

Armed Forces health stakeholder brief Autumn 2025

Welcome to the autumn 2025 edition of our Armed Forces health stakeholder brief - our first since [the publication of the 10 Year Health Plan](#), part of the government's health mission to build a health service fit for the future. The plan sets out how the government will reinvent the NHS through three radical shifts: hospital to community; analogue to digital; sickness to prevention.

Making sure that all members of the Armed Forces community experience the benefits of these shifts is our priority and their involvement, particularly through the NHS England Armed Forces Patient and Public Voice Group, will help to achieve this.

In this issue, we are pleased to introduce a new NHS staff section, where we hear from Ryan Cross and Doug Wing on the work they are doing to support veterans.

Earlier this year, the government and the NHS took a big step forward by setting out plans for a new training and education programme to support all healthcare staff to meet the needs of patients from the Armed Forces community - we're delighted to be leading on this important initiative and you can find out more below.

We hope you enjoy this edition and look forward to opportunities to keep in touch over the coming weeks. Please remember to follow us on X [@NHSArmedForces](#); and you can contact the team via england.armedforceshealth@nhs.net.

Forthcoming launch of the national Armed Forces health training and education programme

Following [the Department of Health and Social Care announcement in May 2025 of the forthcoming national Armed Forces health training and education programme for NHS staff](#), the first phase of this initiative will launch this winter with an initial focus on NHS trusts.

While the overarching aim of this dedicated training programme is to help improve care and support for the Armed Forces community, it is also an effective enabler in supporting NHS bodies to meet their statutory duty of giving 'due regard' to the health and social care needs of this patient group in the planning, commissioning and provision of healthcare services.

The intention is to roll the training programmes out to all NHS trusts over the course of 2025/2026, with the second phase targeting neighbourhood health services and primary care networks in 2026/27.

To find out more, please email rnoh.vcha.ntep@nhs.net.

Update from Op NOVA - marking two years of life-changing support for veterans in the justice system



Left to right: Colin Back, Op NOVA National Manager; Kate Davies, National Director for Armed Forces, health and justice and sexual assault and abuse services and Inspector Jim Jones, Greater Manchester Police.

On 16 May 2025, colleagues from NHS England, Op NOVA and Greater Manchester Police, as well as veterans with lived experience of the justice system, came together for an operational update. Op NOVA is the NHS England-commissioned support service for veterans in the justice system.

The update marked a major milestone, with Op NOVA having achieved one of NHS England's original commissioning objectives – delivery of a national and fully commissioned, single pathway for veterans in the justice system. It was also timely, with Op NOVA having just completed two years of operational service in the



community and one year in prisons.

Op NOVA's national network of community-based support is now available in all police and probation regions, as well as every adult prison establishment in England.

Since its launch in April 2023, Op NOVA has supported over 2,742 veterans, 78% of whom have reported improved mental health and well-being, and 64% reporting progress to a law-abiding life.

Op NOVA has proven to be a life-changing and life-saving addition to the NHS Armed Forces healthcare suite. Its impact is testament to the collaboration between the NHS, the justice sector, lived experience and the Armed Forces community, underpinned by specialist delivery from the Forces Employment Charity and its in-prison subcontractor Care after Combat.

In the words of Op NOVA lived experience participant, Steven, “That police officer who asked me if I served in HM Armed Forces ... he saved me. I'd tried civilian counselling; it didn't go well. But the moment I met Andy, my Op NOVA caseworker, it felt different. He got it. He got me. He knew how to help.”

Collaboration will continue to be the driving force behind Op NOVA, as the service adapts and grows to meet the needs of an evolving and complex health and justice landscape. Op NOVA is already well-placed to support the new sentencing guidelines and will continue to work to close gaps, build solutions and generate positive outcomes for veterans, their families and the wider community.

To refer a veteran or find out more about Op NOVA, contact Op NOVA direct: 0800 917 7299 or visit www.opnova.org.uk

Discover more about Kate Davies and her team's aims and objectives for Op NOVA [here](#).

Veterans Covenant Healthcare Alliance (VCHA) annual national conference 2025 – 17 September

Feedback from last year's
NHS Veterans Covenant
Healthcare Alliance (VCHA)
annual national conference



Feedback from last year's conference

The lived experiences were so valuable to hear as this makes the work we all do real. To understand veterans' journeys and the barriers they have incurred should motivate us all to identify the individuals and steer them towards the support they need.

NHS VCHA Annual National Conference 2025
17 September 2025, 10am-4pm
Online

#NHSVeteranAware

highlighted how deeply impactful it was to hear directly from veterans. Their lived experiences brought clarity and meaning to the work of healthcare professionals across the system. As one attendee shared, *“To understand veterans' journeys and the barriers they have incurred should motivate us all to identify the individuals and steer them towards the support they need.”* That sentiment continues to shape this year's event.

The NHS VCHA annual national conference 2025 will now take place exclusively online on Wednesday, 17 September 2025, from 10:00am to 4:00pm, making it more accessible than ever before. The move to a fully virtual format is designed to allow greater participation from colleagues across the NHS, independent care sector, hospices, and partner organisations - no matter where they are based.

If you've already registered for the previously planned in-person event, you don't need to take any further action - your registration has been automatically transferred to the online version. If you haven't registered yet, there's still time to join us.

To register, click [here](#).

For updates on the conference programme, including the agenda and speaker lineup, visit the [VCHA website](#) or follow @NHSVeteranAware on social media. For more information, email rnoh.vcha@nhs.net.

You can also be part of the conversation online by using the official hashtag: #NHSVeteranAware.

Op RESTORE summit 2025: Lessons from the front line: 25 – 26 September

Op RESTORE: The Veterans Physical Health and Wellbeing Service continues to serve more patients, with referrals steadily coming through in direct response

to team members attending national and local events, and our communications campaign starting across social platforms to increase our reach.

Op RESTORE is currently preparing for its 2025 summit: Lessons from the frontline – partnering with allies in Ukraine to explore how we can improve the offer for veterans, both now and in the future, in direct response to real time challenges from modern warfare.

Op RESTORE colleagues look forward to welcoming input from those on the frontline in Europe, as well as from colleagues internationally to help future proof the service for those experiencing physical health issues from their time in the Armed Forces.

Further information on OP RESTORE is available at [Op RESTORE: The Veterans Physical Health and Wellbeing Service](#).

Latest primary care network veteran friendly accreditations

Almost 100% of primary care networks (PCNs) have at least one veteran friendly accredited practice and 70% of GP practices in England are accredited.

Project evaluation: The veteran friendly GP practice accreditation project team are underway with selecting a partner to evaluate it. If you would like further information about this work, email veterans@rcgp.org.uk.

VICTOR service brief, please read and share



Please find attached information about the [VICTOR programme](#) for veterans with PTSD and complex PTSD. VICTOR (Veterans' Intensive Complex Trauma Organised Recovery) which is provided by Combat Stress. This intensive programme, which complements Op COURAGE, was commissioned by NHS England in October 2024 for a period of two years.

Update from NHS Employers - Celebrate our new Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold Award winners

The Ministry of Defence has granted an impressive 21 healthcare organisations the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold Award.

This distinguished award recognises extraordinary support for the Armed Forces community and an ongoing commitment to integrating this support into their workplace culture, resulting in a substantial impact within their organisations and beyond.

There are three levels to the awards: bronze, silver, and gold. Attaining gold status requires organisations to show a deep commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, ensuring their policies and practices reflect the core values of the Armed Forces community.

To see this years' award recipients [visit here](#).

Meet NHS colleagues who have served

This new section of our brief provides an insight into the contribution members of the Armed Forces community are making in their work for the NHS.

Ryan Cross, Op RESTORE Physiotherapist Complex Case Manager and former Army Commander



Former Army Commander Ryan Cross, from Doncaster, spent six and a half years in the Armed Forces as a signaller in the 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery, before leaving to train as an NHS physiotherapist.

Now directly supporting his fellow veterans as a physiotherapist complex case manager at [Op RESTORE: The Veterans Physical Health and Wellbeing Service](#), Ryan is also due to rejoin the Armed Forces as a reservist in the Reserve unit, 144 Parachute

Ryan said: "I got to travel the world in the Army – I spent time in the US, France and Germany, and one of my standout experiences was arctic warfare training in Norway. Passing the All-Arms Commando Course and earning the coveted Green Beret was also a highlight of my Army career.

"I was so grateful for those experiences, but I wanted to experience civilian life, so I left at 22. The Army was all I knew as an adult after joining at 16, so it was time to try something different with a career change. I'd suffered injuries myself, especially playing football at semi-professional level and I've always been into human biology and exercise, so training as a physiotherapist seemed like an obvious progression for me.

"There's so much more to physiotherapy than I originally thought. I worked in hospitals as a student on placement, in elite football, gymnastics, private practice and primary care as a primary contact practitioner."

When the opportunity to join Op RESTORE came up, Ryan felt it was perfect for him. He said: "It marries the two sides of my career together. It helped that I had significant military knowledge and experience of how veterans need to be cared for. Most cases are also musculoskeletal, so it was a no-brainer for me to go for it.

"One of the best things is knowing Op RESTORE provides specialist care and support for veterans. We're such a niche and patient-driven service. It's the only place for veterans' physical wellbeing and seeing the positive impact on veterans is very rewarding.

Ryan has a message for his fellow veterans who may need support: "Please reach out to your local GP and make sure they know you've served in the UK Armed Forces. We know a lot of veterans aren't registered with a GP – but once you are, if you've ever had a Service-related physical injury in any capacity, from day one of joining the Armed Forces, you can get referred to us by your GP and we can support you."

In his spare time, you'll find Ryan and his wife busy ferrying their two young children between sport clubs, swimming and gymnastics and walking their dog, Willow. Ryan is also currently training heavily for the upcoming Iron Man competition in Leeds in July.

More information on Op RESTORE, visit www.nhs.uk/oprestore.

Doug Wing, former Sapper Wing in the Royal Engineers and Operational Lead, Midlands Op COURAGE Partnership

Former Sapper Wing, Doug has worked in the NHS since 2001 and qualified as a registered mental health nurse in 2007. Since then, he's worked as a clinician and manager across various teams and services, including



forensic settings at HMP Lincoln and roles within assertive outreach and adult community mental health and child and adolescent mental health services.

Doug said: "When I first joined the NHS – at Rampton Hospital as a nursing assistant – I found there were a number of similarities to the military in terms of structure, and this was in no small part due to the high number of ex-forces staff working there.

"There are similarities across all areas of the NHS that I have worked in since then and a lot of the skills I gained from the Army have served me well throughout my career.

"I've worked in veterans' services since March 2021; initially as service manager in the Lincoln hub, until moving into my current role of operational lead for the Midlands Op COURAGE: Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service Partnership in January 2023.

"After leaving the Army, and before joining the NHS, I would have benefitted from the sort of mental health and wellbeing support that Op COURAGE provides."

For more information on Op COURAGE, visit www.nhs.uk/opcourage.

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