

Home for heroes

Coming back from a conflict can be the hardest thing of all. A pioneering development in Wiltshire aims to help returning service personnel with a support network — and a roof over their heads

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September 25
2016, 12:01am,
The Sunday
Times



Serving soldiers were asked for ideas
JOE STALLARD

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Three miles northwest of Salisbury, in Wiltshire, a large-scale manoeuvre is being carried out. The main objective is to rehabilitate veterans back into civilian life, and the strategy is to assemble a housing development with homes built exclusively for former service personnel and their families.

At the heart of the 34-acre site in Wilton, on land once occupied by the now demolished Erskine Barracks, there will be a cafe, an

enterprise hub, 44 affordable rental flats and at least 10 shared-ownership homes purpose-built for veterans. This is the first development of its kind in the UK.



A fighting chance: the enterprise hub at Our Wilton will provide work and training for veterans

More than 55,000 ex-service personnel live in Wiltshire, and the county council, which adapted the standard planning conditions relating to affordable housing for the scheme, hopes it will be a model. “We want to create a community that supports veterans in transition,” says Matthew Bell, founder of the development company Our Enterprise. It has teamed up with Redrow Homes and the Wilton Community Land Trust to form the Our Wilton Trust, which received a grant of £500,000 earlier this year from the Armed Forces Covenant.

“There’s so much charity in the veteran sector — a lot of work goes into the wounded and

sick, but there are veterans who fall outside of that from a medical point of view,” Bell says. “These men and women still have a life to lead, and some need help.”

Greg Power, 44, who joined up at 17 and saw active service in the Gulf, Northern Ireland and Bosnia, backs this up: “Leaving the army was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” he says. “You’ve got people all over the world doing operations we will never know about, and when they come back, they have to realise quickly that people on civvy street don’t understand what they’ve been through.”

Power now teaches bushcraft and coppicing in Somerset. “I believe wholeheartedly that if veterans have a noisy mind, then bushcraft will calm them down – it will help them to get purpose back in life. When you’re in the army, you’re in a bubble, you’re doing as you’re told, but afterwards not everyone is geared up to go to work in an office.”

The Our Wilton scheme is intended to provide 200 jobs for veterans, who will be in charge of running the cafe and their own grounds-maintenance enterprise, supported by the charity. It will also create a number of training, volunteering and enterprise opportunities.

The private homes — a number of which will be wheelchair-accessible — will have between three and five bedrooms. Prices will start at £399,950; the government-backed Forces Help to Buy scheme will be available. “We are immensely proud to have been a part of the project’s creation,” says Mark Vanson, sales and marketing director at Redrow. “We hope it will not only provide veterans with new homes, but help to unite the community.”

The criteria for qualifying for a property have yet to be finalised, but will likely involve a needs-based assessment as well as an interview. Local veterans and those at risk of homelessness will be prioritised, while rank,

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aeemea irrelevant. individuals and more
vulnerable people will be offered a rental flat Times+ My account ▼
for a period of 6-24 months on either a shared
or single-occupancy basis. Family homes will
be allocated with longer-term tenure in mind.



“Every resident will have a licence or tenancy agreement, depending on which part of the accommodation they go in,” says Andrew Lord, chief executive of Alabaré, a local Christian charity. “They will have a support plan with goals, and over time we will help the veterans meet those goals.”

Building is set to begin in November, and the project is due for completion next year, but its benefits are already being felt in the wider population. A new initiative called Wilton Welcomes, where local businesses offer discounts to serving personnel, veterans and their families, is up and running – it was launched by Kerry Harvey, a veteran’s wife who is working on Our Wilton. Meanwhile, a furniture upcycling scheme involving young people is raising funds for Alabaré and providing vital first-hand knowledge to help shape what Our Wilton will provide.

“We brought together some of our veterans, and they gave ideas in terms of what facilities they require, as well as what advice and training they need,” Lord says. Soldiers on exercise on Salisbury Plain also shared thoughts on their particular skills and qualifications, which could be transferred into civilian employment.

“We have a steering group consisting of representatives from the local authority, forces charities and a veterans advisory team who will be part of the growth and development of the project,” says Sue van Leest, operations manager for Our Enterprise.

Wilton’s enterprise hub will be the focal point where much of this development takes place. Half of the space will be available to established local businesses, including tech companies and pop-ups; the rest will be designated for veterans. Lessons such as cooking on a budget will be taught in the connecting glass-fronted cafe — the design put an emphasis on making the most of natural light, to promote a sense of wellbeing — and will be open both to residents and to the wider Wilton community.

“There will be a programme of training, but also a ‘tasting menu’ of career opportunities, so veterans can stay with us to try different things and, if they wish, set up a business,” Bell says.

By 2020, more than 17,000 troops will be based in Wiltshire, and the army’s plans will see an extra 4,000 personnel move into the area, as well as about 3,300 dependents. Our Enterprise has begun discussions with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, which

supports the armed forces by building, maintaining and servicing infrastructure, to map out where further sites might be needed.

The Our Wilton scheme was highly commended at the Planning & Placemaking Awards in July, and the team hopes that this recognition will boost its chances of becoming a blueprint for more new homes for veterans across the UK. “We’ve got to prove this model,” Bell says. “I think we will do that, and I’ll be knocking on No 10’s door and saying we need more.”

Our Wilton is on Twitter ([@OurWilton](#));

redrow.co.uk