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Picture: Graeme Main

FROM the modest beginning of a hand-drawn poster in the window of a Scarborough restaurant, a scheme encouraging local communities to show their gratitude for the Armed Forces has quickly evolved to become a nationwide network.

Hundreds of local councils and companies have now signed up for Heroes Welcome, a campaign urging organisations to display a sticker as a demonstration of their support for the Services, and the number of participating outfits is growing by the day.

In addition to a warm reception, many of those who have enlisted offer troops, veterans and their families deals and discounts, pledging everything from cheap train tickets and cut-price taxi fares to special offers in hotels and spas.

"You can say thanks to a fireman or police officer

at the scene but for Servicemen and women who do their work over the hills and far away, it's harder," explained John Senior, the retired TA major-turned-restaurateur who launched

the scheme in his home town two years ago. "Although we offered discounts in the restaurant we had no way of showing our gratitude for the job they do."

As a means of rolling out Heroes Welcome beyond his own business, Senior developed the idea of a sticker indicating support for the work and sacrifices of the Service community that can be displayed everywhere from shop fronts to the windows of vehicles.

"It's up to each and every business how they choose to get involved and from the soldiers' point of view they are just happy with the recognition, although

discounts in restaurants and taxis mean a lot," he explained. "It's about subtle support. Imagine a young private soldier on his way home, getting off a train at a cold station late at night and seeing one of these stickers in the window of a taxi – it warms you up."

Lt Col Toby Gray, commanding officer of 1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards and an old friend of Senior, has endorsed the scheme since its inception.

"It's about passive support for soldiers and military personnel and it's a good thing," he told *Soldier*.

"It's an opportunity and an outlet for civvies to demonstrate support and a chance for Servicemen and women to know that the sacrifices they see and make in Afghanistan on a daily basis are genuinely appreciated by people who are doing something very different to them."

Following the example set by Scarborough, which boasts more than 200 participating companies, and with some gentle words of

encouragement from Senior, towns from as far apart as Stirling in the north and Swanage in the south have adopted the scheme.

WO2 Pete Hall (4 Yorks), a reservist based near the original Heroes Welcome town, said he thought the initiative was "long overdue" and praised communities and businesses for getting involved.

"There's a lot of soldiers who have said they can't believe the amount of support they are getting," he added. "Seeing the stickers everywhere in places like Scarborough is very welcoming. It's an excellent idea."

Lt Col Gray believes the backing and respect shown to Service personnel is more important than any of the discounts on offer.

"It's great for my soldiers because whether they see that sticker in a pub, restaurant or taxi window, they will know that they will be treated kindly and that can only be a good thing," he explained. "It costs nothing to be part of and it spreads a bit of goodwill."

At the time of writing, Heroes Welcome has reached and been embraced by more than 30 towns and cities and Senior is hoping further communities will come on-board as word of the campaign spreads.

"We've got at least 25 towns in the queue right now, all ready to launch their own schemes,"

he said. "I started this off with one homemade poster in a cafe window because I felt we owed them [soldiers] this – it's about asking communities to re-engage with the covenant."

"When I spoke to the Mayor of York just after the city launched Heroes Welcome, she said 'you shouldn't have to be telling us to do this'. They all want to do it but just need to know how and this scheme seems to be able to help with that at a civic level."

● To qualify for discounts and special services, Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force personnel and veterans must show their identification card at participating businesses.

Visit www.heroeswelcome.co.uk to find out which towns and local businesses have signed up for the scheme and details of the offers available. ■



HEROES WELCOME

'YOU CAN SAY THANKS TO A FIREMAN OR POLICE OFFICER AT THE SCENE BUT FOR SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN WHO DO THEIR WORK OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY, IT'S HARDER'
- JOHN SENIOR



NATIONAL GRID

HOW A HUMBLE STICKER IS HELPING TO SPARK COMMUNITY SUPPORT