



**The Royal British Legion
Northamptonshire County
Annual County Conference
held on Saturday 1st February 2025**

MINUTES

PRESENT:

Mr Ian Byrnes, County Chair
Brigadier David Russell-Parsons OBE DL, Deputy Lieutenant Northamptonshire
Cllr Lora Lawman, Chair of North Northamptonshire Council
Cllr Jo Gifford, Chair of West Northamptonshire Council
Cllr Paul Joyce, Mayor of Northampton
Father Oliver Coss, County Chaplain
Colonel Robert Blomfield MBE TD, County Colonel R ANGLIAN Regt Northants & Rutland
Mrs Jane Cosgrove, RBL Membership Council Representative
Mr Daniel Esler, RBL Director of Grants and Quality
Ms Kate Wildman, Head of RBL Audit & Compliance
Ms Lebo Nyoni, RBL Membership Engagement Officer (Northamptonshire & Oxfordshire)
Ms Jo-Anne Wilson MBE, Manager RBL Galanos House
Mr Giles Coleman, Poppy Appeal Manager

Plus 9 Branch Delegates, 9 Standard Bearers and 25 County Committee Members and Visitors

The Conference opened at 10.30am

1. Welcome: Mr Ian Byrnes, the County Chair:

- a. Welcomed the invited guests;
- b. Called in the Northamptonshire County and Branch Standards; and
- c. Read the Roll of Honour for RBL Members of the County who have passed away since the last Conference as follows:

RBL Burton Latimer Branch	Anthony John Dale Peck
RBL Desborough Branch	John Buckby
RBL Desborough Branch	Anne Liddle
RBL Finedon, Irthlingborough & District Branch	Pamela Wheatley
RBL Raunds & District Branch	Bryan Chantrell
RBL Roade & District Branch	Ron Peacock
RBL Rushden & District Branch	Roy Cave
RBL Rushden & District Branch	John Firmin
RBL Rushden & District Branch	Reverend John Tye
RBL Rushden & District Branch	Chris Jackson
RBL Rushden & District Branch	Denis Taylor
RBL Thrapston & District Branch	Mary White

The Chairman then delivered the Homage which was followed by the Last Post.

2. Civic Welcome to the delegates by the County Chair to:

- a. Cllr Barbara Jenny, Chair of North Northamptonshire Council
- b. Cllr John Shepherd, Chair of West Northamptonshire Council
- c. Cllr Stephen Hibbert, Mayor of Northampton
- d. Father Oliver Coss, County Chaplain

The Mayor of Northampton responded by thanking Conference for their kind invitation, especially as his family has close military connections.

3. Biding Prayer. Father Oliver Coss delivered the Biding Prayer.

4. Address by Brigadier David Russell-Parsons OBE DL, Deputy Lieutenant Northamptonshire

Brigadier Russell-Parsons thanked Conference for their kind invitation and all Royal British Legion members for their contribution to the County and praised the exemplary turnout and drill of the Standard Bearers present.

Before turning to the presentation of the work of the Armed Forces Covenant during 2024, he outlined some of the activities undertaken by the Lieutenancy.

He also explained that the works in the Cabinet Office and next week sees the Office for Veterans Affairs is being moved from the Cabinet Office to the Ministry of Defence – this will result in all veteran affairs being coordinated from one central department which will improve communications and support for the military family from joining to retiring as a veteran.

2024 was an extremely busy year for the Lieutenancy with approximately 400 invitations received.

Mrs Morcea Walker MBE DL retired as Vice Lord-Lieutenant on 19th February, on reaching her 75th birthday, but is still extremely active within the county, succeeded by Mrs. Anne Burnett.

On 3 March 2024, David Laing CBE CStJ DL, former Lord-Lieutenant of Northamptonshire, passed away peacefully following a short illness. It was a terrible shock at how quickly this happened. We lost a wonderful generous supporter of the County. So many bodies and organisations, both in Northamptonshire and nationally, have been touched by his generosity, interest, and energy. A memorial service was held in All Saints Church on 24 June with representatives attending on behalf of HRH The Princess Royal and HRH The Duke of Gloucester. The Church was packed, with over 800 attendees.

The Lord-Lieutenant has been having Introductory meetings with the seven new MPs in the county.

With only a small group of working Royals now, Northamptonshire Lieutenancy were successful in securing royal visits to the county as follows:

- Volunteer group "Off the Streets" received a Royal visit from HRH The Princess Royal on 16th February 2024 at the Hind Hotel in Wellingborough for their efforts in tackling knife crime and supporting young people.

- HM Lord-Lieutenant of Northamptonshire, James Saunders Watson Esq was delighted to welcome HRH The Duke of Gloucester KG GCVO to Northamptonshire on Wednesday 30th October where he visited four organisations:
 - **HMP Five Wells - Wellingborough.** HMP Five Wells is the UK's newest prison which has been designed around a forward-thinking layout to support the rehabilitation and training of offenders to break the vicious cycle of recidivism. The purpose of the visit was to visit the workshops for teaching trade skills, etc. with the opportunity to meet prisoners and staff.
 - **Rock UK Adventure Centres Ltd – Irthlingborough:**
 - Rock UK (formerly Barnabas Trust & Barnabas Adventure Centres) was founded in 1922 as the Belgrave Trust in West Sussex by a group of Sunday School teachers who recognised the need for young people to go away on an adventure. Nowadays, the Charity has four centres across the UK welcoming over 60,000 people annually, with its Head Office in Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire.
 - The purpose of this visit was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Charity (2022) and its achievements over the past 100 years as well as its continued work with young people whether they are visiting the centre as a guest or are part of Instructor Training Programme (ITP).
 - **The Frank Bruno Foundation – Standen's Barn, Northampton:**
 - The Frank Bruno Foundation was founded in 2017 as a direct result of Frank Bruno MBE wanting to give back to the community and is based at The Round-by-Round Centre in Standen's Barn, Northampton. The Frank Bruno Foundation has worked hard to create positive change in the community by providing structured non-contact boxing sessions and wellbeing programmes for anyone aged over the age of 10 years struggling with their mental health throughout Northamptonshire.
 - The purpose of this visit was to raise awareness of The Frank Bruno Foundation's commitment to supporting those struggling with early-stage mental ill health.
 - **Official unveiling of the organ donor memorial sculpture at Northampton General Hospital:**
 - The purpose of this visit was to raise awareness of Organ Donation within Northamptonshire and to officially unveil the Organ Donation Memorial sculpture at Northampton General Hospital.
 - HRH The Duke of Gloucester met with members of the Northampton Organ Donation Committee, hospital staff involved in the organ donation process, as well as families who have supported donation and those who have received transplants. During the visit, the Duke was also invited by the Chair of the Organ Donation Committee, Peter Martin, to unveil a plaque to mark the occasion.
 - **Visit to meet St John Cadets Northampton on their Centenary Anniversary.** Alongside the official unveiling of the Organ Donor Memorial at NGH, the visit also included celebrating 100 years of St John's Cadets in Northamptonshire.

Two significant events resulted in increased attendance of military related activity in June. The 80th Anniversary of D Day demonstrated quite clearly the respect and thanks our community wished to show to the veterans of that costly campaign to liberate Europe from Nazi occupation. Later in the month there were a number of events throughout the County to mark Armed Forces Day.

On 21 November, AVM Andrew White CB DL attended a ceremony at Cheltenham Road Development in Corby to celebrate the completion of 18 purpose built new build properties council owned by NNC specifically intended to house former and active personnel of the Armed Forces who are in housing need. This development also reinforces the strength of North Northamptonshire Council's commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant in Northamptonshire.

2025 will mark the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, with two key dates to remember, Thursday 8 May and Friday 15 August. Thursday 8 May is Victory in Europe Day (VE Day). The Lieutenancy expects to be actively involved in any events arranged across the county.

The King will give two Garden Parties at Buckingham Palace this year on **Wednesday 7th May and Tuesday 20th May 2025**. Northamptonshire have been allocated 22 tickets split between these two dates.

The Lieutenancy along with the local authority and civic bodies are planning a number of events and activities to mark the 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of Northampton.

Brigadier Russell-Parsons concluded by thanking the Conference and congratulated the Legion on everything it does in the County.

5. Presidential Address on behalf of Colonel John Royle MBE DL, RBL County President, by the County Chair

The County Chair announced that he had received a message from the RBL National President, which conveyed a greeting from His Majesty the King as follows:

"Please convey my warmest thanks to the Members of The Royal British Legion for their loyal greetings, sent on the occasion of their Annual General Meetings which are being held throughout January and February ,2025.

As your Patron, I much appreciate your message, and I am always interested to be reminded of the ever-important work you do for those who are serving and have served in our Armed Forces, and their dependants. In return, I send my warmest good wishes to you all for a successful series of meetings. CHARLES R"

On behalf of the County President, he thanked the now closed County Women's Section for their very kind donation of the lectern and bell.

6. Apologies for Absence

The County Secretary, Mr Stephen Thatcher, confirmed that apologies had been received from Colonel John Royle MBE DL, RBL County President and Mr Al Ashworth, President Finedon, Irthlingborough & District Branch.

7. Appointment of Scrutineers. Mrs Diane Cutting (RBL Finedon, Irthlingborough & District Branch) & Mrs Sue Broughton (RBL Duston & District Branch) were duly appointed.

8. Minutes of the RBL County Conference held on 20th January 2024

Proposed by Mr Alan Short (RBL Finedon, Irthlingborough & District Branch), Seconded by Mr Paul McKay (RBL Rushden & District Branch). **CARRIED.**

9. Matters Arising. No points were raised.

10. County Plan 2023-2026

The County Chairman presented an updated version of the 2023-2026 County Plan which includes the following changes:

- County Committee members are required to attend branch meetings at least twice a year (including the Branch Annual General Meeting) in furtherance of the County Policy call "Branch Links".
- Minor changes to the terminology of Branch Community Support.
- Introduction of progress rating column which will be used for monitoring and reporting purposes.

The County Chair concluded by reminding all branches that they should have their own plan which supports the County Plan.

Proposed by Mr Alan Short (RBL Finedon, Irthlingborough & District Branch), Seconded by Mr David Ward (RBL Desborough & District Branch). **CARRIED.**

11. County Chair's Report 2023

"Deputy Lord Lieutenant, Honoured guests, delegates and visitors.

Ask not what your Legion can do for you and ask what you can do for your Legion - to paraphrase John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and you are asking yourselves "But I do a lot for the Legion why else am I sat here on a Saturday morning" and I agree and thank you for attendance today and all the efforts you put into your roles in running the many branches across the County.

My target audience today is not here. We need an attitude change in those who think running a Legion branch is burnishing your medals and collecting for the Poppy Appeal and thinking that equates with running a Legion Branch for a year. These are important and public actions, but it is not running a branch in an era of declining membership of branches - we need to ensure that our members are shown active leadership, action and commitment. As I go around the County visiting branches, I meet the dedicated Committee members (yourselves) and I applaud that

commitment - you are the backbone of the branch and the whole organisation. But and it is a big But, we must remember that if you place too much strain on a backbone, it will give way, then it will snap!

We need to involve more members, younger members to spread the load to ensure nothing snaps and a Branch Committee never reaches that breaking point. Later in this meeting the inaugural Bill Rose Award will be awarded to a branch that does just that - it spreads the load, and it shows in their success.

Colleagues the key to spreading the load is membership; new members we need not only to recruit but younger members. Make the best use of those members and when your powers of persuasion do convince someone to join please ensure that they are given a warm welcome to the branch, but please unless you recruited an individual for a specific role do not try to cajole someone straight into a Committee role, but a warm welcome to your branch is essential. As an organisation we have exit survey data that shows 40% of new members leave after one year because they were not made welcome to a branch!

When did the branch officers last change at your AGM? Set a target so no one person is holding an office for more than a set number of years so that the expertise is spread around the Committee and members are kept involved. We want people to become members to make use of their skills and talents to forward the aims of this great organisation, we don't just want their annual subscription. The membership exit spiral begins with a new member asking, "What do I get from my RBL membership apart from a warm fuzzy feeling?" Unless we have a positive offer, they will spiral out of membership with a negative image of the RBL. We need to harvest the skills of all our members to grow back the membership numbers - to do that as branches we need a positive offer making the annual membership fee a bargain for what they get from it, value for money, involvement at meetings, speakers events, meetings that are not just a repeat of last month don't bore members,

Do you need a monthly business meeting? 4 formal RBL meetings are what is required to follow the rule book; a couple of branches have done this one has 4 business meetings and the other 6 sessions they have played bingo, had a conjurer visit, a talk from a member on their foreign travels. Another has 4 business meetings and two out-reach meetings where they take a branch social event to a care home to interact with the residents. All this non-business can be summed up as comradeship, one of the essential planks of Legion membership - when that plank is missing it creates a gaping chasm through which membership falls!

I return to my headline topic from Last year's Conference - Succession Planning. It is just as vital to address it this year as last - has your Vice-Chair if you have one been trained to take over in the event of the Chair being ill, had a road accident on our potholed roads which makes driving more difficult, are other officers able to take over other roles in event of illness? We rely too easily on people being in roles and suddenly they are not, and the branch is left floundering. We

lost a branch because of a Chair's illness and the remaining officers being reliant on the guidance of the Chair - let us try and share the expertise around folks!

Deadlines - please can branches stick to deadlines - I know the assembled company have meet the two key deadlines, again I know I am preaching to the "choir" so please bear with me for context which you can hopefully spread when you meet other branches officers, 2 Key dates every year 30th June and 31st December. The end of June is the close of our accounting year and end of December the submission date for Form MS1/MS1B/MS1CSB. We were asked recently by officers of one of the newer branches why were we so inflexible with these dates? Simple, they are in the Membership Handbook the Rule Book of the RBL. The 30th June date (the close of the Branch Financial Year) triggers the first deadline of 31 August when all Financial Returns go to the MEO. This in turn triggers a further deadline the date by which the Royal British Legion must submit its financial return to The Charity Commission. After the 30th June, as the first of the 2,300 financial returns start arriving at Haig House, the Finance Department begins to swell until roughly double normal size to cope with this extra work. At a County Chair Seminar about 12 months ago we were told that late and incomplete returns add an extra £50,000 to the accounting bill!

The MS1 deadline is so that we have an accurate annual return of branch officers and that the RBL database is as up to date as possible before National Conference Registration opens which it did on 14th January 2025.

If you are here as a branch delegate, then your branch is doubly compliant with Accounts and the MS1 being submitted by the deadline. Some branches are of the opinion that they can ignore deadlines especially the fiscal one. However, you need to be aware that the rules have changed; if accounts are missing for 2 years, the branch goes on the Membership Council Watch list; miss a 3rd consecutive year of filing accounts and the Membership Council will initiate closure, something I never wish to be in a position to see in this County.

So, my grateful thanks to all here who gets the forms and accounts in on time it is much appreciated by the MEO and the County Secretary - to all the Branch Secretaries and the County Secretary without all your efforts we would be lost for words - Thank you all!"

12. Presentation of Accounts for 2023-2024.

- The County Treasurer, Mrs Irene Blanchard, presented the accounts as of 30th June 2024, a copy of which had been provided to all delegates and visitors. Any questions should be referred to Northamptonshire.Treasurer@rbl.community
- A number of donations from branches were gratefully received.

13. National Guest Speaker: Mr Daniel Esler, RBL Director of Grants and Quality

Mr Esler opened his address by thanking Conference for their invitation and explained that his post involved the allocation of grants in the UK and abroad where there is a welfare need, many

times in partnership with other organisations. His other area of responsibility covers quality which is measuring what the Legion does and how successful it is in delivering.

This was followed by the RBL Corporate Address as follows:

“A year of transition

- *We began the year with a renewed sense of focus on how to make the organisation effective for today and at the same time plan for our future.*
- *In 2023 the cost-of-living crisis placed additional pressure on our beneficiaries. RBL has responded to this challenge by evolving how we manage our finances to bring about greater operational efficiency, so that we can continue providing support to the Armed Forces community.*
- *2024 was a year of transition as we learned from our first 100+ years and prepared for our future, knowing that the Armed Forces community is rapidly changing – their demographics and needs. We must change so that we remain relevant and can continue to meet the needs of our beneficiaries; both those who need us now and those who will turn to us in the future.*
- *In January we welcomed a new Director General. The Board and Executive Board worked together to identify six strategic priorities with the aim of setting us up to serve the changing needs of the Armed Forces community. It has been an exceptionally busy year with many activities underway aligned to these priorities:*
 - *Develop a new strategy and target operating model*
 - *Drive financial performance across RBL*
 - *Build the foundations to grow our future income*
 - *Strengthen and evolve our culture and governance*
 - *Improve our data, digital, and technology capability*
 - *Improve our membership experience*
- *We were delighted to announce His Majesty King Charles III as Royal British Legion’s Patron. The King has been a long-standing supporter of the RBL’s work, attending the Royal British Legion’s Festival of Remembrance for the first time just days before his 20th birthday in 1968. The King is an Armed Forces veteran and has a close affinity with the Armed Forces community. It’s fantastic that The King chose to retain the long-standing tradition of Royal patronage with RBL – held since we were founded in 1921.*

Evolving how we work together

- *Early in the year we brought together representatives from the Board of Trustees, the Executive Board, and the Membership Council to discuss how to work better together. We’ve created the Newport Agreement, which outlines the agreed ways of working between these three leadership groups. It was presented at the County Chairs seminar and work is underway to bring this to life across the Legion.*

- *Our National President, Sir Clive Johnstone, sadly died in May. During his short time with us he made a huge impact, including a powerful message of unity at Annual Conference. He shared his love for our charity and called for us to build on our solid foundations, become more efficient, more focused, and of greater value to the changing needs of the Armed Forces community.*
- *We took the time to recognise Clive's contribution at a thanksgiving service in September. We welcomed Vice Admiral Paul Bennett, a passionate advocate for those who serve and have served, as our new National President in October.*

Membership

- *Members play a vital role at RBL: they are critical to who we are and what we do. One of our six strategic priorities is to 'improve our membership experience'. The new Membership Council Chair and interim Executive Director for Membership are working together with a renewed sense of purpose on fixing the basics so that we improve the membership experience. To achieve this, we have already made some changes to our structure and processes to make sure the right expertise is delivering the right services. We have seen a marked increase in performance both internally within our Customer Operations team and with our third-party partners.*
- *We delivered a successful Annual Conference in Newport, and we are particularly pleased with the successful introduction of the Aspire Programme – a new leadership course for members interested in a leadership role at County, Committee, and Board level. We've received positive feedback from the two cohorts who've been through the programme.*
- *We would like to thank members for their support around the fee increase, which happened smoothly in November. Although it is a difficult issue and it's preferable not to increase fees, it was necessary so that we can maintain a good level of service and invest for the future.*
- *While membership figures have remained comparatively stable, we have ambitions to grow. To achieve this, we are re-designing the future member journey and delivering improvements. It is hoped that by offering individual membership, special interest groups, and improving our membership offer we will attract the next generation of RBL members.*

Role in national life

- *It's our role to invite more people to join us in remembering and commemorating. 2024 was a significant year for Remembrance events, most notably with D-Day 80 in June which included events in Normandy and at the National Memorial Arboretum (NMA). We also held a service, in June, at the NMA to mark 25 years since the end of the Kosovo War. We supported commemorative events to mark the 80th anniversary of the Liberation of Antwerp. And we've remembered the 10th anniversary of the end of combat operations by British Armed Forces in Afghanistan with a ceremony at the NMA.*
- *We led the nation in honouring all those who have served and sacrificed at the Festival of Remembrance. Around 10,000 people took part in the March Past the Cenotaph on*

Remembrance Sunday, and we marked the Two Minute Silence during a service of reflection at the NMA on Armistice Day.

- *There have been fantastic efforts once again from volunteers and colleagues for our Poppy Appeal. In 2023 our Poppy Appeal raised £49.2m vital funds to enable us to deliver a variety of support to the Armed Forces community. As you know, it takes some time to count the income streams, although we continue to see an increase in contactless donations. Thanks to more volunteers and collectors, early indications for our 2024 Poppy Appeal suggest that this has had a positive impact. We had an incredibly successful London Poppy Day raising £1.28 million, beating our £1 million target. We're looking forward to announcing our total towards the end of March.*
- *We've worked hard throughout the year to manage our finances, and we're pleased this has resulted in a significant improvement in our year end results which are now being audited.*

Supporting beneficiaries

- *As you'll be aware, our colleagues provide expert advice and practical support to beneficiaries – with our contact centre receiving 128,000 contacts and 22,507 beneficiaries being supported through case management during the 2023-24 year.*
- *During the year we extended our urgent support service to seven days a week, providing guidance and support when issues such as a lack of food, shelter, or security means they have immediate welfare needs. In 2024 we supported 867 beneficiaries.*
- *We continue to provide money and debt support which also includes tribunal representation. We awarded grants to more than 22,682 individuals to a value of over £12 million, and we assisted beneficiaries to recover nearly £10 million.*
- *For many beneficiaries, it's important to chat through their needs with someone. Having listened to feedback about accessing grants we've introduced the option for individuals to apply for grant support online.*
- *Feedback from beneficiaries also told us that they were having to explain their situation to too many people before receiving the support they needed. Our Improving Beneficiary Journeys programme has seen an improvement in our customer satisfaction score with 76% saying they had their needs met, and 87% would recommend RBL. These scores help us to continually improve how we provide support.*
- *We support people with physical and mental health needs through our recovery programmes. We've been planning for the next Invictus Games – the first winter games – which takes place in Vancouver, Canada in February 2025. It's a real honour to be taking a team of 64 individuals to represent Team UK. At the end of the summer, we heard the fantastic news that Birmingham has been selected to host the Invictus Games in 2027.*
- *Those with care needs continue to be supported through our expanded national Admiral Nurse service and at our six care homes. We have spaces in some of our homes – perhaps you know someone who needs the support?*

Campaigning

- *We spent considerable time on our General Election Manifesto campaign ‘Supporting those who Serve Us’. We have since engaged with the new government on a programme of public affairs activities including ministerial meetings and roundtables, engagement with the Ministry of Defence and the Office for Veterans Affairs, meeting with officials within the new government structure, with new MPs (many of whom are veterans or have a link to the AFC), and have established an All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Armed Forces community.*

Inclusion

- *In 2023 we saw the publication of the Etherton Report – an independent review into the military’s pre-2000 ban on LGBT personnel. We know significant numbers of both serving and ex-serving personnel were hugely impacted and affected by this ban. We’ve been working on delivering the action plan that was created in response to the publication.*
- *RBL is determined to be welcoming and inclusive of everyone in the armed forces family. We are aware of the criticism in some quarters about our commitment to inclusion and the value of diversity, but we resolutely stand firm in our approach to supporting everyone from the Armed Forces community who needs us. We each have a role to play in creating an inclusive environment and it’s important that we remain united when facing this sort of negativity.*

Developing our long-term strategy

- *Earlier I spoke about our strategy priorities. One of these priorities is about developing a long-term ten-year strategy. We’ve focused on bringing clarity and definition to our future strategy by developing our shared purpose, mission, vision, values and behaviours, reviewing our diverse products and portfolio and reviewing our structure. Part of this phase has included commissioning research to help us better understand the Armed Forces community, and engaging with members, colleagues, volunteers, beneficiaries, and partners to seek their views.*
- *It’s been important for us to understand a wide range of views about what RBL does well and what needs to improve. Members have had opportunities to feed in their views via a bespoke survey that we promoted in the membership monthly E-newsletter and Legion magazine. We also ran an exercise at County Chairs to identify RBL’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and several members have supported us with our values and behaviours activity. We’re grateful to all members who’ve given their time to provide input.*
- *We’re currently in phase two which sees us developing our finance model, identifying strategic gaps, and defining the outcomes we want to achieve for beneficiaries. Our strategy will be presented to members at Annual Conference in May.*

Looking ahead to 2025

- **Remembrance.** *2025 will be a big year again as we commemorate the 80th anniversaries of VE Day in May and VJ Day in August.*

- **National Elections.** Last year we started the recruitment process for the most significant set of elections in recent years – for a National Chair, National Vice Chair, three Trustees, and 12 representatives for the Membership Council. We’re well into the election process that will see successful candidates take up their roles in May.
- **Our new strategy.** We will launch and embed our new strategy. This strategy, coupled with a recently developed suite of communications frameworks, will unify us towards delivering a set of clear goals and help us to communicate consistently with all stakeholders and customers.
- **Transforming our services**
 - Our efforts to improve our ways of working and make RBL a great place to work will require us to take on board colleague feedback from our latest staff engagement survey. We also plan to make some changes at Haig House so that it makes better use of the space (including letting out some of the space to other military charities) and enables more effective and collaborative working.
 - Work to improve efficiency and effectiveness will continue in several areas across the charity. Last year we carried out a comprehensive review of our care provision through RBL’s six care homes. We will make some changes in the coming months so that we bring down the deficit to make us fit for the future and so that we can continue to provide a quality service for our residents.
 - We will also continue our focus to improve membership engagement, including identifying how we can provide an attractive offer to new members.
 - We will advance our work to modernise the Poppy Appeal, including taking advantage of data insights and technology improvements. We also need to implement a more robust way to manage customer data, and we will develop our understanding and resilience to cyber security.
 - We have a comprehensive policy programme for the next few years including the Government’s policy agenda that affects the Armed Forces community, including bringing the Armed Forces covenant fully into law, establishing an Armed Forces Commissioner, and abolishing visa fees for non-UK veterans who have served for four or more years and their dependents.
- **Annual Conference.** This year our Annual Conference will take place in Harrogate from 16th to 18th May. Once again, we will run this as a hybrid event, giving more members the opportunity to attend. We hope to see many of you there.

Thank you. Thank you once again for your continued support and dedication for the work of the Royal British Legion. Members do fantastic work by providing much needed camaraderie in local communities and provide countless hours volunteering to raise vital funds so that we can serve those who need us. We look forward to forging even greater partnerships in the coming year so that together we can continue to remember and support our Armed Forces community.”

14. Guest Speaker – Ms Kate Wildman, RBL Audit Compliance & Investigations Manager

“Thank you for the invitation to speak at the conference. I have contacted both the Membership and Finance departments for updates that I can provide for you at this meeting.

- **Finance Department:**

- *The Northamptonshire Branch Return rate was 88%, which was good and will hopefully be even better in 2025.*
- *If you are having problems with getting branch accounts Independently Examined, please contact myself or one of the team and we should be able to assist.*
- *Also, if branches are not already using the ‘Advanced Excel Spreadsheet’ then can I recommend that you do as it acts as a cash book / ledger and automatically populates the annual return for you. This can be found on the Membership Administration Portal or in the Year End pack that you receive from the finance department.*
- *Internet banking was rolled out to Counties back in October, and if your county has not signed up and are interested then please contact your MEO to register your interest. If you are already using internet banking, then please let your MEO know so that Finance can check everything is set up correctly.*
- *Internet banking is now being extended to branches and the roll out will take place over 2025 on a region-by-region basis. Branches will be notified when the rollout reaches their region via their regional newsletter.*
- *Please make sure you've completed the survey form registering your interest as a branch if you are intending to sign up to internet banking. Any questions should be directed to membershipservices@britishlegion.org.uk*

- **Membership Department:**

- *As part of the Membership Improvement plan which was developed to prioritise focused improvements to the way processes and support are offered to Branch/County/District Officials, the Membership Directorate are developing a suite of resources which will be launched by April 2025.*
- *These resources will be available on the Membership Administration Portal (MAP) and will include a Branch Toolkit containing guides and templates with helpful information to support the running of formations.*
- *These are being developed in collaboration with other teams, so Branch and County Officers have a simple, easy to use set of resources designed to reduce the complexity of managing branch activities allowing branches to focus on supporting their local armed forces community and beneficiaries.*

Any queries please contact myself or one of the team on the following emails:

kwildman@britishlegion.org.uk

or

AuditComplianceInvestigations@britishlegion.org.uk

15. Guest Speaker – Ms Jo Anne Wilson MBE, Manager RBL Galanos House

Ms Wilson thanked Conference for their invitation and confirmed that she runs Galanos House, one of six Care Homes which are run by the Legion.

She continued by explaining that, whilst all the homes delivered similar services, the approach by each home does varies. When it comes to care, many people think it is about end of life, but it is much more than that with focus being placed on discovering who residents are and getting to know them as a person.

Galanos House also has a Day Club for both veterans and families to visit for respite, and in 2024 received a Gold Standard for Social and Palliative Care again. Since 2006, 625 people had lived and died in Galanos House – they haven't been in hospital but have passed away in their own bed, with family and friends and people who care for them around.

She explained further that Galanos House has 65 volunteers who play a key role in supporting both residents and staff alike. Residents also play their part in running the home with running things like a food forum.

The House works alongside various Veteran Contact Points dealing with for example dementia support and advice. Galanos House is also now a formal RBL Branch with its own standard and a youth section.

In closing Ms Wilson thanked the County and Branches for their continued support and encouraged everyone to pay a visit to Galanos House, where they would be made very welcome.

16. Guest Speaker - Mr Giles Coleman, RBL Poppy Appeal Manager

Mr Coleman delivered his 2024 report which included the following points:

- **Poppy Appeal Income Comparison:**

2021-2022	£477,170
2022-2023	£508,807
2023-2024	£521,225 - an increase of 2.11% against 2022-2023
- **Contactless Overview 2023-2024:**

Contactless up from £69K to £96K. QR Coding £2,620.
- **Current strategy for relationship building with PAOs.** Continuous engagement via calls, visits and email. Thankyou seminar this year in Kettering during March. Northants Seminar during June/July.
- **Current strategy for replacing/recruiting PAOs.** Attending as many local events in person to assist PAO's. Organising an F2F presence where area has DWO (District Without Organiser). Use social media in areas which are DWO to contact local community groups. Ongoing

encouragement of succession planning. Use of National Recruitment team in problem areas utilising National website and social media.

- **Volunteers Development:**

- **Collector recruitment strategy/plans.** Assist PAO's to recruit signposting to the limited resources available. Also as mentioned above, to attend alongside PAO's any event's that have been identified as high footfall for their area.
- **Current thank you strategy/plans.** Combined Oxon, Bucks & Northants Thank You event Bicester 16th March 2024. Seminar June-August 2024.
- **Current retention strategy/plans.** Ongoing regular comms with PAO's to address any areas of concern. PAO's flagged as area of concern are given additional support as far as possible. Encourage more PAO's to think of succession plans and recruit deputies.

Poppy Appeal Income streams	2022-2023	2023-2024
Street	£47,459	£20,486
House to House	£30,425	£5387.57
Static Points	£100,879	£123,066
Donations/sales	£203,507	£219,733
Special Events	NA	NA
Wreaths	£14,124	£12,783
Direct	£5,432	£12,925
Unallocated	£39,296	£6,333
Supermarkets Direct	£46,321	£64,584

- **Priority/focus areas for 2024/25 Appeal:**

- **Recruiting/Northampton PAO District.** As per usual I'll be undertaking recruiting activities in areas requiring support using supermarkets and other local larger footfall events. Due to our current PAO having to re-locate out of county we are now in need of a new organiser for Northampton. Whilst there is a team of willing and able volunteers covering most tasks, we need an organiser to tie it all together and co-ordinate. I will be going out to the wider public via volunteer groups, all media channels, direct recruiting at Northampton events, supermarket recruitments days and local persons of influence. I have also bought in assistance from the national media team and Poppy Appeal Recruitment Manager. However, if this position remains unfilled there may be a situation where there is no Appeal in the town.
- **Cash Counting/Processing Project.** This year saw my inclusion within the Cash Counting/Project Team. We have been looking at many issues, but the main ones are:
 - **Banking.** At present there are many issues for some areas trying to pay cash via bank or Post Office. There is no one size fits all solution but after discussion and investigation it appeared that processes in place appeared to be quite robust. The issues we face, particularly for this year, seemed to hinge on poor comms from ourselves and high street banks/building societies. We are going to ensure better comms for this year's Appeal. Another issue was Post Office Cards being unreadable, I suggested we supply all PAO's with new updated cards for this year, this is being discussed by Senior Management.

- **Counting Machines.** We have now brokered a contract to include supply and maintenance of new machines to replace the old (over 10 years old) machines. Over the course of the next 2-3 years all machines will be replaced, I am looking to replace all Northamptonshire's this year.
- **Contactless/QR Codes:** 2023/24 saw a 103% increase in contactless useage. QR codes weren't so popular. However, for 2024/25 Appeal we have seen a 25% increase plus a substantial increase in QR codes. I have also mooted a new label design to include a larger QR code (sticker) and infographics on how to donate on each tin. Other charities do this, but their coding only goes to an HQ account. We can use our QR code stickers to ensure individual districts will receive correct donations.
- **Summary.** A good year County up by 2.1% mainly down to D-D Activity, we had 23 events and sold 4567 D Day badges. Well-done to everyone who helped make this a successful Appeal. D-Day bought in an additional £21K and with VE/VJ day we should expect a similar if not slightly better return.

17. Announcement of the election of County Chair 2025-2027. Ms Lebo Nyoni, Membership Engagement Officer, announced that following a nomination and election progress, Mr Ian Byrnes had been duly elected as County Chair for 2025 to 2027.

18. Election of County Committee Members

The County Chair explained that, of the 8 vacancies on the County Committee, 3 nominations had been received from branches. As they are uncontested the following are therefore appointed to the County Committee for a period of 3 years:

Mr Pat Cutting (RBL Finedon, Irthlingborough & District Branch)
 Mr Peter Higgs (RBL Mears Ashby Branch)
 Mr Robbie Paice (RBL Greens Norton Branch)

19. Motions to Conference

Submitted by RBL Rushden & District Branch: Standard Bearers' Head Dress

The Motion was presented by Mr Terry Perkins (RBL Rushden & District Branch), who explained the rationale behind the Motion, the main points which were:

- Despite being a very happy and proud Legion member, his heritage lies with the Royal Navy. He is also a Standard Bearer for both the RBL and the Royal Naval Association.
- The RBL Ceremonial Handbook is quite clear regarding the policy on the wearing of head dress, and this is quite appropriate to standard bearers who do not have any military service. However, this does not provide those with military service performing the opportunity to identify that service except for the wearing of medals, many of which are not recognisable to most people. This would be easily rectified by allowing those with previous military service to wear the head dress which they wore in service.

- In conclusion, he felt that this change in rules would reinforce the Legion's policy of inclusivity and would encourage more people to become standard bearers.

The Motion was seconded by Mr Stephen Clements (RBL Raunds Branch).

The following delegates presented comments in response to the Motion:

Mr (Ian) Eddie Edmunds (RBL Brixworth and District Branch)
Mr Matt Ellmer (RBL Thrapston & District Branch)

To which Mr Perkins responded.

Voting was then carried out by Delegates: For – 3 Against - 5. MOTION FAILED.

20. Presentation of County Certificates and Trophies

Mrs Jane Cosgrove, RBL Membership Council Representative, presented the following:

County Certificates:

Most Improved Standard Bearer 2024/2025 – Mr Mark Taberner-Stokes (RBL Rushden & District Branch) Winner Lion & Crown Trophy

Poppy Appeal Trophies:

- The Lord Cromwell Trophy to the Small Poppy Appeal District with greatest percentage increase – RBL Brixworth & District with a 68.28% increase - presented to Mr Eddie Edmunds.
- The Albert Franklin Memorial Cup to the Large Poppy Appeal District with the greatest percentage increase – RBL Kettering and District with a 20.08% increase – presented to Ms Faith Cosgrove.

County Standard Bearers 2025-2026:

- Deputy County Standard Bearer 2025/2026 and recipient of the N.B. Wiffin Trophy as Runner-Up in the County Standard Bearer Competition 2024 – Mr Pat Cutting (RBL Finedon, Irthlingborough and District Branch).
- County Standard Bearer 2025/2026 and recipient of the Maxwell Challenge Cup as Winner of the County Standard Bearer Competition 2024 – Ms Faith Cosgrove (RBL Kettering & District Branch).

As the overall winner of the Competition, Ms Cosgrove was then appointed as the County Standard Bearer and charged with the County Standard for 2025/2026 by Mr Ian Byrnes, County Chair, which she accepted.

County Chair's Award:

Presented to Mr Stephen Thatcher for his outstanding work as County Secretary and County Training Officer.

The Bill Rose Memorial Trophy:

This was awarded to the branch judged to have been the most effective and improved during 2024. The inaugural presentation was made to RBL Rushden & District Branch – presented to Mr Jake Baker, Branch Chair.

21. Installation of the County Chair. Mr Ian Byrnes was installed as the County Chair 2025-2028 by Mrs Jane Cosgrove, Membership Council Representative.

22. Homage and Act of Remembrance. The Homage was read by Cllr Paul Joyce, Mayor of Northampton, which was then followed by the Act of Remembrance led by Father Oliver Coss, County Chaplain RBL Northamptonshire who read the Kohima Epitaph. Following prayers, wreaths were laid, and the Last Post was sounded.

23. Close of Conference

Following the National Anthem, the County Chairman, Mr Ian Byrnes closed the conference by thanking all those who had attended and advised delegates that the date of the next County Conference will be 10th January 2026.

“The business of the meeting being concluded, let us before we leave, remember our duty to King and Country, to our comrades and our branches. Let us be ready at all times to foster the spirit of brotherhood and mutual helpfulness to which we are dedicated, never forgetting our solemn obligation as members of The Royal British Legion”.

The Conference closed at 1.45pm