

Veterans Voices

**Veterans experiences of
health and social care services.**

July 2025



Listening to veterans



About Healthwatch Dudley

Healthwatch Dudley listens to people's views of health and social care. We aim to hear from all communities including those who may find it more difficult to have their voices heard. We share feedback with people who have the power to improve services.

Purpose of the work

Veterans often have unique healthcare needs stemming from their military service, including physical injuries, mental health conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and difficulties navigating civilian healthcare systems.

Whilst there are some commitments from services to address these needs, there may still be gaps in provision.

Only 64% of veterans in England and Wales rate their health as good or very good, compared with 82% of the general public (ONS, 2021).

Healthcare needs

People who have served in the armed forces are entitled to priority access to NHS services for conditions related to their service. However, this is always subject to clinical need and doesn't guarantee jumping the queue ahead of someone with a higher clinical need.

Op RESTORE

The Veterans Physical Health and Wellbeing Service is an NHS service providing specialist care and treatment to veterans who have physical health problems as a result of their time in the armed forces.

Op COURAGE

Op COURAGE is an NHS mental health specialist service designed to help serving personnel due to leave the military, reservists, armed forces veterans and their families.

The Armed Forces Covenant



The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise from the nation that those who serve or have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly (Gov.uk, 2025).

Healthcare

- Priority access to NHS care for service-related conditions.

Education

- Includes the Service Pupil Premium and awareness of the needs of service children.

Housing

- Support for getting on the housing ladder and maintaining housing arrangements.

Employment

- Guidance and support for finding new careers after leaving the Armed Forces.

Financial Assistance

- Schemes like 'Forces Help to Buy' provide financial support.

Legal and welfare support

- Ensuring access to legal and welfare services.

Dudley Council has signed up to the Armed Forces Covenant and have received the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (DERS) Silver Award in recognition of their commitment to supporting the Armed Forces Community.

Dudley Council aim to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for our Armed Forces personnel and their families. The council provide a range of advice and support on housing, leisure discounts, schools and learning, jobs and training, welfare and financial support and healthy living.



Stepway

**3.2% of people over 16
in Dudley borough
have served in the
armed forces.**



Stepway help veterans to find a sense of belonging and purpose and support them to adjust to civilian life. They have a local hub where veterans from all over the Black Country can access a range of support services.

Stepway offer the following support services to improve mental wellbeing:

Banter & Brews



A monthly drop-in session for veterans to enjoy a free breakfast and an opportunity to connect with others.

7-Step Civilian Skills Programme



A course covering mental health awareness which provides veterans with a survival kit for civilian life.

LINK – The Community Hub & Projects

Inclusive activities including:



- Opportunities to volunteer at the centre, including peer support.
- Community garden for veterans and people from the local community to come together.
- Support for veterans who are currently in prison and those who have recently been released, helping them to adjust to life outside.



Family First Programme

Family First offers tailored support for Armed Forces families, including:



- One-to-one emotional and practical support.
- Wellbeing and resilience sessions.
- Family bonding activities.
- Creative workshops.
- Employability support .

Joining the breakfast club

The Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Clubs started in 2007, when three friends would meet in a garage for a get together.

There are over 500 clubs around the world supporting over 200,000 members. Breakfast Clubs are free to attend and are run by volunteer veterans.

The club provides an opportunity for veterans and their families to access support and connect with others.

The Dudley Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club meets monthly in Central Dudley.

We visited the Armed Forces & Veterans Breakfast Club in November 2024, January & March 2025.

We visited a hub, set up for veterans in Oldbury, to find out more about the support they offer to veterans and their families.



52 people attended the three breakfast clubs.

12 veterans shared their experiences of care.



Mental health

"I contacted Combat Stress at 2am one Saturday and someone stayed on the phone with me for several hours. They booked me an appointment to see someone on the Monday."

-Veteran

"Veterans are trained in a certain way, they will go into fight, flight or freeze mode due to their training. They need to be treated in a certain way otherwise they will shut down."

-Neil, Stepway

One veteran shared that they often felt upset when they see news reports about conflicts, as it reminds them of their own experience of combat. This can trigger feelings of guilt and sadness for veterans, as they empathise for the people involved.

"Many veterans carry around survivors guilt, if they have been in an incident where their fellow servicemen have been hurt or killed."

-Neil, Stepway

We heard that veterans felt that mental health services need to be responsive to the needs of veterans and act quickly, as PTSD and mental health issues can happen at any time following the event and can occur suddenly.

"PTSD can happen years after the event."

-Veteran

Reaching out for support

A veteran shared an experience of reaching out to Combat Stress via their telephone helpline in the early hours of the morning. An advisor stayed on the phone for two hours with them listening to them and supporting them during a time they felt they were in crisis.

The caller was offered a face to face appointment within a few days of the call and they felt this quick response is needed, especially for veterans.

Peer support

We heard that peer to peer support is really valued in the veteran community and mainly happens informally via groups, friendships and online support.

“My friend [fellow veteran] takes me to my medical appointments and takes me out for the day.”

-Veteran

We heard about Stepway offering support to veterans to access services. They feel that veterans may need someone to attend their first appointment with them.

“Warm referrals work better for veterans, if I give them a phone number, I know they’re not going to call it. I help them to make contact with a service and go along to the first appointment if they need me to.”

-Neil, Stepway



Services that work



Knowing where to go for help

There are many charities and organisations who offer support to veterans and we heard that at times this can be confusing and people do not know who to contact first.

“People will post on Facebook to say they’re struggling and everyone offers phone numbers and places to contact. It’s really confusing to know where to go first. One single point of contact would be easier.”

-Veteran

We were told that some services supporting veterans are not based in the local area and are unable to respond quickly when someone is in crisis.

Co-designing services

We heard that when planning and designing services, especially those regularly accessed or aimed at veterans then co-producing and consulting with veterans is important.

“It needs someone who can understand the needs of veterans to know what will work.”

-Veteran

Someone who understands

We heard that veterans often respond well to people who have also served, often listening to them more as they have more respect for them. They feel fellow veterans can understand their situation better and may have more empathy.

“If veterans know a professional has served they will listen to them.”

-Neil, Stepway

Health services

Dentistry

Veterans told us that during their service they receive free dental treatment, so were not used to paying for this service.

One veteran said they had recently been quoted between £2000–3000 for a dental implant.

We heard that someone was fined £100 for ticking that they claimed benefits accidentally. The fine arrived some time after the treatment.

Waiting for surgery

We heard about a veteran who is waiting for knee surgery. They had been told that they were too young for surgery and that their weight is causing further complications.

They have spoken to PALS about this issue and have been referred to another surgeon who specialises in treating veterans and sports injuries.

Hospital – New Cross Cancer Care

We heard positive feedback about cancer care at New Cross hospital.

“I have nothing but praise for the treatment I have received. My life has greatly improved since I had my surgery.”

–Veteran

Blue Badges

We heard from a veteran that they had issues renewing their Blue Badge. They have been informed that there is a backlog dealing with badges that are linked to PIP claims.

This is causing the person to worry that their current badge may expire before the next one is issued.



GP Services

"I see a different doctor each time and some requests for tests and referrals have not been sent through.

I feel I have to explain my situation several times "

-Veteran



Accessing GP appointments

A veteran told us that they live in Dudley but access a GP surgery in Sandwell. They have a long term health condition and have struggled to book an appointment.

"I have tried to speak to the practice manager but I was told they were unavailable."

-Veteran

Veteran Aware

One attendee shared that they have a long term health condition and that their records state they need to see a GP and not a nurse or a member of the extended health care team. They reported that they still are required to be triaged every time they call for an appointment.

"We are flagged as veterans with the GP, however it makes no difference, but I don't feel I should get preferential treatment over anyone else."

-Veteran

Practice & Patient Charter

In May 2024 Healthwatch Dudley published a report, Exploring Access to GP Services in Dudley Borough. We received over 1000 responses via our survey and speaking to people at community groups and events.

A GP Practice Charter, developed with Healthwatch Dudley, local GPs and other partners, supports mutual respect and sets out expectations for practices and patients. The following is included in the charter:

"We are committed to supporting veterans healthcare and will work towards improving our identification and understanding of their needs and referring appropriately."

GP Services

Privacy when booking

We spoke to a veteran who said she called her GP practice to book an appointment. As it was a sensitive subject, she requested an appointment with a female GP. After this request she was upset that the receptionist continued to enquire about the nature of the appointment.

“I called to book an appointment and requested a female doctor. I was asked why I was booking an appointment. I said it as a private matter and I felt they should know as I’d asked for a female doctor.”

-Veteran

Medication

We heard from a veteran who had visited their GP recently with high blood pressure and had requested a specific medication. They felt that this medication suited them, but were prescribed one that gave them mood swings and other side effects. They booked a further appointment with a different GP who was able to prescribe the medication they had asked for.

“The doctor told me how much the medication I asked for would cost the NHS. I didn’t think that was right.”

-Veteran

Deaf patients

We heard from a veteran who has a hearing impairment. They rely on lip reading and told us that their medical records at the GP surgery are flagged to say they are deaf.

“I struggle if staff don’t face me when they are speaking. It’s flagged on my records but I don’t think they check. I visited the surgery to book an appointment and the receptionist said someone would call me, despite me reminding them that I am deaf.”

-Veteran



Armed Forces Day

Armed Forces Day is an annual celebration of armed forces personnel past and present.

The free event is held at Himley Hall and is one of the largest events in the West Midlands.

The event had a military vehicle display, vintage fairground rides, 1940s/50s dance lessons, paintball and more.

Health and wellbeing carnival

We took part in the Health and Wellbeing Carnival where a range of services, including: cancer screening, mental health and employment were providing advice and information to visitors.

600 people visited the tent to find out more about local services.



Recommendations



Veteran aware

- Services are veteran aware- this can help with appropriate signposting
- Flagging veterans medical records helps health professionals to make appropriate referrals to services.
- Rather than simply providing information on different services, veterans benefit from direct introductions to help support them accessing health and social care services.
- Awareness is raised about specific referral pathways for veterans.



Warm welcomes

- Services are welcoming and understanding.
- Where possible, professionals introduce veterans directly to services.



Design with veterans in mind

- When designing services aimed at veterans this is co-produced with people with lived experience.



Armed Forces Covenant

- Businesses and organisations can sign the Armed Forces covenant to show their support to veterans



Support services

Armed Forces Covenant Fund

Awards grants that support the Armed Forces community.



<https://covenantfund.org.uk/programmes/>

Combat Stress

Combat Stress is the UK's leading veterans' mental health charity, the work we do is life-changing and often life-saving.



0800 138 1619



07537 173683



helpline@combatstress.org.uk



www.combatstress.org.uk/

STEPWAY

STEPWAY is a military charity that supports all Veterans and their families in civilian life, no matter their background or circumstance.



West Midlands Wellbeing Centre
Merton Close, Oldbury
B68 8NG



Tuesday -Friday
10:00am- 3:00pm



neil.binder@stepway.org



0121 7922 723



<https://www.stepway.org>

Support services

Royal British Legion

The Royal British Legion help members of the Royal Navy, British Army, Royal Air Force, veterans and their families.



<https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/>

Tough Enough to Care

Providing advice and a safe space to talk.



text TOUGH to 85258



info@toughenoughtocare.org



<https://toughenoughtocare.help/>

The Poppy Factory

The Poppy Factory helps veterans and their families on their journey towards employment.



support@poppyfactory.org



0208 940 3305



<https://www.poppyfactory.org/>

Dudley Council

The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise to ensure those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly.

Dudley Council has signed up to the covenant, and lists support and advice for the Armed Forces Community in Dudley.



<https://www.dudley.gov.uk/council-community/armed-forces-covenant/>

Thank you

Thank you to the veterans and their friends and family who shared their experiences.

Thank you to Neil Binder who provided us with a warm welcome and facilitated our attendance and discussions with veterans at the breakfast clubs and Stepway Well Being Centre. His understanding and warm approach helped veterans to share their experiences with us.

References

Office for National Statistics [ONS] (2021) UK armed forces veterans, health and unpaid care, England and Wales: Census 2021 *Office for National Statistics* Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/armedforcescommunity/articles/ukarmedforcesveteranshealthandunpaidcareenglandandwales/census2021> [Accessed 18 July 2025]



If you would like this report in another language or format please contact us.

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**Committed
to quality**

Healthwatch Dudley is committed to providing a quality service, from how we collect data, to the information we provide. Every three years we perform an in-depth audit, in conjunction with Healthwatch England, to ensure we meet this high standard.