



*“The Armed Forces Community Garden will be a huge asset to this Green Flag park. I’m also delighted that because of additional funding from our Wildlife Ways programme, we are able to start work on all three zones of the garden in the new year. This will enhance Hillfield Park further, improve our local habitats and provide more places for people to visit.”*  
**Councillor Ken Hawkins, Cabinet Member for Environment and Highways | Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council**

## Wildlife Ways

### Armed Forces Community Garden

Part of a Solihull park has been transformed into a sensory garden for the armed forces, to help those injured in combat or living with conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder.

#### Overview

Working in collaboration with Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) and Warwickshire and Birmingham Royal British Legion, Balfour Beatty Living Places (BBLP) have been developing an ‘Armed Forces Community Garden’ in Hillfield Park. The garden will benefit veterans and their family members, local schools and other members of the community.

The garden is a peaceful sanctuary for remembrance and reflection with calming herbaceous borders, colourful plants and tall grasses, incorporating seating areas, planters and disabled access pathways. A place to help people overcome isolation, providing a welcoming place to meet up and interact with others.

Support was received to develop the initial designs from the Royal British Legion, local veterans and serving personnel, army medical teams and local community groups.

#### Design

The concept behind the garden was one of ‘healing habitats’. An eco-therapy project which comprised of a series of therapeutic natural habitats for people to explore. These habitats aim to improve bio-diversity and provide opportunities to improve and maintain the well-being of the armed forces community through nature-based activities.

The garden is divided into three zones, with each area having its own feel and purpose:

Zone 1 is where the project originated and is the community wildlife garden, providing a valuable meeting place for people.

From there you can walk into zone 2 which will be a summer meadow and community orchard.

Zone 3, a community woodland and follows the Royal British Legion’s ‘Battle-back’ principles to create opportunities for active recovery.



Design for the garden that is now completed in Hillfield Park

Elaine Butler, president of Warwickshire and Birmingham Royal British Legion County, said;

*“The quiet spot was a perfect location for the garden and a huge amount of work had been done to find out what was wanted. The answer came back ‘some places of solitude’, for those who have a need for that, and ‘some places of activity’, for those that want to do things. And most of all a place where we can talk to other people.”*

*“They particularly want to chat to younger people, they don’t always want to talk to their own age group. We’ve had lots of comments from around Warwickshire and Birmingham from veterans saying ‘it would be nice if somebody just came and sat with me and said how are you?’*

*“I’m deeply grateful to Solihull Council for their enthusiasm. When it’s going we will have veterans in wheelchairs, there will be young veterans with PTSD ... the kids will be here helping them garden, the community will be here helping them to dig. That’s what we need and I’m very passionate about it.”*

#### Adding value to the community

Hillfield Park is one of sixteen Green Flag sites in Solihull, and was identified as the best location for the garden because of its size and solitude of the area.

It was important that the garden was a distance from busier facilities within Solihull, which ruled out certain parks, but Hillfield - serving the areas of Blythe, Shirley South and St Alphege - was seen as an ideal choice. Additionally, the Royal Star and Garter home, which offers compassionate care to veterans and their partners, is located minutes away from the garden. The home now accommodates younger people, younger veterans that have been injured.

In January 2020, SMBC officially announced it was moving forward with the scheme after securing £20,000 from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

At one stage it was hoped to have the project finished in time for the 75th anniversary of VE Day. However, within weeks of the announcement the UK was in the grips of the pandemic and groundwork was eventually delayed until January 2021. A completion date of the summer was a more likely achievement date due to the ongoing restrictions.

Work rapidly moved forward, the garden is now fully open to the public and there to be seen in Hillfield Park. The paths are laid and the flowers in full bloom. Visitors can also explore a summer meadow providing wildflower walks and a mini orchard. The perfect place to reflect on those who have lost their lives during active service.

