

VETERANS' NEWSLETTER

From the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office

IN THIS ISSUE:

News

- Serving and Veteran Employment Workshop: Fostering Education and Employment Opportunities for Veterans
- UK Veterans Families Study: Report Launch

Interviews & Features

- Introducing DMWS' Veterans Medical Welfare Service (NI) Team
- Camaraderie in Action: Regenerate Veterans Group
- Milibern Trust Resident Celebrates 100th Birthday!

Get Involved

- Step into spring with SEFF Community Allotments
- Road Map to Recovery: here to support veterans and their families
- Lights, camera, action! We go back to (film) school with AAVS



NIVSO co-hosted a Serving and Veterans Employability and Education Workshop



Meet the new recruits! DMWS expands service to veterans in Northern Ireland through additional funding

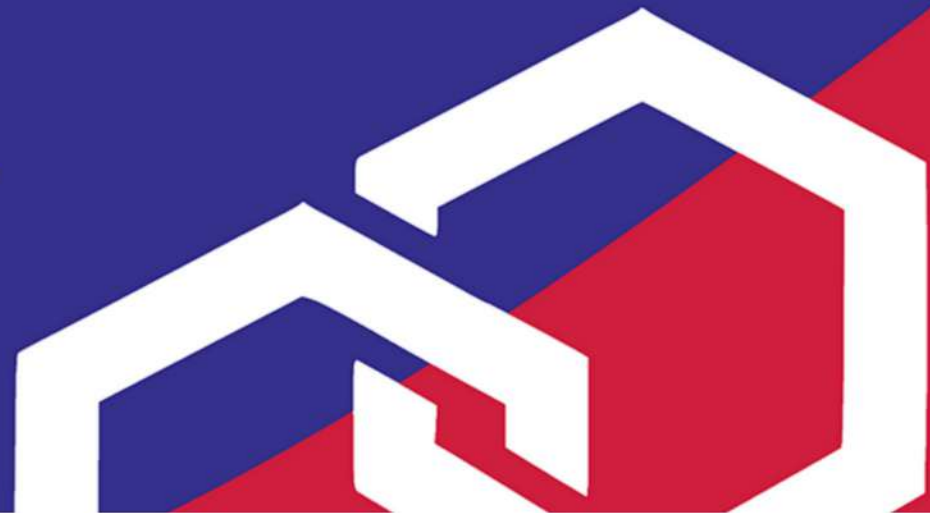


The SEFF Community Allotments provide a unique opportunity for veterans, their families and friends to come together

JANUARY 2024

Veterans' Newsletter

From the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office



Dear friends and colleagues,

Welcome to edition number 9 of our NIVSO Newsletter and there are so many fantastic news and information articles contained within it - my advice is to sit down with a cup of tea and read the newsletter from cover to cover! I would really like to thank everyone who has provided stories, material and invited us to events that we can subsequently share with the whole veteran community in these pages - we cannot produce the Newsletter without you, so please keep the articles coming. It is very heartening to see how much work is going on by veterans and in support of veterans and wider communities across NI - Regenerate's Toy Appeal work is such a good example of how veterans can really organise and help in local communities. And of course, there is always cause for celebration - for Merchant Navy veteran John McDowell, the first centenarian tenant at the Milibern Trust, who turned 100 in December and also cheer and camaraderie at the Not Forgotten Christmas lunch.

There is so much creativity apparent in this edition, whether that be the creation of the wonderful sundial by veterans in Maghaberry, or the Tree of Hope in Brooke House or the decorative wreaths made by the ladies of the Serving and Ex-Serving Women's Network. And with (hopefully!) the worst days of winter behind us, there is much to look forward to as spring approaches and as the gardeners, sustained by the hearty fare that their produce has contributed to, begin to gear up for another growing season and the wonderful Defence Garden Scheme spring programmes at Ashes to Gold and Brooke House. I can see that the AAVS videographers are going to be busy recording all this activity.

However, there have been so many important underpinning events through the last few months, that have really helped to shine a light on change and positive developments within the veteran support network. In order to communicate the extent of that change to those supporting veterans within a whole range of organisations, the Veterans Commissioner hosted a very well attended and successful information day at the Dunadry Hotel. Despite the weather really being against us, over 70 veteran support staff from a whole range of organisations were updated on the roles and services provided by the Veterans Welfare Service NI, NIVSO, Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS), Combat Stress, Inspire, Brooke House Health and Wellbeing Centre, SSAFA, the Royal British Legion, Walking With The Wounded, Andy Allen Veterans Support and Mark Ewing who runs the Veterans' Adviceline for Statutory Professionals service. We have focussed on some of these new initiatives, such as Inspire's Roadmap to Recovery service in more detail within the pages of this edition, as well as new services that we have become aware of such as the work of Deafblind UK here in NI. But there has also been a specific focus on families, by Queen's University and on employment, where we hosted a very successful workshop which looked at education and employment opportunities for veterans. There will be more work in these two important areas in future.

We are pleased to highlight the good work of the 7 partners delivering the Veterans Places, Pathways and People (VPPP) programme here in NI. It really doesn't matter where support is coming from, as long as veterans and their families receive that support when and where it is needed, but it is important for us here at NIVSO that we are able to evidence the need, in order to make a case for retaining and increasing the range of services available to the veteran community here in NI. Building additional capacity to support veterans is at the heart of everything we do and we are pleased that VPPP is delivering that much needed support to so many.

And lastly, we extend a sincere thank you to our Veterans' Champions Support Officer, Bobby, as he leaves the role and embarks on new adventures. Bobby has truly excelled in bringing together our Veterans' Champions programme during its inaugural year, and we look forward to building on this success throughout 2024.

**Head of the Northern Ireland
Veterans' Support Office**



Serving and Veteran Employment Workshop: Fostering Education and Employment Opportunities for Veterans

On Friday 24th November the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office co-hosted a Serving and Veterans Employability and Education Workshop at Queen's University Belfast.

The event, organised alongside Dr. Stephen Herron from Queen's University Belfast, featured a comprehensive program aimed at fostering dialogue, sharing experiences, and identifying key strategies for enhancing employment opportunities for veterans in Northern Ireland.

Dr. Herron welcomed attendees and provided an insightful overview of the research pertaining to veteran education and employment. Head of the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office, Liz Brown, contextualised the national landscape and set the tone for a series of engaging discussions and presentations.

A session focused on 'In-Service Support' was led by Stephen Montgomery from SO2 Transition HQ 38 (Irish) Brigade, Geraldine Dempsey from 32 Army Education Centre, and Louise Wilding from Career Transition Partnership. They presented on existing support structures and resources available to veterans, offering invaluable insights into navigating the transition from military service to civilian life, and emphasising that support is available at any time.

Geraldine highlighted the opportunities available through use of Enhanced Learning Credits. The MOD's Enhanced Learning Credits (ELC) Scheme promotes lifelong learning among members of the Armed Forces. Providing financial support in each of a maximum of three separate financial years, the scheme enables higher level learning of a nationally recognised qualification at Level 3 or above (or approved international equivalent) with an approved Learning Provider.



Stephen said: "Before you leave, have a plan. Think about what job you will get and where you will live. It's not just a personal responsibility to ensure you are prepared before you leave, it's a unit responsibility."

Jill Shaw and Marie-Claire O'Neill from the Open University delved into 'Opportunities to Study,' shedding light on various educational pathways accessible to veterans, emphasising the importance of continuous learning and skill development in today's competitive job market. Jill also spoke about the Disabled Veterans' Scholarship Fund, which offers 50 places to eligible veterans each year. Participants in this scholarship have their fees waived for a maximum of 120 credits per seasonal academic year, up to a maximum of 360 credits, which is equivalent to a full honours degree. The OU also offers free courses on topics such as Money & Business, Society, Politics & Law, and History & The Arts.

Lived experiences were shared during the sessions featuring veterans Graham Fergus and Jason Gillard, who discussed their employment journeys post-Service, highlighting both challenges and successes in transitioning to civilian careers.

Graham said: "If you've got a job and something is missing, top it up with something you're passionate about, and your passion may well lead you to a job in that area in future."

Attendees then took part in a workshop breakout session, where issues in veteran education and employability were discussed. Themes such as access to resources, existing support systems, and areas requiring improvement were actively discussed among the attendees and fed back to the wider group.

The event served as a platform for meaningful dialogue, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by veterans in education and employment sectors. As the workshop came to a close, there was a strong sense of commitment among attendees to drive positive change and create a more supportive environment for veterans transitioning to civilian life.



UK Veterans Families Study: Report Launch

On 15th January 2024 we attended the launch of the second report from the UK Veterans Family Study. The report, "Understanding and mapping the psychosocial wellbeing support needs of veteran family members across the UK" looks at the emotional wellbeing and support needs of the families of those who have served in the UK Armed Forces.

Representatives from across the veteran support network attended the report launch, where key findings and recommendations were presented by members of the research team.

The Northern Ireland Veterans' Commissioner, Danny Kinahan, gave some opening remarks, where he expressed the significance of the event: "This event is absolutely key to everything we're doing. It's really important we dig deep here to find out what's going on, and feed it into the system."

The research was conducted by Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in collaboration with King's College London (KCL), and funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FIMT).

Professor Chérie Armour, from QUB, emphasised the efforts that are being made to identify the gaps in services for families: "There has been an extensive amount of work done in this area. There have been gaps in services for families that we want to try and rectify. We're on that journey but this isn't the first step. Our study which looked at the health and wellbeing of veterans living in Northern Ireland exposed the gaps in service provision for them, and set us on the track of exploring families who have been impacted just as much as veterans. This study is one piece of a much bigger picture."

In discussing the evolving area of research, Isabel Summers, Assistant Head of Policy at FIMT highlighted a notable shift in the focus of future research: "The policy landscape has changed a little bit. Families are still not seen in their own right, separate from veterans. Some are vulnerable to poor health and wellbeing outcomes. We hope this report provides insight to inform your service delivery. We want to work together to remove some of these barriers for families getting support."

Dr Rachael Gribble from KCL highlighted a number of findings from the report, including looking at how PTSD affects transition for the family and access to support, and how communities played an important role in supporting mental health. She said: "Previous work centres on the veteran and we wanted to flatten that out and see how mental health is interrelated in the family."

Dr Eric Spikol, from QUB reflected on the positive findings set out in the report. He commented on the resilience of the families cohort, and reminded the audience: "Keep in mind that in general, people's mental health is quite good - psychological wellbeing across the cohort was quite high. So many people had so much good to say. The report highlighted there was high satisfaction with support available."

Dr Spikol also commented on the collective efforts and shared commitment that have brought the community to this pivotal moment. "We really are working on building trust within this community, and your participation made all of this happen."

If you would like to read the report, please visit www.ukvetfamilystudy.org



Stronger Together: Highlights from the Supporting Veterans in 2024 Training Day

On Tuesday 16th January we were pleased to present at the Supporting Veterans in 2024 Training Day, organised by the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner, Danny Kinahan and his team.

Attendees from across the veteran support network heard presentations from members of the NIVSO, the Veterans Welfare Service NI, Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS), Combat Stress, Inspire, Brooke House Health and Wellbeing Centre, SSAFA, the Royal British Legion, Walking With The Wounded, Andy Allen Veterans Support and Mark Ewing who runs the Veterans' Adviceline for Statutory Professionals service.

Engagement with the audience was a highlight of the day, fostering meaningful connections and interactions among participants. The networking opportunities provided a platform for attendees to share insights, exchange ideas, and build collaborations that will further enhance veteran support initiatives in 2024.

Thank you to the Commissioner for hosting, and to all those who listened and supported our presentations throughout the day!



Above: Head of the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office, Liz Brown, gives an overview of the work of the NIVSO.



Left: Veterans' Commissioner Danny Kinahan is pictured with Liz, Bob Reid (DMWS) and Veterans' Champions Philip Anderson (Causeway Coast and Glens), Alison Bennington (Antrim and Newtownabbey) and Trevor Cummings (Ards and North Down).



Right: Rachael Harger from the Commissioner's team takes part in an audience Q&A alongside Danny, Liz, and Karen Hutchinson (Veterans' Welfare Service Northern Ireland).

Introducing the Veterans Medical Welfare Service (NI) Team in Northern Ireland



The Office for Veterans' Affairs has provided funding to the Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS) for the implementation of the Veterans Medical Welfare Service (NI) project in Northern Ireland. This initiative aims to establish a medical welfare service for veterans following medical pathways in Northern Ireland, drawing upon the valuable service delivery experience of DMWS in the UK. This is an 18-month project, and has funded 7 members of staff including two clinicians and four welfare officers. In this edition of our newsletter, we're pleased to introduce you to two of the new recruits, Susan and Steven!



Some members of the DMWS team in Northern Ireland, pictured with NI Veterans' Commissioner, Danny Kinahan

Coming from a family with long military history, I understand how reluctant veterans are at asking for help and often put things off until they are in crisis.

I come from a nursing background so know the importance of timely intervention, to help improve both physical and mental health outcomes. Feeling supported during this journey is vital, as often waiting list times are very prolonged. I see our role as a welfare officer as coming alongside the veteran and giving them support and encouragement, whilst enabling them to be as independent as possible.

I really enjoy the role of welfare officer, as it enables me to care holistically for the veteran and their family. Working for DMWS is like being part of a family and I feel very privileged to be part of such a great team. It is a unique role and one I have very proud of.

No two days are the same, but every day we assist veterans and their families to progress through the challenges they face. The veteran is at the heart of everything we do and being able to provide assistance is very humbling.

I want to ensure that veterans feel empowered to ask for help, feel supported and feel valued. Our role is to make a difference, however big or small, enabling veterans to have a meaningful and healthier life, and support them to achieve the best incomes for each individual.



Susan

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As a veteran myself, I can fully appreciate and understand the types of daily challenges our veterans and their families face. At times it can seem that you are no longer a member of the wonderful military family/society, however we at DMWS and the many other amazing organisations are very keen to offer a helping hand. There are a vast array of people/organisations with many skills that are so wanting to give help, advice and care to those veterans and their families who are in need.

The main reason I became a welfare office with DMWS was because I came into contact with many veterans at social gatherings and breakfast clubs who expressed that they had many medical and social needs but felt that there were not enough being done to help them. However I was fortunate enough to be aware of the number of organisations within Northern Ireland who have amazing abilities to help those veterans in need. I knew that due to my 22 years of military experience and my natural desire to help those of my comrades, I needed to become part of the caring community. As soon as I was introduced to DMWS, I knew that this was the sort of organisation that wanted to be part of. DMWS have given me a unique opportunity to do the dream job I have been wanting for so long and I do it with great pride.

Each day I assist veterans and their families transition through their daily lives when struggling with the many obstacles in their way. Be it medical, mental or welfare issues, I along with the many organisations available, ensure that the challenges faced, are made as easy as possible and making sure that the veteran is always a priority. I have become acutely aware that the future of our veterans is a very positive one. One that is superbly coordinated, focused and driven to ensure that each and everyone of our veterans, their family members and carers are OUR priority.



Steven

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Regenerate Veterans Group: Camaraderie in Action - Adventures, Altruism, and the Art of Giving Back

The Regenerate Veterans Group is a peer support and community group which hosts a range of activities for veterans. Once a month the group engage in an outdoor activity including fishing, clay pigeon shooting, boules, adventure sports and even axe throwing! Here, they tell us a little more about what's on offer for veterans.

In the lead up to Christmas, Regenerate Veterans Group assisted in the Regenerate Toy Appeal. The appeal provides local families with the opportunity to enjoy Christmas without fearing the burden of increased costs for their children's presents. The cost of living crisis affects us all especially those families that are most vulnerable in our community. Regenerate Veterans donated money and gifts as well as helping to sort, package and deliver the presents alongside our parent group. As we all know, giving back is part of Take 5, around which our group build all their activities and events.

We currently have two programmes running. Our Then and Now Project allows and encourages veterans to discuss and retell stories, good and bad, from their time in service. We have collated a picture gallery from images provided by our group members and recently ran classes where they could frame cap badges and other mementos important to them from their time in uniform. A lot of sandbags were pulled up during these evenings!

Another project is our Countering the Narrative Initiative. Veterans that served on Op Banner are keen to express and tell their side of the story and how they fought and won the peace in which our society lives today. The initiative provides our members with the platform to achieve this through visits and talks from various guest speakers. It encourages our veterans to discuss the past and not bottle it up.

Alongside these projects we have our three weekly activities. Walking Club on Monday evenings, Coffee Mornings on Wednesday and Model & Craft Club on Thursday.

Any local veterans interested with joining in should come to our Coffee Morning every Wednesday at 1030hrs in our Veterans Hub. Come along for the craic and camaraderie, you won't regret it!

If you would like to know more, reach out via the Regenerate Veterans Group Facebook page.



Here Comes the Sun: Veterans Craft Ceramic Tribute to Absent Friends



Remembrance is expressed in many forms, from poppy wreaths to statues, monuments, medals and photographs. These objects serve as important reminders of our history, and provide a tangible link to our past.

One group of veterans who reside in HMP Maghaberry have drawn on the theme of Remembrance to create a sun dial as part of a unique art and employment training course. Facilitated by HMP Maghaberry's Artist in Residence, Lucy Turner, a group of 13 veterans took part in the course, funded through SSAFA from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

SSAFA NI and Start 360 caseworker, Tommie Linton, explained a bit about the project: "While most of the funding was allocated to training for work for veterans who had been released from prison, a training course was developed within the prison in partnership with the Prison Arts Foundation. The idea for the design came from the veterans themselves as they explored ideas at the start."

As well as providing veterans an opportunity to engage in hands-on ceramics, the course placed a significant emphasis on honing soft skills essential for the workplace, such as communication, planning, design, timekeeping and teamwork. The four day course started with a brainstorming session, where the theme of Remembrance strongly emerged. Lucy worked closely with the participants to transform their ideas into reality, leading to the creation of the ceramic sun dial.

Lucy said: "We wanted this project to be motivational, to give the participants a sense of pride in their work and develop their skills to a high standard."

Charlie Marno, Regional Coordinator for the Defence Gardens Scheme in Northern Ireland, who runs a spoke garden for veterans in Maghaberry, was closely involved in the sun dial project. He said: "To say the veterans are proud of what they have made is an understatement!"



Words reflecting the theme of Remembrance adorn the sundial: Love, Joy, Peace, Hope, Life, Trust, Happiness, and most poignantly, Absent Friends. The profound significance of these words gains new depth when you reflect on the fact that they were thoughtfully chosen by veterans during their time in prison.

Tracy Megrath, Deputy Governor at Maghaberry Prison said: "Social isolation and loneliness are real issues for many older prisoners and which can lead to mental health issues. However by encouraging a more active, physical lifestyle we can help lessen some of those health challenges. Rehabilitation is a major part of prisons today and there are many ways in which we engage and challenge prisoners in Maghaberry. Our staff, alongside our health colleagues, worked tirelessly to encourage all prisoners to participate in learning and skills, and rehabilitative programmes which will lead to better outcomes for everyone."

The sundial is destined for a garden beyond the prison confines, creating a space for families and friends to visit. This installation aims to instil hope, foster a sense of connection between separated families and serve as an inspirational beacon for veterans to look forward to visiting when they leave prison.

If you know of any veterans who might avail of support from within the criminal justice system, please get in touch with Tommie.

Telephone: 07719280931

Email: tommie.linton@start360.org

START360
Putting YOU at the centre

Step into Spring with SEFF Community Allotments



Allotment Volunteers Benefits to Growing SEFF's Community Allotments Project began as a grassroots initiative by a number of army veterans within the SEFF membership, and they remain at the heart of the decision making in how the project runs.

The SEFF Community Allotments provide a unique opportunity for veterans, their families and friends to come together socially and is also open for lease by the wider community.



Recently, the Allotments team participated in various Country shows across neighboring areas, showcasing their efforts and winning accolades. The Clogher show stands out, where the SEFF Community Allotments team secured the most points in the vegetable section and also claimed prizes in crafts. This success wouldn't have been possible without the support of the plot holders, whose contributions were invaluable.

Two vegetable sales held at the Allotments site proved highly successful, bringing together SEFF members, volunteers, and staff for a delightful time over chats, tea, and sausage baps. These events were a trial run but are now planned to be a regular feature in the upcoming season, thanks to the overwhelming support received. SEFF would like to extend a big thank you to all the volunteers who helped out to make these sales a success.

The allotments team are now working alongside Moat Primary School in Lisnaskea, and have been actively involved in setting up a polytunnel and a large raised bed, enabling children to grow plants and learn about the sustainability. The school's engagement in learning, especially under the guidance of SEFF members, Malcolm and Henry, has been commendable. Their hands-on approach has brought topics like health and nature to life, creating an interactive and engaging learning environment. Feedback from teachers at the school said:

"Malcolm and Henry arrived smiling and had the poly tunnel ready to go in no time at all. It requires a lot of work and we all enjoyed seeing it being transformed. In recent week groups of children from Primary Two have been engaged in learning interactively under the wisdom of Malcolm. The class topic is *Healthy Me* and this topic has really been brought to life by these two gentlemen. Your support, hard work and guidance is greatly appreciated by us all."

If you would like to get involved with the SEFF's allotments, call **028 677 23884** or email: info@seff.org.uk

Benefits to growing

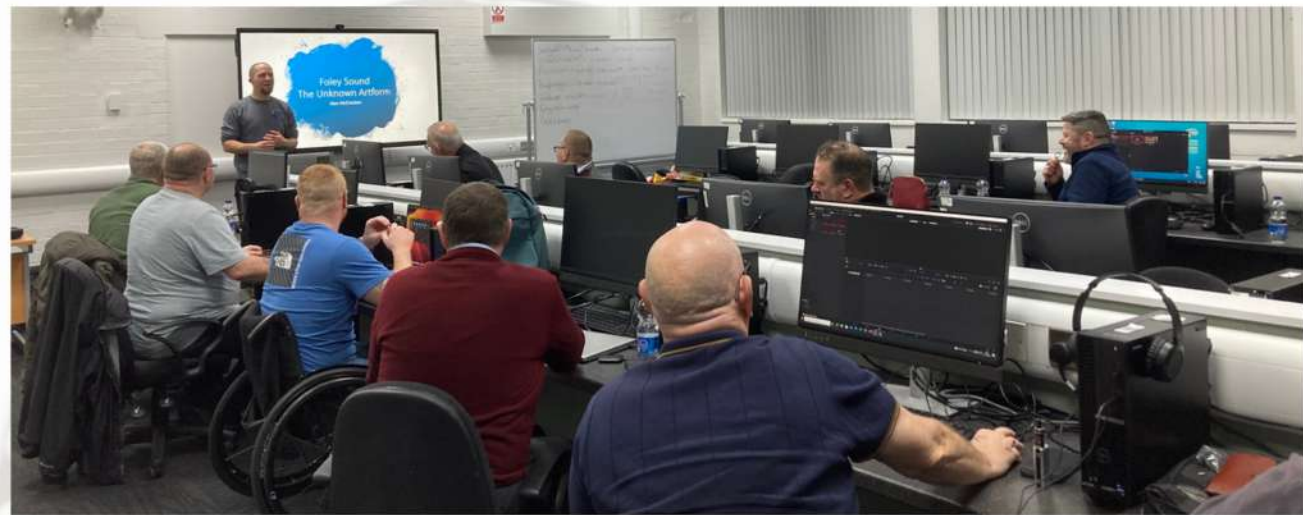
- Socialisation – the allotment holders come from a range of backgrounds, ages, and abilities
- Promotes good physical health – tending an allotment for just 30 minutes a day can be as beneficial as doing a low aerobic workout
- Encourages access to fresh country air
- Encourages creativity through exploration of fruit, vegetable and flower types and colours, some of which may not be readily available in local supermarkets
- Environmentally friendly – some of the allotment holders are keen beekeepers and promote pollinator-friendly growing
- It is incredibly rewarding seeing all your hard work pay off, especially if you can make a meal from it!
- Therapeutic value – allow your mind to switch off and return to the basics of working the land.



Ongoing events

- The allotment site holds a range of events throughout the year, including:
- Seasonal produce sales, both on site and in the SEFF Lisnaskea office
- Christmas Sale and fundraiser
- Allotment Open Days and BBQs
- Tailored health and wellbeing workshops and courses, both for allotment holders and the wider SEFF membership
- Ad hoc growing and preparation tips and support, both through social support and access to purpose run workshops
- Tours to the site for external organisations – phone the SEFF office for further information or to arrange a visit
- Produce entries in local country and agriculture shows, with many successes! There is a mobile unit available for meetings, training, workshops, and general use on an ad hoc basis. Please call the office for more information and for current hire prices.





It was back to school for us last November as we joined in with a video editing class at Belfast Metropolitan College, part of a comprehensive editing course for veterans run by Andy Allen Veterans Support (AAVS) and funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

Following the success of their previous veterans film projects, where veterans learned about film production and videography, participants on this 10 week Level 2 Editing Practice course had the opportunity to take their knowledge one step further.

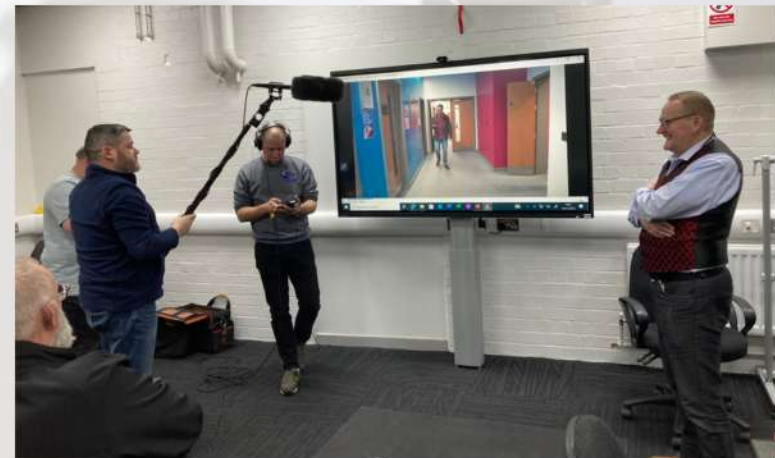
The lesson centered around Foley art, where the group delved into creating sound effects for a short horror film. As we immersed ourselves in the activity, the atmosphere shifted from a mere task to a laughter-filled adventure. Together, we came up with imaginative sound effects to complement the film. And, with horror films inevitably involving screams, how could I resist joining in on the fun?!

The course was taught by Belfast Met lecturer, Alan, who has been working with groups of veterans on AAVS's film projects since they started. Described by one of the students as engaged and understanding, Alan played a crucial role in creating an environment where everyone felt comfortable and motivated to participate. He said, "I really enjoy it, and I try and keep up with the banter!"

What made this experience so enjoyable was the enthusiasm and teamwork displayed by the veterans. Being among peers who shared similar experiences created a unique and supportive atmosphere, as one participant aptly put it, "It's different from being in a normal class; you feel better knowing you're going to be with other veterans who've had a similar experience to you."

The motivation behind learning these video editing skills extends beyond the classroom. Andy Allen, founder of AAVS, and project participant, explained, "We want to be able to use these skills and the ones we've gained from the other courses to go on and make videos that can benefit the wider community and showcase what AAVS can do."

AAVS has a range of photography and film equipment for veterans to use at their base in East Belfast. If you would like to know more, call 028 9074 7071 or email info@aavsni.com



Celebrating Achievements, Honouring Sacrifices, and Building a Future of Support: Update from the Northern Ireland Veterans' Commissioner



In a bustling period of ongoing engagement, the NI Veterans Commissioner's Office (NIVCO) remains a strong voice and advocate for veterans in Northern Ireland. The recent NI Veterans Awards 2023, held at the iconic Europa Hotel in Belfast, marked a significant milestone. The office once again had the honour of sponsoring the Inspiration of the Year award, a poignant moment showcasing the commendable contributions and achievements of veterans, accompanied by guest speaker and RAF veteran Liz McConaghy, the inspirational author of 'Chinook Crew Chick.'



As the nation collectively observed the period of Remembrance, the NI Veterans Commissioner's Office represented NI veterans in London, Belfast, and Londonderry. Notably, the 'We Will Remember' exhibition in Kilkeel was sponsored by the office, highlighting soldiers' perspectives during Operation Banner from the 1970s to 2007. The exhibition was enhanced by UDR Veteran Glens Espie's powerful talk, 'The Terrorist Knocks Twice,' who shared firsthand experiences of surviving two IRA assassination attempts. The exhibition resonated with approximately 650 attendees over a 3 day period, including many young people and local students who were unfamiliar with what it was like to serve during the Troubles.

The Veterans Commissioner's Office travelled to York to attend the Annual Office for Veterans' Affairs Conference. This engagement provided valuable insights into key priorities, veteran projects across the UK, and the evidence-based decision-making needed for future services. Later, the Office for Veterans' Affairs reciprocated the engagement by visiting NI for veteran engagements, reinforcing the importance of London-based strategists actively supporting NI veterans on the ground.



Maintaining a grassroots approach, the Commissioner remains committed to actively attending veteran breakfasts and events, to ensure that NI Veteran voices continue to be heard. Notably, the Veterans Commissioner's Office has sponsored a local Armed Forces & Veteran Breakfast Club breakfast, by providing mugs to save on costs and to ensure a fostered sense of camaraderie among attendees.



Highlighting Northern Ireland's commitment to continuous improvement to provide the best outcomes for NI Veterans, NIVCO organised a 'Supporting Veterans in 2024' training and information day in January. Aimed at veteran welfare and caseworkers, this event facilitated collaboration and information sharing among organisations, charities, and services to enhance and bolster support for NI veterans moving forward into 2024.



Looking ahead, the NI Veterans Commissioner's Office will sponsor another Billboard campaign in five key locations across NI over the Easter period in our mission to reach as many veterans as possible, thus ensuring continued support for NI veterans is readily available and accessible, if and when needed.

If you would like to keep up to date with the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner please follow them on Twitter @niveteranscomm

or Facebook @NorthernIrelandVeteransCommissioner



Road Map to Recovery: Inspire and Fighting With Pride Unite for LGBT+ Veterans



Road Map to Recovery is an Inspire-facilitated network of Mutual Aid Partnership groups across Northern Ireland. It is Coordinated by Michael Donaldson, a veteran and mental health nurse. It combines the strength of Inspire services with the authenticity of veteran peer support. It offers veterans the opportunity to come together in a safe peer supportive environment to find better ways of coping, establishing solutions and making positive changes to their own wellbeing. Support for family members is also available.

The RMTR project facilitates peer support for the following groups:

- Veterans with addiction
- Veterans with Mental Health issues
- Support for family members or supporters/carers of veterans
- Veterans that have been adversely affected due to their sexuality and or gender (supported by Fighting With Pride)
- Veterans within the criminal justice system
- Veterans exiting the veterans justice system

“ We wanted to get these people together who have been through the mill, and they can sit across the table and give each other support in a safe, non-judgmental space.” - Michael

If you would like to know more about the Road Map to Recovery Programme, contact Michael. Tel 07422074363 or email m.donaldson@inspirewellbeing.org

If you would like to know more about Fighting With Pride's work in Northern Ireland, contact Dougie. Tel: 07704271392 or email Dougie.morgan@fightingwithpride.org.uk

On Thursday 25th January we had the privilege of joining the first information event for LGBT+ veterans in Northern Ireland as part of the Road Map to Recovery programme, run in conjunction by Inspire and Fighting with Pride. Representatives from across the veteran support network attended alongside veterans and members of the LGBT+ community. The event aimed to provide a platform for veterans to share their experiences and find support from like-minded individuals.

Coordinator of the Road Map to Recovery programme, Michael Donaldson, expressed the motivation behind the event, saying: “There was a group of veterans I became aware of who had these experiences. We wanted to get these people together who have been through the mill, and they can sit across the table and give each other support in a safe, non-judgmental space.”

Fighting With Pride's LGBT+ Veterans Community Worker for Scotland and Northern Ireland, Dougie Morgan, highlighted the event's aim: “I'm here to be a facilitator, a listener and I want to break down barriers in Northern Ireland. There has been success elsewhere, and we need veterans to do this, I need people to spread the word about this.

“Even more important are allies. If you support us and agree with us you are one of us. Everyone has a role to play. Getting out to reach these communities in Northern Ireland is important.”

While Belfast is recognised as one of the safest places for the LGBT+ community, Dougie emphasised that it may not be the same for veterans: “Belfast is one of the safest places I can go as a gay person, but not as a veteran. I have put my head above the parapet and been shot down so many times, I'm not afraid anymore.”

Through the deliberate efforts of breaking down barriers and fostering open dialogue, this event not only addresses the unique needs of LGBT+ veterans but also contributes to the ongoing journey towards building a more supportive and understanding society for all. It marks a pivotal step in recognising and meeting the specific challenges faced by the LGBT+ veteran community, ensuring that their experiences are acknowledged and their path to support is enriched with the understanding and encouragement they deserve.

Milibern Trust Resident Celebrates 100th Birthday!



In December we were privileged to attend a special surprise birthday celebration for Merchant Navy veteran, John, who turned 100! The festivities were organised by the fantastic staff and board of the Milibern Trust, commemorating John's extraordinary milestone as the very first centenarian tenant of the Milibern Trust! John was welcomed by family, friends and fellow residents, and we got to hear John's incredible life history, which is shared here. The Mayor of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough also joined the party to wish John a very happy birthday.

John McDowell Bell was born in Belfast on 15th December 1923, to James and Mary Bell. John's family resided at 26 Matlock Drove before moving to Sydney Street West, he had one brother (James, who passed away in 2011). John was educated initially in Carrickfergus, before attending the Mitchell School at Tenant Street and then Belfast Technical School.

John's father James joined the Inniskilling Fusiliers on the outbreak of World War 1 and was part of the 36th Ulster Division at the battle of the Somme. John's ancestors have a link to a famous Carrickfergus family called the "Fighting McAtamneys" who lived on Davy's Street in Carrickfergus. Seven members of the McAtamney family (6 brothers and 1 sister), were all in uniform during the Second World War and John's great grandmother was Margaret McDowell whose surname he carries today as part of his name.



At the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939, John was 16 and was not eligible to join the war effort. When he turned 19 in 1942, John enlisted into the Merchant Navy and on completion of his training he was assigned to work on the MV Alexia as an apprentice artificer in the engine room in 1943. The MV Alexia was one of nine Royal Dutch/Shell oil tankers converted to become a Merchant Aircraft Carrier (MAC ship). This group of ships was collectively known as the Rapana class. The ship carried four Fairey Swordfish planes, which is a biplane torpedo bomber, designed by the Fairey Aviation Company. Originating in the early 1930s, the Swordfish, nicknamed "Stringbag" was principally operated by the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy.

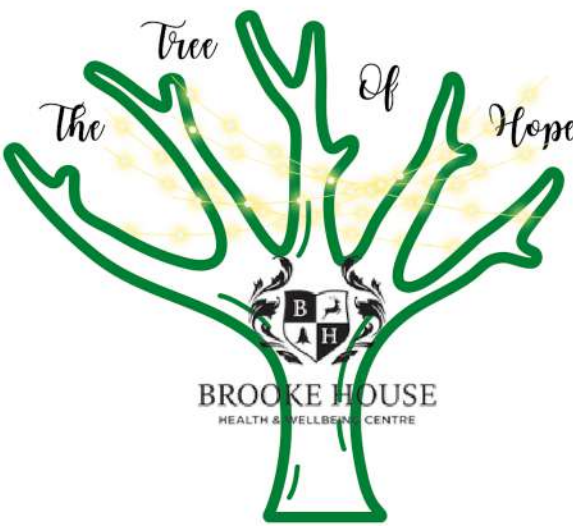
MV Alexia was built at Bremer Vulkan, which was a prominent German shipbuilding company located at the Weser river in Bremen-Vegesack; and the ship was launched on 20th December 1934, then fitted out as an oil tanker for the Anglo-Dutch Royal Dutch/Shell line, which was completed in April 1935. She sustained severe damage in two separate U-boat attacks in 1940 and 1942. After the second attack the MV Alexia was taken over for conversion to a MAC ship, and conversion was completed with the ship entering service in December 1943.

As a MAC ship, she had no aircraft hangar, and continued to carry normal cargoes, although operating under Royal Navy control with only her air crew and the necessary maintenance staff being naval personnel totaling 118 personnel. The MV Alexis had an armament of one - QF 4 inch (100mm) naval gun, mark IV and eight - Oerlikon 20mm cannons. John very rarely spoke much about the war years, or the ship(s) on which he served, although he did convey to his children that the ships he served on were armed and manned by navy gunners, to give some means of defence.

At the end of the war, MV Alexia was reconverted back to an oil tanker, and renamed Lanthina in 1951. She served in this capacity until she was broken up for scrap at Blyth in August 1954. Having learned his trade as an artificer in the engine room of the MV Alexia John, who was discharged from the Merchant Navy in 1946, started working with the then Belfast Corporation as a fitter. He was employed at the Belfast No 1 pumping station, based at Duncrue Street in Belfast. John was responsible for maintaining the huge 2 steam driven pumps. The pumping station was very similar to a ship's engine room, with the huge pumps running smoothly, but noisy and the boiler house where the firemen stoked the fires to keep the steam within the boilers.

John was a good strong swimmer and was coaching his children and others in the art of swimming at the South Gate Amateur Swimming Club (meeting in the then Ormeau Baths). In 1973, the water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland were transferred from local to central government and John was integrated into the civil service as a Professional & Technical Officer. This was a supervisory grade making him responsible for managing the maintenance of the pumping stations in his assigned division in Belfast at that time, including the men who worked within the mechanical & electrical engineering positions, where he remained until he retired.

John's wife Elizabeth passed away in 2012, they had three sons, Brian, Charles and Alastair (his youngest son passed away unexpectedly in 2001). John has six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.



What inspires hope in you? Good news, acts of kindness, the sound of birds singing in the morning? For the team at Brooke House Health and Wellbeing Centre, the pursuit of inspiring hope, not just within themselves, but also within their clients and service users, has given life to a symbol of resilience and optimism: the Tree of Hope.

The Tree of Hope is a collection of branches and driftwood that has been thoughtfully collected by volunteers, staff and service users at Brooke House and placed in a display in the building's reception. The tree is illuminated by beautiful pinecone-shaped string lights and adorned by hand crafted wooden leaves engraved with names of sponsors who have donated towards the project.

Chief Executive of Brooke House, Joan Clements, tells us more about the project: "The tree was envisaged as a one off fundraising project but it has now been lit and will continue to be a talking point of growing kinship, belief in one's self and acceptance of self-worth. When the leaves were placed on the branches, with more to come, it made our service users see and feel connected and thought about."

Volunteers from all parts of Northern Ireland contributed to the project, and the process of gathering the branches played a pivotal role in fostering togetherness among them. Joan said: "Some went and gathered driftwood which took them to different beaches, and enjoyment was had as they walked and talked reflecting also how difficult it was to comprehend that anyone might want to help and support them in their lives.

"This was the important aim of the sculpture - clients could start to believe there were some who remembered them and their service. It has become The Tree of Hope and Kinship. It was a small beginning but with more leaves growing, their sense of connectedness has and will grow, helping to overcome their isolation."

The tree serves as a reminder that, despite life's challenges, there are individuals and businesses willing to contribute to a cause that promotes connection, self-belief, and



acceptance. As the leaves continue to grow and the tree remains illuminated, it stands as a testament to the ongoing journey of hope and kinship fostered by the project.

For more information, or to donate towards The Tree of Hope project, phone Brooke House on 028 8953 1223 or email info@brookehouse.co.uk



Empowering Lives: Deafblind UK's Support in Northern Ireland



In Northern Ireland over 11,000 people face the daily challenges of living with deafblindness, a condition that combines both sight and hearing loss. It's important to recognise and support those among our veteran community who are dealing with sight problems and hearing loss.

Deafblind UK are working to address this need, providing a free, member-led service. Getting support is a straightforward process for both individuals and professionals making referrals, and even caring friends or family members can access support on behalf of someone in need. You can make contact by phoning the helpline, where someone on the other end will be ready to help and connection, or by visiting www.deafblind.org.uk.

Upon joining, members receive a welcome pack and subsequent follow-up contact. During the follow up, members are asked about their preferred reading format, ensuring that communication is tailored to each member's needs. Members can expect regular wellbeing phone calls, providing a chance to chat and connect. Additionally, they can opt in to receiving thoughtful gestures like birthday and Christmas cards, ensuring they feel remembered and cared for during special occasions.

For those in need of more in-depth support, Deafblind UK provides a variety of options, wellbeing and emotional support and including remote counselling sessions lasting 6 to 10 weeks. Befriending services are available across Northern Ireland in Co Armagh, Co Tyrone and Co Fermanagh remote befriending and in Co. Antrim, Co. Down, and Co. Londonderry, featuring both face-to-face and remote schemes. Social visits, volunteer matching, and check-ins contribute to a comprehensive support network.

Paula Meenan, Outreach Officer for Deafblind UK in Northern Ireland, said: "For us, every individual is unique."

This dedicated service doesn't just stop at emotional support; it extends to practical assistance as well. Casework officers are available to guide and assist members, and a digital technology service helps set up phones and tablets properly, ensuring accessibility for members. Regular focus groups serve as an inclusive platform for members to share valuable feedback, voice their experiences, and contribute suggestions for improvements. Additionally, Deafblind UK host seminars featuring guest speakers who bring a diverse range of expertise, covering topics such as the latest advancements in technology. These initiatives not only empower members by fostering a sense of agency and community involvement, but they also promote an environment of continuous learning, ensuring that individuals facing deafblindness stay informed about developments in their journey toward enhanced wellbeing and connectivity.

The vital role of volunteers cannot be overstated. Often, service users become volunteers themselves, creating a cycle of support within the community. The service offers training, including a tailored introduction to meet the specific needs of various audiences. Paula emphasised, "Our work wouldn't be possible without our volunteers."

The service actively engages with the community by participating in deafblind-friendly initiatives such as those at the Void Gallery Londonderry and the Armagh Planetarium. They also provide service talks to organisations and groups, aiming to break down barriers and raise awareness about the challenges that people living with deafblindness face.

Paula explained that identifying someone who may be deafblind is crucial, and their service provides guidance on recognising signs and symptoms. She said, "I try and break the barrier down straight away."

In addition, Deafblind UK has developed a series of information resources for carers, acknowledging the difficulty of navigating available support systems. They aim to keep individuals connected with society for as long as possible, promoting a sense of belonging and community. Paula said, "It's about you having an independent life, making sure you have mobility and communications where needed." Every Health and Social Care trust has a dedicated officer who is deafblind-aware. This commitment ensures that the unique needs of individuals facing deafblindness are met, promoting inclusivity, and understanding throughout Northern Ireland.

Telephone the helpline 0800 132 320 Monday to Thursday 9am to 5pm and Friday 9am to 4pm

Text the helpline 07903572885

Email info@deafblind.org.uk

Visit the website www.deafblind.org.uk

Outcomes: Northern Ireland Veterans' Places, Pathways, People Programme

Funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office manages the delivery of a comprehensive veteran support programme across the region: Veterans' Places, Pathways and People.

We are pleased to share some of the outcomes to date, and highlight some amazing milestones reached by our delivery partners: Brooke House Health & Wellbeing Centre, Inspire, Combat Stress, Walking With the Wounded, Andy Allen Veterans' Support, Fighting With Pride, Defence Gardens Scheme, Out of the Shadows and Fighting With Pride.



94

Veterans on pathways of support in Brooke House

- Complementary Therapy
- Pain Management - Prevention, Physiotherapy, Pharmacy
- Psychological Therapy



101

Veterans on pathways of support in Inspire

- Workshops: Mental Health Awareness, Adult and Children Safeguarding, Alcohol and Drug Awareness, Promoting Self-Care and Wellness, Suicide Awareness and Self-Harm, Understanding and Managing Challenging Behaviours
- Psychological Therapy



95

Veterans on pathways of support in Combat Stress

- Psychiatric Assessment & Medication Review
- Psychological Therapy - Trauma-focused CBT, Narrative Exposure Therapy, Cognitive Processing Therapy, EMDR

THE ARMED FORCES COVENANT FUND TRUST
Funded by HM Government

93



Veteran and family members received direct support from Walking With the Wounded Care Coordinator

914



Veteran and family members supported on a range of activities at Andy Allen Veterans' Support



FIGHTING WITH PRIDE

Outcomes: Northern Ireland Veterans' Places, Pathways, People Programme



48

Veterans completed 10-week Defence Gardens Scheme programmes at Brooke House and Ashes to Gold

7

Veterans completed a 10-week Defence Gardens Scheme programme at HMP Maghaberry

Defence Gardens Scheme - Spring 2024

**Brooke House,
Co Fermanagh**

Open day:

Tuesday 20th
February

Course starts:

Tuesday 5th March

**Ashes to Gold,
Coleraine**

Open day:

Wednesday 13th
March

Course starts:

Wednesday 17th April

**Contact Charlie for more information:
Email charlie@defencegardens.org or call 07399201986**

75 veterans and families received direct support from Out of the Shadows, 1,000+ on activities



OUT OF THE SHADOWS



Mental Health Training of volunteers delivered across Northern Ireland by Inspire



"The VPPP awareness training for volunteers was a brilliant and highly informative delivery of topics that are particularly relevant to those working with veterans and their families. The six bite size chunks were professionally delivered in 2-hour sessions. All of the members of Peninsula Veterans who participated in the programme were very positive in their feedback and felt it was both enjoyable and very worthwhile. I would highly recommend this training to other veterans groups."
- the Peninsula Veterans

Holiday Highlights From Our Veteran Community

SESWN Christmas Wreath Making Event: A Festive Showcase of Creativity!

What a joy it is to reflect on two incredible events that brought smiles, laughter, and a sense of community to our veterans at Christmas!



We start with heartfelt congratulations to the talented ladies who participated in the SESWN Christmas wreath making event!



The photos speak volumes about the joy and creativity that filled the room. The women who participated enjoyed afternoon tea and showed off their creative skills by making some truly beautiful wreaths to take home.



If you're curious about SESWN and their upcoming activities, be sure to visit their website at www.seswn.co.uk or reach out to Jen directly via email at jen@seswn.co.uk or through text/WhatsApp at 07740580123.

Holiday Highlights From Our Veteran Community

Cheer and Camaraderie: Not Forgotten Northern Ireland's Christmas Lunch

We were delighted to attend the Not Forgotten Northern Ireland Christmas Lunch 2023. We had a fantastic time, and are pleased to share these photos taken by Dougie Durant, and this message on behalf of the Vice Chair of the Not Forgotten Northern Ireland:



THE NOT FORGOTTEN
Stay up to date at www.notforgotten-ni.com

The Not Forgotten Northern Ireland (NFNI) is a unique charity which provides a wide and varied programme of high quality and safe recreational and entertainment activities for wounded and disabled regular and reserve serving members of our Armed Forces, and for ex-service members with disabilities, illness or infirmity whatever the cause and whenever it arose. Our resident beneficiary community is numbered at more than fifteen thousand. As a registered charity, the organisation is staffed entirely by unpaid volunteers and meets all of its funding requirements from altruistic donations. The Not Forgotten Northern Ireland provides beneficiaries an opportunity to mix with likeminded people in order to improve their everyday quality of life by integrating more fully into society through organised social intercourse.

Each year, in addition to organising a regular programme of varied activities, the NFNI holds a Christmas Lunch for upwards of one hundred beneficiaries. In 2023, registration to attend this event commenced in September with as wide a circulation of promotional letters and online advertisements as possible. These included all Regimental Associations, Veteran's Charities and social media promotions via the Northern Ireland Veterans Support Office and the NFNI website and Facebook platforms. A final guest list of one hundred was selected to recognise as wide a tri-service group of beneficiaries as possible, but in particular, those who had never previously attended a Not Forgotten activity. Notable representation included members of BLESMA, Blind Veterans, Decorum and more than a dozen military veteran associations.

The actual festive event, which was supported by live entertainment, was held at a 4-star hotel, in Ballymena, Co. Antrim. All three branches of our Armed Services were represented at the function, with the eldest guest being a very spritely 97-year-old RAF veteran, who was resplendent in Association blazer and Santa hat! A smattering of octogenarians who saw service in the Royal Marines, various Army regiments, including the Queens Own Highlanders and UDR, were also treated to a traditional three course festive lunch, washed down with a choice of tea or coffee and way too many mince pies. 10 NFNI officials and volunteers were on hand throughout to ensure the enjoyment of all guests. In a first of its kind in Northern Ireland, the NFNI invited a sister military charity, The Reading Force, to promote its organisation and service at the Christmas Lunch. This collaboration was a resounding success, with guests being treated to the gift of several books each to take home with them.

In response to the NFNI Chairman's welcome address to the assembled veterans, Mr Danny Kinahan, the Northern Ireland Veteran's Commissioner and Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Antrim, responded on behalf of His Majesty King Charles III, with a sincere rejoinder of thanks to the NFNI for its magnificent work in support of all eligible military personnel.

In a heart-warming gesture of generosity by guests, a discretionary ballot to win one of thirteen donated prizes, raised the magnificent sum of £800. Amongst the donations were two personal cheques, each in the sum of £50 from two Royal Marine veterans who, the week before, along with 4 other beneficiaries from Northern Ireland, had been treated by NFNI, to an all-expenses trip to London to attend an exclusive Royal Tea Party at St James's Palace, in the presence of HRH The Princess Royal, patron of the Not Forgotten. Feedback from the Christmas Lunch was all positive, with not one adverse comment.

Of the key words chosen by guests, the overwhelming focus was on the following: Fun. Interesting. Excellent. Nice to be remembered. Great event. Joyful. Helpful. Educational.

Other remarks and comments included:

"An excellent event! Great to be remembered and know there are a lot of likeminded and helpful organisations out there."

"It was a super day and heart-warming to look around the room, see the warmth, and hear the stories shared between the veterans and their families/carers."

"My heartfelt thanks to you and your fantastic colleagues for having me along, and for doing such a brilliant job of organising and hosting a wonderful event for our veterans!"





**Serving and Ex Serving
Women's Network
Northern Ireland**

Serving and ex serving women from across Northern Ireland are invited to join the network!

- ✦ Forge meaningful connections with those who understand
- ✦ Attend exciting events and get-togethers to build lasting memories
- ✦ Share service insights
- ✦ Receive peer support in a welcoming community
- ✦ Enjoy a vibrant social calendar

Join us today and be a part of a network that empowers, uplifts, and celebrates you! Find out more at www.seswn.co.uk or email: hello@seswn.co.uk



Get Involved: Veterans' Radio Production Training with Big Hits Radio

We are delighted to be working with Big Hits Radio to support veterans in radio production training. If you would like to be involved please get in touch! You can tune into Sunday Serving from 6-8pm on Sundays at www.BigHitsRadio.uk

Email your shout outs and song requests to sundayserving628@gmail.com and follow Sunday Serving on Instagram @sunday_serving to stay connected.



Please link in with our NIVSO website and social media channels to stay up to date with our activities!



@ni_veterans_support_office



@NorthernIreland VeteransSupportOffice



@VeteransNI



@NIVSO6