contribution to the Northern Irish Fitness Industry award** went to **Neal Craig**, whose efforts uplift and inspire the community.

The **Health & Well-being Award**, presented by Inspire - Michael Donaldson, was awarded to **AA Veterans Support**, acknowledging their commitment to enhancing the lives of veterans and service leavers.



Pictured Above: Frank McCracken, Recipient of Role Model of the Year 2024 & Jason Gillard (Founder of the Northern Ireland veterans Awards)



Pictured Left: David French & Stevie Scarborough
Pictured Above: Alana Colenso & Neal Craig
Pictured Right: Andy Allen from AAVS receives the Health & Well Being Award from Michael Donaldson





The **Reservist of the Year Award** recognised the dedication and commitment of outstanding reservists. This year's winner is **Matthew Parks**, sponsored by 38 (Irish) Brigade was presented by Brigade Commander Jamie Murray.



The **Employer of the Year Award**, which honours organisations that go above and beyond in supporting veterans and service leavers in the workplace, was awarded to **Babcock**, sponsored by Forces Employment Charity.



The **Entrepreneur of the Year Award**, which celebrates outstanding entrepreneurship and innovation, was awarded to **Jason Millar of Jay's Barber Club**, sponsored by G4S UK.



The recipients of the **Veteran Owned Business of the Year Award** were also recognised, highlighting outstanding businesses led by veterans. This year's winner is **Gentem**, whose dedication and innovation set a high standard in their industry.



This year's **Lifetime Achievement Award** saw an exceptionally high standard of candidates, reflecting the incredible dedication of many remarkable individuals. The award goes to **Alan McDade**, sponsored by G4S UK and presented by Kevin Scurby.



Cpl Channing Day

A special moment of the evening was the presentation of the first **Channing Day Inspiration of the Year Award**, named in memory of Cpl Channing Day, who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan. Channing, from Comber, Co. Down, served in the Royal Army Medical Corps as a Combat Medic, died on 24 October 2012 aged 25 yrs, and was one of three female soldiers killed in action during Op Herrick. This very special award celebrates her legacy, courage, and dedication and reminds us of a young life lost too soon.

The recipient of this years award is **Brian McKee**, presented by Channing's mother, Rosemary Day, alongside Head of Office from the Veterans Commissioner's office, Alan Murphy.



In the **Veteran Group of the Year** category, the incredible work of many groups dedicated to making a difference in the lives of veterans across Northern Ireland was showcased. This year's winner, **MAPS, (Military and Police Support)** has been an invaluable resource in Omagh, providing essential support where it's needed most. Their remarkable impact in the West Tyrone area truly deserves this recognition, with gratitude extended to Thales for sponsoring this award.

Pictured Left: Richard Scott, Alana Colenso (Thales) and Margot Hetherington receiving Veteran Group of the Year Award for MAPS.



The **Volunteer of the Year** award winners were celebrated, with special thanks to Vivienne Buck CBE for presenting this award on behalf of the sponsor, Blesma, The Limbless Veterans. The award went to **Nora McKee**, highlighting her exceptional contributions. Pictured above are Rosie Rowbottom (also nominated in this category) and Nora McKee.

2024 NI Veteran Awards Winners

Veteran of the Year	Charlie Marno
Lifetime Achievement	Alan McDade
Veteran Group of the Year	MAPS
Role Model of the Year	Frank McCracken
Celebrating the Community	Stevie Scarborough
Business Leader of the Year	Valerie Wilson
Health & Wellbeing	Andy Allen Veteran Support
Reservist of the Year	Matthew Parks
Entrepreneur of the Year	Jason Millar
Channing Day - Inspiration	Brian McKee
Employer of the Year	Babcock
Veteran Owned Business	Gentem
Volunteer of the Year	Nora McKee
Contribution to NI Fitness Industry	Neal Craig

THALES
Blesma

THE LIMBLESS VETERANS

A huge thank you to the main sponsor, Thales UK, and the charity partner for the evening, Blesma, The Limbless Veterans. Together, the incredible achievements of veterans and the unwavering support of the community surrounding them were celebrated. Here's to another year of inspiring stories and remarkable contributions!

Reading Force Reaches 1,000 Members!



Reading Force, the initiative dedicated to connecting families, friends, and communities through the joy of shared reading, is thrilled to announce an incredible milestone: 1,000 members have now joined our book clubs!

To celebrate this achievement, the 1,000th member received a special bonus bundle of free books, perfect for keeping them company during an overseas tour in Italy. This milestone highlights the growing popularity of Reading Force book clubs and the positive impact they have on bringing people closer together through shared stories.

Reading Force has a resident Northern Ireland Ambassador, Laura Watson. If you would like support in setting up a book club or learning more about Reading Force, Laura can be contacted via email at laura@readingforce.org.uk.

Happy Reading!

Andy Allen Veterans Services NI Serve Up a Festive Feast



On Wednesday, 4 December 2024, Andy Allen Veterans Services NI (AAVS NI) hosted a heartwarming Veterans Christmas Dinner at Cregagh, Royal British Legion. The event brought together over 80 veterans and their families for a wonderful afternoon of festive cheer.

The delicious meal was expertly prepared by Lee, a serving chef, and David, a veteran, and served by Officers, Warrant Officers, and Senior Non-Commissioned Officers from 2 Royal Irish and 38 (Irish) Brigade. The event was further enhanced by music and piping, creating a joyful and celebratory atmosphere.

This annual dinner has become a cherished highlight on the veterans' calendar, growing in success each year. A huge thank you to AAVS NI for organising this special event and bringing the community together to celebrate the festive season.



Top Left: A piper provides musical entertainment at the AAVS NI Annual Veteran Christmas Dinner 2024.

Above: Veterans enjoy a three course Christmas dinner of Soup, Turkey & Ham and Christmas Pudding.

Below Left: Some of the team who made the AAVS NI Christmas dinner possible.

Serving and Ex-Serving Women's Network Celebrates Success with Christmas Dinner



On 18 May 2023, the Serving and Ex-Serving Women's Network (SESWN) was officially launched aboard HMS Caroline. This multi-generational group was established to foster connections, share experiences, and provide guidance among women from all backgrounds and services.

Since its inception, SESWN has hosted a variety of activities, including afternoon teas, walks, retreats, and even a range day, where younger members had the chance to handle the SLR rifle while older members, such as the Greenfinches, reflected on their unarmed service. Recognising the group's value, the Veterans Foundation awarded SESWN a grant to support its activities in early 2024.

On 11 December, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office (NIVCO) sponsored a Christmas dinner aboard HMS Caroline. The festive event brought together like-minded women for an evening filled with camaraderie, delicious food, and a quirky Secret Santa gift exchange, where attendees brought gifts valued at £2.50.

Special thanks go to Jen Robinson, whose dedication has been instrumental in driving SESWN forward, coordinating events, and ensuring the network continues to thrive.

SESWN remains a vital support system, providing a platform for women to connect, share, and celebrate their unique journeys.



A selection of photographs taken from the evening of the 11 December 2024, at the Serving & Ex Serving Women's Network Christmas dinner aboard HMS Caroline.



NI Veterans Commissioner Visits Mid Ulster Victims Empowerment (MUVE)



Earlier this month, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner visited the Mid Ulster Victims Empowerment (MUVE) organisation in Cookstown. MUVE is dedicated to providing exceptional support to veterans, offering a variety of services designed to promote healing and community engagement.

During the visit, the Commissioner was shown MUVE's holistic therapies, crafting projects, and the popular men's and hens shed for woodworking. These initiatives not only foster creativity but also create a sense of camaraderie among veterans, helping them to connect and support one another.



MUVE has a strong history of collaboration with the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office (NIVCO) and plays a vital role in the community as custodians of the mobile Op Banner Exhibition. This exhibition shares the unique perspectives of soldiers who served during the Troubles, providing valuable insights into their experiences and sacrifices.

MUVE's dedication to enhancing the lives of those who have served is greatly appreciated and makes a significant impact in the community.

To contact MUVE, Tel: 028 8676 3349. or Email: tina@muve.org.uk

Army HIVE Information Service Supporting the Service Community

The Army HIVE Information Service is an MOD organisation dedicated to providing essential information support to the Service community. HIVE offers guidance on various topics, including relocation, accommodation, health and wellbeing, education, employment, finance, deployment, and resettlement.

This invaluable service is free and accessible worldwide. HIVE staff can research information and provide confidential signposting to further support, ensuring individuals receive the assistance they need.

HIVE also shares relevant information through blogs and social media, with a weekly email round-up for those wanting updates. In addition to general inquiries, HIVE addresses complex matters requiring research and collaboration with other agencies, providing confidential welfare information and referrals.

For Service leavers, veterans, and their families, HIVE collaborates with various organisations to share information about employment fairs and job opportunities. Support is also extended to non-UK nationals regarding family visa and citizenship applications.

Reservists and their families can benefit from HIVE services as well. In Northern Ireland, HIVE can be contacted at **02894 455595** or via email at **RC-Pers-HIVE-NI-0Mailbox@mod.gov.uk**. HIVE is committed to ensuring all members of the Service community have access to the information and support they need to thrive.

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

Veteran Welfare Service NI
E: dbsafvs-vws-ni@mod.gov.uk
Tel: 02890 420145

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

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

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

Veterans Advice-line for
Statutory Professionals
E: vasp@sommenursing.org
Tel: 07551 397384

Veteran Health & Wellbeing

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

BLESMA –
The Limbless Charity
www.blesma.org
Tel: 0131 2262910

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

Serving & Ex Serving Women's
Network (SESWN)
E: Hello@seswn.co.uk
Tel: 07740 580123

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.udrbenevolentfund.com
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

Legal Support

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