



# The power of partnership

## The Defence Gardens Scheme with Brooke House Health and Wellbeing Centre at Colebrooke Walled Garden

The Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office (NIVSO) was established in 2018, to develop strong working links between devolved government departments, local government veterans' champions, and the voluntary and charitable sector. It was also tasked with delivering the Armed Forces Covenant, with a coordinated approach in support of veterans and their families.

### BACKGROUND

In 2019, the House of Commons Defence Select Committee identified 'a stark gap in the provision of mental health support for armed forces personnel and their families.'<sup>1</sup>

In Northern Ireland, less than a decade ago, there was considered to be a vacuum in regard to the mental health welfare needs of armed forces veterans. A study by Queen's University Belfast also recognised that there was indeed a lack of support and coordination in this area.

Jane,<sup>2</sup> a 30-year old veteran who had served in Afghanistan in 2009 was suffering from PTSD. Jane said: 'When I tried to access counselling through the NHS, I was told there was an 18-month waiting list. I told my family not to even bother putting me on the list, as I wouldn't be here in 18 months.'

1. [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) 2. Jane is not her real name.





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***'The DGS programme takes a hugely different approach to mental health welfare. It makes an incredible difference for vulnerable service leavers and the veterans on the programme, by bringing like-minded people together, in a beautiful, nature-based, and secure environment.'***

Lord Brookeborough

***'The veterans who attend the DGS programme work in the gardens as a group. They naturally and holistically talk about their past, their stories come out and the therapy starts, as people start to reflect on what they have been through and the problems they are facing now. This is true peer support, the buddy system, working shoulder to shoulder, sitting together round a table...talking.'***

Charlie Marno, the DGS Northern Ireland Regional Co-ordinator

## THE PARTNERSHIP

The Viscount Brookeborough of Colebrooke Park in Co Fermanagh had served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment. He was aware of and recognised the complex mental health issues affecting armed forces veterans.

In 2018, the Brooke House Health and Wellbeing Centre was set up in the Colebrooke Park estate to offer counselling, complementary therapies, and other therapeutic interventions. In 2019, The Defence Gardens Scheme (DGS) piloted an evidence-based nature-based therapy programme funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

DGS aims to help fill the gap in mental health support, by increasing access to nature-based therapy, creating the time and space for bespoke, holistic support for military veterans. The ten-week, evidence-based, horticultural programme runs for one day a week, for four hours per day for groups of eight. On hand is a horticultural expert and an Eco Counselling therapist. All sessions cover a balance of practical gardening skills and self-help for managing mental health. All sessions include physical, cognitive, social and emotional therapeutic outcomes. There is a fidelity of delivery and evaluation as sessions are supported by a DGS concept manual.

Joan Clements, CEO at Brooke House, said: 'The outdoor space is of utmost importance to our clients and it is really valuable to us. We have a counselling hut on the periphery of the walled garden, and we use the outdoor space as the hub of everything we do, from our bell tent for carers, through to mindful walks and the DGS programmes. Everything we develop here is based in the outdoors.'



BROOKE HOUSE  
HEALTH & WELLBEING CENTRE

THE ARMED FORCES  
COVENANT FUND TRUST



COLEBROOKE  
WALLED GARDEN

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## THE EFFECT

**'For anyone who is considering DGS – I would say, don't be scared, take that first step. Everyone is nervous, but you are made to feel at ease, immediately. Brooke House and DGS changed my life, I don't think I'd be here today if it weren't for them, they are the ones that saved me.'** Jane, veteran

Prior to coming to Brooke House to be assessed by the health and wellbeing team and joining the DGS programme Jane was suffering from PTSD. Ahead of the first session, she couldn't sleep, she was physically sick, and she sat for some time in the Colebrooke Park car park, ready to drive away, as the nerves took hold.

The Brooke House health and wellbeing coordinator brought her in, and in Jane's own words: 'my life changed.'

The eight men and women attending DGS had all been through traumatic events during their service. The horticultural therapist put everyone at ease and as a group they benefitted from peer support and the ability to talk without feeling judged.

Jane looked forward to her time in the garden. The peer support did not stop at the end of the day. Jane set up a WhatsApp group for her course, and their support of each other continued between sessions and continues to this day.

DGS provides a roadmap for the veterans at the end of the ten-week programme. All individuals receive support that includes new training courses, or assistance into to employment or self-employment, with ongoing support and mentoring.

Joan Clements, CEO at Brooke House: 'We were honoured to be part of the pilot that developed the DGS programme. This project has enabled us to develop additional innovative projects and without our experience with DGS, this wouldn't have been possible.'

**'One thing that is important to all veterans is trust, particularly for Northern Ireland veterans. They have to feel safe and secure with the people and the environment they are in. DGS provides that sanctuary, it is the foundation for everything.'**

Liz Brown, Head of the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office



**'I am delighted that the strong partnership that has evolved with Brooke House Health and Wellbeing Centre and the Colebrooke team at the Walled Garden has endured and indeed been strengthened by the pandemic. There is no doubt the sum is greater than the parts. We are incredibly grateful for the support of the NIVSO as well as the ongoing funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust under the Veterans People, Place and Pathways fund.'** Sally Coulthard MBE CF FRSA, DGS Founder and CEO

