Essex County Council

Greater Essex

Armed Forces Needs Assessment

Executive Summary

2026



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ARMED FORCES COVENANT

"Most members of the Armed Forces community do well, but a smaller number experience complex, interconnected needs. These needs are not always visible because Armed Forces status is not consistently identified, recorded or understood across services."

What the AFNA tells us?

- Greater Essex has a substantial and diverse Armed Forces community, including around 51,000 veterans alongside serving personnel, reservists, Service children, cadets, military families and bereaved members of the Armed Forces community. Veterans live across Greater Essex with the largest numbers in Colchester and Tendring. The veteran population is older overall, although Colchester and Thurrock have comparatively younger veteran profiles.

- The evidence does not suggest widespread disadvantage across the Armed Forces community as a whole. Many veteran households are in stable housing; national analysis shows that differences in labour-market participation narrow substantially after accounting for age and other demographic factors; and outcomes for Service children are mixed. However, a smaller number of veterans and family members experience complex and overlapping needs, particularly around transition from Service, health and disability, housing insecurity, employment, financial vulnerability and contact with the criminal justice system.

- A consistent finding across all themes was the importance of identification – Armed Forces status is not always routinely identified, recorded or shared appropriately. Where this information is absent, individuals may miss opportunities to access specialist support pathways, and organisations are unable to fully understand demand, monitor outcomes or evaluate service effectiveness.

- The assessment also identified continuing gaps in local intelligence regarding service utilisation, referral pathways, housing outcomes, and the experiences of specific groups within Armed Forces community. Improving identification, data quality, partnership working and referral pathways should therefore remain key priorities for Greater Essex.

- Looking ahead, national developments including the Veterans Strategy, the proposed expansion of the Armed Forces Covenant Duty through the Armed Forces Bill 2026, and the roll-out of VALOUR programme place increasing emphasis on coordinated local delivery. Greater Essex is well positioned to build on existing Armed Forces Covenant partnerships and strengthen a whole systems approach to supporting serving personnel, veterans, and their families.

51,000
Veterans in Greater Essex
Census 2021

3,750
Regular personnel
Stationed in Essex, 2026

1,464
Service children
In Essex mainstream schools

6,401
Veteran households with children
Census 2021

2,738
Indicative partners
Modelled from personnel stationed in Essex

160
War widow(er)s
War Pension Scheme

The Armed Forces Community in Greater Essex

No single dataset captures the entire community. These selected measures describe different overlapping populations.

- Veterans make up 3.4% of the Greater Essex population aged 16 years and over. The largest numbers are in Colchester (7,172) and Tendring (6,338).
- Around 60% of Greater Essex veterans are aged 65 or over. Colchester and Thurrock have younger veterans' profiles than many other areas.
- Women account for about 11.7% of Greater Essex veterans, which is approximately 6,000.
- Service children account for approximately 0.7% of school children.

About the evidence:

Figures come from several datasets and reporting periods and should not be added together to produce a single Armed Forces community total. Census 2021 remains the principal local source for veterans. MOD personnel figures relate to duty station rather than residence. Service activity and recorded homelessness depend on identification and disclosure and should not be interpreted as the total level of need. Some local estimates are indicative where directly comparable data are unavailable.

Key findings by theme:

Policy, delivery and progress:

The review of earlier Essex AFNA recommendations shows some useful progress, but uneven implementation. Greater Essex now has 163 Veteran Friendly GP Practices, Veteran Aware NHS trusts and access to specialist national pathways. The Veterans Strategy, development of the VALOUR programme and the proposed expansion of the Armed Forces Covenant Duty places greater emphasis on coordinated local action. The next step is to turn commitment and accreditation into consistent identification, referral, follow up and measurable outcomes across the whole county.

Health and wellbeing:

5,975	16,924	5,963	30,500
Bad or very bad health	**Disabled / limited**	**Providing unpaid care**	**Aged 65+**
11.7% of veterans	33.0%	11.6%	59.6%

Greater Essex has a large and ageing veteran population, with around 60% of veterans aged 65 years and over. The absolute numbers affected are substantial: 5,975 veterans reported bad or very bad health, 16,924 were disabled or limited in daily activities, and 5,963 provided unpaid care (observed, unadjusted counts). Age-adjusted East of England comparisons narrow the apparent health gap considerably, although disability and unpaid care remain slightly more prevalent among veterans. As the veteran population ages, demand may increase for dementia support, support for carers, accessible healthcare, home adaptations and independent living services. Musculoskeletal conditions and hearing loss remain important service-related health issues, while mental ill health, alcohol and substance misuse, gambling harms, suicide risk among some groups highlight the need for connected and veteran-aware pathways. Local intelligence on prevalence, service use, waits and outcomes remain limited, making improved identification, routine coding, referral and monitoring key priorities alongside the availability of specialist services.

Education:

1,464	0.7%	9.4%	13.7%
Service children	**Of pupils**	**Free School Meals**	**SEN support**
Mainstream Essex schools	Essex, January 2026	vs 21.4% non-Service	vs 14.1% non-Service

There were 1,464 Service children in Essex schools, representing 0.7% of pupils. Compared with non-Service pupils in Essex, Service children had lower levels of deprivation and were less likely to be eligible for Free School Meals, while rates of Special Education Needs were similar. Education outcomes were mixed. Service children achieved higher attainment in Year 1 phonics and Key stage 2 and had slightly better attendance rates. However, attainment was lower at Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 4, and outcomes were below the national average for Service pupils at all four reported educational stages. Service children were also almost twice as likely to have changed schools during the two years prior to KS2 assessments, reflecting the impact of military mobility. Post-16 destinations were broadly comparable to those of non-Service pupils. The attainment comparisons should be interpreted cautiously because Service-child cohorts are relatively small.

Housing:

77%
Veteran households' owner-occupiers
vs 69% all Greater Essex households

42
Armed Forces households owed prevention/relief duty
2024/25

14
Housing authorities
Across Greater Essex

Most veteran households are in stable accommodation: 77% are owner-occupiers, compared with 69% of all Greater Essex households. The emerging issue is not only access to housing but whether homes remain suitable as veterans age, including access to adaptations, Disabled Facilities Grants, assistive technology and support for independent living. Affordability varies considerably between Greater Essex local authorities and can constrain choices for Service leavers. Forty-two Armed Forces households were recorded as owed a homelessness prevention or relief duty in 2024/25, however it is only a partial count depending on disclosure and recording. A shared Greater Essex housing prevention and referral approach would improve consistency while preserving each authority's statutory responsibilities.

Employment, transition and skills:

36.6%
Economically active Greater Essex veterans aged 16+

48%
Of employed Greater Essex veterans worked in managerial, professional, associate professional occupations

52.5%
Of *UK Veterans Survey* respondents reported having taken a job below the experience or skill level of their final Armed Forces role

National analysis indicates that veterans and non-veterans have broadly similar economic activity rates after adjustment for age, sex and region. In Greater Essex, only 36.6% of veterans aged 16 and over are economically active, reflecting the older age profile of the veteran population, with around six in ten veterans aged 65 and over. Among those in employment, nearly half work in managerial, professional or associate professional occupations, and local demand in logistics, engineering, technical, health and care occupations aligns with many military skills. The main concern is therefore the quality of transition and employment, rather than overall economic activity rates. Nationally, 52.5% of veterans reported ever taking a job below the experience or skill level of their final Armed Forces role. Better skills translation, retraining and outcome monitoring are needed, particularly for medically discharged personnel, Early Service Leavers and military spouses and partners.

Criminal Justice:

The number of veterans in contact with the criminal justice system cannot be reliably estimated from current local data. Essex Police data combine serving personnel and veterans, and disclosure is inconsistent across police, courts, probation and prisons. National evidence suggests that 4.9% of people in prisons, detention centres, and approved probation accommodation identify as veterans, with housing, mental health substance misuse, debt and employment needs often overlapping. Consistent identification and prompt referral to Op NOVA and other appropriate services should be embedded across the pathway.

Families and underserved groups:

6,000
Women veterans
11.7% of veteran population

5.3%
Of veterans were born outside the UK
Census 2021

1,700
Ethnic minority veterans
Census 2021

~265
Nepal-born veterans
Census 2021

The AF community is diverse. Greater Essex includes around 6,000 women veterans; 5.3% of veterans were born outside the UK; approximately 1,700 are from ethnic minority groups; Census data showed that there are approximately 265 Nepal-born veterans. LGBTQ+ veterans affected by the pre-2000 ban, Commonwealth and Gurkha veterans, women veterans and military families may face distinct barriers, including discrimination, immigration and settlement issues, social isolation, childcare and disrupted careers. These groups should be considered with both mainstream and veteran-specific pathways and include future engagement and needs assessment activity.

Overall, the AFNA suggests that Greater Essex's principal challenge is not the scale of need across the veteran population as a whole, but ensuring that those veterans and families experiencing disadvantage, poor health, transition difficulties or complex needs are identified early and supported through coordinated, evidence-based pathways.

What happens next?

The findings and recommendations of this needs assessment should inform the work of the Civilian Military Partnership Board and relevant Armed Forces Covenant partners across Greater Essex. Following publication, partners should agree a proportionate implementation plan identifying priority actions, responsible organisations, timescales and arrangements for monitoring progress. The AFNA should also inform future service planning, commissioning and evidence development where appropriate.

Strategic priorities

Overall, based on the findings the key strategic priorities should be:



Recommendations

R1	**Identification and intelligence** Develop a more consistent approach to identifying and recording members of the Armed Forces community across relevant services, and use this information to better understand need, access and outcomes	R5	**Housing and strategic planning** Develop a coordinated Greater Essex Armed Forces housing approach covering homelessness prevention, transition, access to settled and suitable accommodation, and evidence led consideration of AF housing need within strategic planning
R2	**Navigation, referral and coordination** Strengthen navigation and referral between mainstream, specialist and voluntary sector support so that members of the AF community can access appropriate help through clear and coordinated pathways	R6	**Employment, skills and post-Service education** Strengthen transition into appropriate civilian employment, education and training, with emphasis on employment quality, skills recognition and successful longer-term transition
R3	**Health, care and wellbeing** Strengthen veteran-aware health, care and wellbeing pathways and improve understanding of access, experience and outcomes for veterans and their families.	R7	**Criminal Justice System** Improve consistent identification of veterans and timely referral to appropriate support throughout the criminal justice pathway
R4	**Service children** Improve identification, educational continuity and wellbeing support for Service children, particularly where mobility and other aspects of military family life affect education	R8	**Families and underserved groups** Ensure that mainstream and Armed Forces specific services recognize and respond to the diversity of the Armed Forces community, including families and groups whose experiences and needs may be less visible within routine data
R9	**Implementation, engagement and accountability** Establish a clear partnership mechanism for implementing, monitoring and periodically reviewing the AFNA recommendations		

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