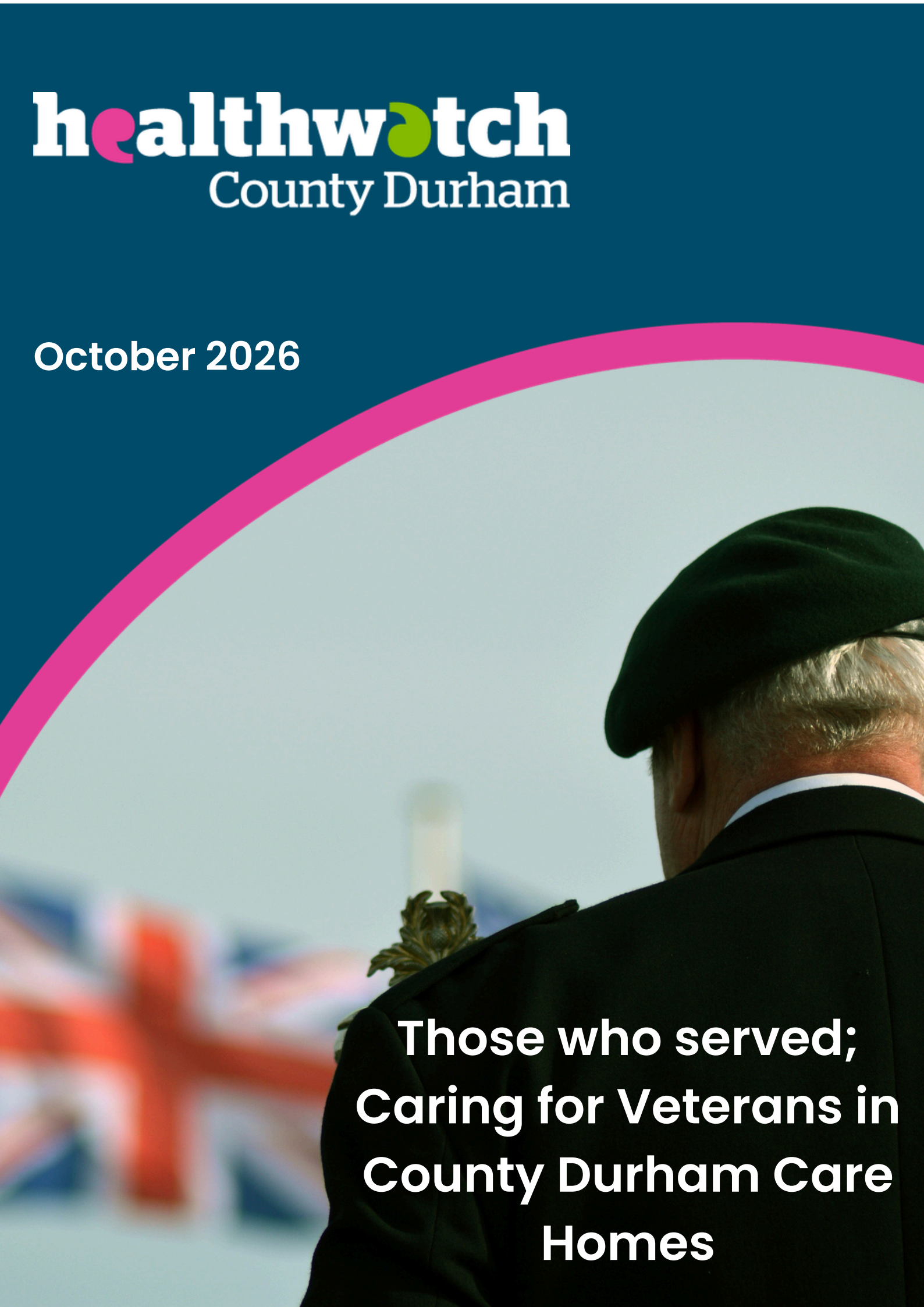


October 2026



**Those who served;
Caring for Veterans in
County Durham Care
Homes**

About this work

Healthwatch County Durham is the independent voice for people who use health and social care services.

We wanted to understand how well care homes in County Durham identify and support people who have served in the Armed Forces. We spoke to 12 members of care home staff across eight care homes. Staff included care managers and activities coordinators.



We asked about:

- Identifying veterans when they move into a care home
- Understanding veterans' individual needs and experiences
- Activities and opportunities for veterans
- Links with veteran support organisations
- Training and resources for care home staff.

What did we find?

Overall, we heard a strong commitment to providing compassionate, person-centred care. Staff spoke positively about their veteran residents and showed a genuine interest in understanding their experiences.

However, we also found that support can vary between care homes and sometimes between staff within the same care home.

A key message was that staff do not always need to do more, they need the right information and support to do what they already do well.



Identifying veterans

Almost all of the care homes we spoke to currently had at least one veteran living there. One home told us that almost half of its residents were veterans. Despite this, formal records of military service were not always available.

Most staff said veteran status was included within a resident's life history, but two staff members said it was not recorded in care plans.

Some staff felt it was important not to pressure someone to disclose their military history. This is particularly important where experiences may be difficult or traumatic. However, respectfully asking about someone's service history as part of understanding their life story could help staff recognise needs, routines or behaviours that might otherwise be misunderstood.



What this means

Care homes could consider how veteran status can be identified and recorded sensitively when someone enters care, while always respecting a person's choice about what they want to share.



Understanding veterans' needs

Staff showed awareness of some needs that may be particularly relevant to veterans.

Examples included:

- supporting veterans to maintain routines around smart dress and personal presentation
- understanding possible reactions to loud noises
- recognising that some experiences may be connected to trauma
- using a person's military history as part of their life story and person-centred care.

However, only 2 of the 12 staff members interviewed had received specific veteran-related training or guidance. That means 83% had not received tailored training or guidance. Staff told us they would welcome more information and training. We also heard examples of care homes doing creative things to recognise veterans, including poppy activities, military music and entertainment.

Importantly, staff recognised that celebrating military experiences needs to be done sensitively. Not every veteran will want to talk about their service, and some memories may be distressing.



What this means

Training could help staff understand military culture, recognise potential needs and feel more confident supporting veterans without making assumptions about their experiences.

Activities, engagement and connections

Care homes were using a range of activities to engage veteran residents. These included:

staff dressing in military uniform

poppy painting

VE Day celebrations

visits to memorials

wartime films and television programmes

military-themed music

Where activities were adapted to individual needs, staff told us they were received very positively. For example, one care home avoided loud sounds and gunfire in films by using subtitles or choosing books instead. However, around one third of staff could not identify any activities specifically aimed at veterans.

Only one care home had an existing connection with an external veteran support organisation. Many staff knew of organisations such as the Royal British Legion and SSAFA (Soldiers', Sailors', and Airmen's Families Association) but were less familiar with the range of support available.



What this means

There appears to be an opportunity to connect care homes with organisations that already provide specialist veteran support, training and activities.

What could make things better?

Staff identified several barriers, including:

- limited awareness of veteran-specific support
- lack of training
- staffing pressures
- funding limitations
- difficulties organising activities, trips and visitors
- complex needs, including dementia and trauma-related behaviours.



However, 92% of those interviewed said they would benefit from additional resources.

Training was the most commonly requested resource. Staff also wanted ideas for activities, trips and opportunities for veterans to meet others.

We heard that staff with their own military or family connections sometimes felt this helped them understand veteran residents better. Their knowledge could potentially be shared with colleagues across the wider staff team.

We were also reminded that spouses of veterans may have their own experiences and needs, and should not be overlooked.



What Healthwatch County Durham has done with this information

Our work did not stop with speaking to care homes. We shared the findings with Veterans for Veterans in Care, a specialist organisation supporting veterans living in care. They used our research to support a presentation to more than 150 CQC inspectors and managers.

The presentation generated significant interest, with a planned 15-minute presentation continuing for more than 30 minutes because of questions and discussion.

Veterans for Veterans in Care told us that our research helped back up what they were saying and gave the presentation even more weight. The presentation has also created an opportunity for further conversations with CQC about veterans living in care.



The research particularly supported messages about:

- Veterans potentially losing aspects of their military identity
- The importance of understanding military culture
- The need for training and awareness among care staff.

Why this matters

This means the experiences shared by care home staff in County Durham have helped inform a much wider conversation about how veterans are understood and supported in care settings.

Our next aim is to help local care homes connect with specialist veteran support and training, so that the learning from this work can lead to practical improvements for residents.

Our recommendations

Based on what we heard, Healthwatch County Durham has made three recommendations.

1

Identify veterans when they enter care

Care homes should consider introducing a sensitive and voluntary way of identifying whether a resident has served in the Armed Forces. Where a resident wishes to share this information, it should form part of their life history and care planning.

This could help staff understand the person's background, preferences, routines and potential needs.

2

Increase staff training and awareness

Care homes should provide opportunities for staff-wide training about veterans and military culture.

Training should help staff understand:

- military culture and experiences
- how service history can influence a person's identity
- possible trauma-related responses
- how to support veterans without making assumptions
- where to find specialist support.

Training should be available to the wider staff team rather than relying on one or two members of staff having specialist knowledge.



Our recommendations

Increase opportunities for veteran-specific activities and support

3

Care homes should explore opportunities for:

- veteran-specific activities
- visits and trips
- links with local veteran organisations
- peer support
- speakers and visitors
- celebrating military history in ways that are meaningful to residents.

Activities should always be person-centred and optional, recognising that veterans have different experiences and interests.

A positive foundation to build upon

Our research found that care homes are already doing many things well. Staff showed compassion, respect and pride in caring for their residents. Many were enthusiastic about learning more and finding new ways to support veterans. We also found examples of excellent practice already happening in local care homes. The challenge is not necessarily about starting from scratch. It is about sharing good practice, improving awareness and making specialist support easier to access.

A relatively simple change such as knowing that someone is a veteran and understanding what that might mean to them, could help staff provide more informed, personalised care.



What We Found vs What Could Help

Veterans were present in almost all care homes we visited

Sensitively identify veteran status

83% of staff had not received veteran-specific training

Provide staff training and awareness

92% wanted additional resources

Improve access to information and support

Activities varied between care homes

Share ideas and examples of good practice

Staff wanted to understand veterans better

Provide accessible guidance and training

Good practice already exists locally

Share learning between care homes

Only one home had a link with an external veteran support organisation

Strengthen connections with specialist organisations





At a glance

Our message to care homes

You don't have to be an expert in military history to support a veteran well. Being curious about someone's life, listening to what matters to them, respecting what they choose to share and knowing where to get additional support can make a real difference.

Healthwatch County Durham will continue to explore opportunities to connect care homes with organisations that can provide training, advice and specialist veteran support.



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A huge thank you to all the care home staff who took the time to speak with us and share their valuable insights and experiences.

We would also like to thank Veterans for Veterans in Care and East Durham Veterans for their support and for the important work they continue to do to support veterans across County Durham.

Thank you!



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