

Armed Forces Covenant Update 2025

A report and actions on compliance, engagement and advocacy

Introduction

This report summarises work undertaken to ensure the Council's compliance with its Armed Forces Covenant responsibilities, external advocacy required under the Council's Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award status, and Government initiatives impacting veterans living and working within South Kesteven.

Also included is a report on delivery of our Soldiers from the Sky airborne forces heritage trail, an ambitious programme funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The Council's signature to the Armed Forces Covenant requires it to have 'due regard' for legislation in the Armed Forces Act 2021.

This ensures that those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, including the bereaved, should face no [disadvantage](#) compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.

Due regard means that organisations in scope of the Covenant Duty, including the Council, need to consciously consider the unique obligations and sacrifices made by the Armed Forces; that it is desirable to remove disadvantages faced by the Armed Forces community and that special provision may be justified in some circumstances.

The Council is therefore required to actively consider the Covenant when developing, delivering and reviewing policies and decisions that may impact the Armed Forces community.

The Council's Armed Forces Officer is part of the Community Engagement Team, with four key areas of activity: Compliance, Heritage, Advocacy and Engagement.

As the only local authority in Lincolnshire to hold the Ministry of Defence Gold Award, the Council continues to take the lead within the Lincolnshire Community Covenant Partnership.

The 2021 Census identified 8693 military veterans living in the district - 7.37 % of the population aged over 16 - putting South Kesteven seventh on the national league table. This is the second highest number of veterans in any district of Lincolnshire.

Since coming to power, the current Government has made key changes relevant to veterans, including:

- removing the former local connection need for housing applications
- a change in the law to allow Veteran Cards to be used as evidence of identity for elections

- introducing a 'Forces First' approach, ensuring that veterans will go to the front of the queue for new homes built on selected, surplus defence sites
- expanding the elements covered under the [Armed Forces Covenant](#) to cover all UK Government Departments
- the launch of a new Veterans Strategy in November 2025

Two recent announcements will affect veterans living and working in the district.

Operation VALOUR is designed to provide veterans across the UK with easier access to multiple services. It is being overseen by the Office for Veterans' Affairs (OVA) within the Ministry of Defence.

VALOUR centres will be established across the UK, with one in the East Midlands as the base for two field officers tasked with building strong regional networks with councils, public services and charities.

VALOUR will strengthen the existing network by:

- improving coordination between services
- building on what's already working well
- helping local services align around veterans' needs.

Although VALOUR is starting with a focus on veterans, it is being designed to grow to support the wider armed forces community to include families.

[VALOUR: information and next steps - GOV.UK](#)

Veterans Strategy was launched in November and sets out the Government's new vision for armed forces veterans across the UK, [Veterans Strategy - GOV.UK](#). It underpins Operation VALOUR and aims to ensure that veterans are:

- empowered to realise their full potential
- provided with the support they deserve to achieve this.

Built around the pillars of Celebrate, Contribute and Support, the strategy provides a framework for the whole of society to adopt, recognising and celebrating the sacrifices of veterans while ensuring they have every opportunity to succeed in civilian life.

It also recognises the security and growth challenges faced by the UK, addressed in a new [Strategic Defence Review](#) as a core response plan.

The Council's Armed Forces Officer and Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer **will work to support Operation VALOUR and the Veterans Strategy in 2026.**

COMPLIANCE

The three main pillars of the Act are housing, health and education. Currently our main responsibility is with housing.

As an in-scope organisation, we must ensure that serving personnel, reservists, veterans, and their families have the same equality of access to public services as civilians.

All housing applicants are asked if they have served or have military connections, thereby taking into account specific family circumstances such as a requirement to leave military accommodation in the event of family breakdown.

Due regard is especially important for those that have sacrificed the most, such as the bereaved and the injured (whether that injury is physical or mental).

This approach recognises the unique obligations of, and sacrifices made by, the Armed Forces and the fact that for many the return to civilian life can pose problems, including:

- veterans may find it hard to engage with and trust professionals who have no military background
- many leaving the military have no lived experience of civilian life
- veterans take longer on average than others before asking for help.

We also have a legal duty to help any homeless veteran, and good links have been established with partner agencies such as SSAFA and the Royal British Legion.

The Lincolnshire Community Covenant Partnership – chaired by Cllr Bridget Ley – contributes to a wider appreciation of compliance issues and challenges through national and local updates on best practice and discussion of issues arising.

It meets quarterly with 30+ regular attendees representing local authorities, health, police, charity sector, military sites, support networks and hosts guest speakers.

Its membership also includes the Department of Work and Pensions and Operation NOVA – working with former military in the penal system – resulting in direct lines of communication in these and other important areas.

Within the Council, Officers are identified as Armed Forces 'champions' and continue to be active across Housing, Revenues and Benefits and the Welfare and Financial Advice Team, which deals with cost of living enquiries should veterans present themselves.

Customer services staff have also been briefed on how to identify veterans, handle military-related queries and where to signpost.

Compliance with Covenant responsibilities has been greatly enhanced thanks to the Council's co-funding of the Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer.

As a Gold Award holder, the Council has helped shape the direction of county-wide work and funded print of the new Armed Forces Community Directory, which is also easily accessible through the Connect to Support website.

The post of Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer is co-funded by the seven district councils of Lincolnshire along with the Integrated Care Board. The work of this officer benefits Armed Forces personnel, veterans and their families at a local and county-wide level. Lincolnshire County Council will help co-fund this post from April 2026.

As an example of the work undertaken, issues identified within the Armed Forces Covenant Partnership around families who face eviction from military quarters prompted an awareness session with all housing officers.

In summary, the Lincolnshire Armed Forces Community Covenant Officer's work includes:

- a weekly email round-up of MOD / Covenant updates
- identification of all eight Local Authority Armed Forces Elected Member Champions
- co-ordination of county Armed Forces Covenant Partnership meetings
- relationship building / collation of best practice from elsewhere
- liaison with Office for Veterans' Affairs

New Task and Finish Groups are exploring:

- mobile Support Hub for Veterans'
- veterans' Housing initiative
- armed forces drop-ins/surgeries/senior staff presentations for all military sites
- a second Lincs Armed Forces Information booklet - for families
- feasibility of support network for Armed Forces community carers
- identifying dispersed military families

Future actions include:

- the development of online Military 'Welcome to Lincolnshire' Information
- the feasibility of in-person Befriending Service
- wider promotion of the Defence Employer Recognition scheme
- development of a Veterans into Business Guide – working with SKDC

For South Kesteven District Council, **actions for 2026 include** an Armed Forces Covenant re-affirmation and Covenant aims update, elected member training and planning for Mission Business 2026.

HERITAGE

Victory in Europe Day was celebrated with an exhibition in Grantham House, a beacon lighting in Wyndham Park and military heritage exhibits in the park's Visitor Centre.

Victory over Japan Day was commemorated with a video reflecting Deepings resident and Navy veteran Peter Foxon who saw action on Atlantic convoys, the Normandy Landings and in the Far East war with Japan.

His subsequent award of the French Legion d'Honneur was presented by Council Officer Mark Whitney, a fellow former Naval wireless operator and Falklands veteran.

Work has continued on the delivery of the Soldiers from the Sky airborne forces heritage trail project, funded by a grant of £147,550 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The project was also awarded £15,000 in match funding from the UKSPF, allowing the Council to tell the backstories of airborne forces from three nations - Britain, America and Poland - in the district in the build-up D Day and Operation Market Garden (Arnhem).

It has delivered an engaging and informative programme of events, walks, talks, volunteering opportunities, storyboard design, cycling and driving routes and a comprehensive website. www.soldiersfromthesky.co.uk

The website, which was launched in September 2025, has also defined a new visitor trail of international importance, thereby delivering economic benefit to South Kesteven and promoting visitor sites with airborne links, accommodation and rural retailers.

A Poppies on Pebbles schools programme engaged Key Stage 2 (7-11 year olds) pupils across eight schools to include:

- educational materials (on the website)
- funded workshops
- poetry and artwork
- painting of 500+ pebbles with inscription
- final Remembrance pebbles display at Saltby Airfield on 10 November.

Project events included:

- a series of D-Day hosted walks at RAF North Witham
- a Celebration of Valour event at Easton Walled Gardens honouring an Arnhem VC holder
- a Soldiers from the Sky exhibition at Grantham House.

Actions going forward include a celebration of Armed Forces Week 2026, collaboration with tourism colleagues to promote the new visitor trail, support for visitor centres to maximise visitor impact and relationship building with heritage sites / museums to promote the trail.

ADVOCACY

‘Mission Business’ has been a significant focus of the year, promoting the skills of ex-military to the business community.

Held at Prince William of Gloucester Barracks (PWOG) in Grantham, the event drew 120 delegates with more than 70 businesses attending.

The event was part of South Kesteven District Council’s continued drive to support its military communities alongside helping the local economy through an injection of skilled personnel.

Ex-military personnel, now running successful businesses, shared their journeys from deployment to employment, and serving military personnel illustrated the range of talents and skills they offer.

Business development was high on the agenda, with speakers on strategy, leadership, planning and branding.

It delivered on the Council’s Defence Employer Recognition Scheme commitments under advocacy, plus encouraged signature to the Armed Forces Covenant as a gateway to employment of ex-military personnel.

Flag raising events have included Armed Forces Day, Merchant Navy Day, Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan commemorations.

New waste freighters have delivered an opportunity to support the defence community, with a new, branded, Royal British Legion refuse lorry encouraging anyone in need to contact the Legion.

Black History Month was commemorated with a salute on social media to African and Caribbean troops, whose service with the British 1st Airborne Division was discovered through the Soldiers from the Sky project.

Looking forward to 2026, there are plans for a Remembrance schools programme encouraging pupil engagement and a new waste freighter carrying Help for Heroes messaging and employer engagement through Mission Business.

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement with Prince William of Gloucester Barracks has resulted in a far higher local profile for the site, wider recognition of the units serving there and what the Army presence contributes to the town.

The Officers' Mess has been made available free of charge to accommodate Covenant Partnership Meetings and events such as Mission Business, and military personnel attendance has increased at council-organised events.

In terms of civilian and ex-military volunteer engagement and event attendance, opportunities have been delivered through the Soldiers from the Sky.

A volunteer and ambassador event in Wyndham Park Visitor Centre drew 12 interested members of the public, mostly local but two people attended from the West Country to establish links with their own airborne heritage.

All were given project background and sources of research and information to encourage further research in their own villages with the aim of updating local history groups / parish councils.

The project has also given several volunteers the chance to display and extend their personal memorabilia collections at project exhibitions and events and inspired others to research airborne forces history.

Exhibits on RAF North Witham, RAF Barkston Heath, RAF Folkingham and the Carlton Scoop mid-air collision have been on display at Grantham House for the VE/D-Day event, Caythorpe Gala, Wyndham Park Beacon Lighting, the Harlaxton Manor 40's Weekend and the Soldiers from the Sky exhibition at Grantham House in late November.

Eight schools took part in the project's Poppies on Pebbles programme, directly engaging some 350 KS2 pupils. The resource is being promoted to all schools in the district, with the potential for pupils to repeat studies in future years.

An Airborne Research group meeting every two months consists of volunteers from the UK, Poland and America, with historians, charities, serving and veteran – all contributing valuable information, ideas and source material for the project.

Members of the group will continue to stay in touch as valuable contacts and sounding boards for the project, rather than attend formal meetings – helping to keep the project alive and identifying possible future engagement opportunities.

Quarterly meetings of the Lincolnshire Armed Forces Covenant Partnership engage a wide range of organisations and stakeholders, from health to education, charities and heritage groups.

Its achievements include:

- a strategic housing officers group meeting quarterly, ensuring that the military, local authorities and Armed Forces charities work together to ensure housing policies align.
- education sector representatives, LCC, military welfare officers and Families Federations are collaborating to assist and support military moving to Lincolnshire facing challenges of school placements, SEN considerations and any other issues.
- working cross border with Op VALOUR to help applications for different funding streams
- collaboration between SSAFA, the Veteran Support Service and Op COURAGE, ensuring Lincolnshire is supported in its funding bid for a planned mobile Armed Forces hub (the county is too big to have a single static resource).

The Council's Armed Forces Officer regularly supplies information on events, jobs within the Council and appropriate military updates to the Grantham HIVE, Prince William of Gloucester Barracks information channel which is then shared across all UK military sites.

Plans for 2026 include working with the Council's events team to develop programme of walks with military connections, engaging landowners for community military archaeology digs and further engagement with schools to increase poppy initiatives.