

Veterans and their families



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Who is a Veteran

In general this is defined as men or women who have, at any time, served (for at least one day) with:

- Any branch of the armed forces regular or reserve.
- The Merchant Navy or the civilian Nursing Services who have been involved in active service.
- All those who are entitled to wear the Armed Forces Veterans Badge.
- All those who at any time during the period 1939 to 1945 served in voluntary or conscripted national organisations; e.g. Land Girls, Bevan Boys, Lumberjacks and Lumberjills.

Veterans' families

Veterans' families were defined in broad terms:

- Immediate members: partners whether married, cohabiting, or former (separated and divorced); children residing, or in contact with, the veteran parent; and parents and grandparents residing with or in communication with the veteran.
- Extended family members: other relatives and close family friends who may help with child and elder care activities or offer wider support be that psychological, material or in kind.
- Friends and comrades: including both friendship made during active service and pre-service friends.

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Veterans and their families

Every year in the UK around 22,400 people leave the forces to return to civilian life, the majority of whom are army personnel. Resettlement is a process for all the family, be they immediate or extended members. People rather than places represent 'home'.

In the coming three years, the Government plans to reduce the overall size of the Armed Forces. For the army it is estimated that personnel will fall from 110,000 to 85,000, including some compulsory redundancies. These unprecedented changes within an uncertain economic climate, combined with on-going concern over service in various zones of conflict, will place pressure on families. In short, the coming years herald major changes for the services as a whole, not least for the many families in transition from service to civilian life.

This briefing paper reports on the outcomes of a range of activities undertaken with a number of veterans, veterans' families, and third and public sector organisations located in Scotland. Our aim was to explore the resettlement experiences of veterans and their families. This work culminated in a workshop with over 30 veterans in June 2011, organised in conjunction with Veterans' Scotland.¹ Participants represented a diverse range of veterans of all ages, services, jobs and experiences, including those who served in conflict and peacekeeping zones from Malaya to the Balkans, the Falklands, Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan sometime between 1950 to 2010. Some participants had been deployed to a zone of conflict and experienced battle or guerrilla and civil conflicts. Others served in technical and logistical jobs in specialist trades and jobs.

Experiences of veterans and their families

On leaving service those with immediate families to consider, especially children, often relocate near the relatives of the female partner. Those who remain single are likely to return to the parental home or locality. Whilst comrade friendships can remain strong, the ties and bonds of immediate and extended families tend to draw veterans' families back to these localities. Material, care and financial support from families and friends are often factors in deciding where to resettle.

Recent media coverage of the impact of deployment on serving families has begun to receive attention. Time deployed away

Policy/research implications

- Pre- and post-discharge training in life skills (money management, employment planning and relationship skills) might be offered on a continuous basis rather than during the year prior to and post discharge.
- Immediate and extended families and friendship networks are vital to resettlement and should be considered in policy and research initiatives.
- A triage service might simplify pathways into support and information services.
- Partnership work across local and national government and third sector organisations may be promoted by key veterans' organisations.
- Better networking between Veterans Champions in local government and veterans' charities would aid service co-ordination.

from families, especially to conflict zones, place particular pressures on the soldier, their families, neighbourhood and friendship networks. During deployment specific support

from within the army is available for families; often in conjunction with third sector organisations, including Regimental Associations (RA), the Army Families Federation (AFF), Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen Families Association (SSAFA) as well as day-to-day support from Ministry of Defence welfare and religious personnel. These groups provide activities and services for partners, children and relatives to support one another across the ranks.

The majority of this support stops when the serving family member becomes a veteran. Yet the impact of operations can continue for decades and the longer-term consequences for families post service are rarely considered, documented or adequately understood.

¹Veterans Scotland is an association of 53 organisations connected either wholly or partially by the common aim of working with the Veterans Community in Scotland (see www.veteransscotland.co.uk).



Issues raised by veterans

Many participants spoke of a transition to civilian life that offered both opportunities and challenges. Overall, veterans' families spoke of a range of positive experiences of help and support, however, some practical and attitudinal challenges (for example inaccessibility or a lack of empathy) were described as less helpful to resettlement. These issues combined with the economic downturn, growth in unemployment, especially among under 25s and over 50s, and concentration of veterans in particular localities, raised further concerns.

We have outlined five themes relating to the experiences of veterans and their families raised in our workshops and related discussions with veterans, local government and third sector organisations, together with suggestions to enhance support for veterans' and their families.

Suggestions to enhance support for veterans and their families

Drawing upon responses across the project a number of suggestions were offered to improve services and support for veterans' families:

- A 'triage service' to keep in regular contact with veterans to assess needs as high, moderate or low risk. This would be a co-ordinating service, offered by a charity that straddled the pre- and post-discharge period.
- A single shared information database generating a profile would lessen the need to 'tell the story' time and time again. A unique identifier was also recommended, as was a card (like a donor card) that might be carried.
- Might resettlement training be deferred for up to 2 years after discharge? This would help the veteran to assess wider issues and understand how to get the best from the support available.
- Life skills courses should be compulsory before leaving. Examples from the prison service were cited as a useful model.
- Third sector organisations need to know more about each other and how to cross refer; especially between first tier (veterans' charities) and second tier organisations, such as Relate, Carers UK and Barnardos.
- The number of charities supporting veterans are increasing, and are at times described as a 'cottage industry'. Appropriate mergers and partnerships between these organisations should be considered.
- Third sector organisations need to monitor, evaluate and review their work to ensure they can achieve their mission and goals as the needs of veterans change. For example, veteran experiences are changing as a result of varying experiences of conflict, peace keeping and containment roles. Charities need to keep in mind the longer term veteran and the new generation emerging.
- Independent chairing of the pillars (network groupings) organised by Veterans Scotland was suggested as a method of enhancing partnership working and avoiding conflicts of interest. Two suggestions were: (a) an annual user forum and (b) a feasibility study/ workshop of the triage service recommendation.

1. Communication

- Communication prior to leaving is often focused on service and deployment rather than (re) training or job prospects. The existing framework in Canada, with discussions at 6 and 3 months prior to discharge and on leaving, was flagged as a good model.
- Being asked to repeatedly tell the story of service time, injury and, discharge was described by participants as frustrating, distressing, and as an example of a lack of knowledge and appreciation of experiences. Whilst it was felt that social and family networks were more likely to appreciate the issues, some become silent for fear of upsetting the veteran.
- The macho culture and British 'stiff upper lip' poses barriers to genuine communication, particularly in discussing psychological issues. It was acknowledged that some injuries may take years to emerge; for example, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may not manifest for many years. This presents a range of problems for veterans in accessing benefits, care and services for support.

2. Support services

- Support for families after resettlement can be in stark contrast with the dedicated and sometimes intense support during deployment 'like day and night'. This can lead to a sense of isolation which may be increased by other factors such as on-going injuries, or disconnection from labour markets and social networks.
- Information posters, leaflets and adverts focus on physical injuries and this helps fundraising but further stigmatises psychological injuries and stresses.

3. Information

- There are a range of resettlement training opportunities, depending upon length of service. Although this was felt by some to be fragmented and complex, recent improvements in the information received prior to discharge will impact on the experiences of current and future leavers.
- The number of organisations involved in delivering courses, offering advice and support pre- and post-discharge led to feelings of confusion and frustration, and in some cases conflicting advice. Not knowing where to go for information and support combined with the frustrations of being asked to 'tell their story' yet again, was exhausting for participants.

- Second tier support, defined as charities, local authorities and government departments offering support to the general public presents particular challenges, as they do not always have knowledge of the range of medical, welfare and relationship issues veterans' families may experience.
- Veterans and third sector organisations offered a range of experiences and views on the barriers resulting from the Data Protection Act with little agreement. Can services pass on details to other relevant organisations, including the NHS, jobcentres and schools? There seems a lack of clear guidance which is inhibiting cross-organisational communication and networking.

4. The longer term journey

- Whilst some injuries and issues endure or re-occur, others emerge over time, such as PTSD, marriage and relationships breakdown and difficulties with children. The legal limits for claims, the paperwork and systems make longer term claims, and changes to existing claims complex.
- Veterans' families move more often than many families or single people. This reflects their service life and makes record keeping an on-going issue, for example the transfer of lost and incomplete health records from army medical services to and within the NHS.
- Veterans may move from localities with strong Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Families Association/Forces Help (SSAFA/Forces Help) provision and local authority support to areas not so well organised. The role of Veterans Champions, established with local authorities, government and the NHS was appreciated, although it was felt that Champions had a difficult job keeping track of information and communications.

5. Additional issues

- Veterans do not want to be patronised. Whilst many recognised and welcomed the opportunity to input into discussions as service users, volunteers and potential campaigners, it was noted that not all veterans would wish to do so.
- Some felt the major (new) charities were dominated by high profile, senior ranking ex-service personnel, with little room for ordinary soldiers to influence.
- Veterans' issues were considered particularly relevant in Scotland as a notable proportion of the population has served, or is presently in the UK Armed Forces. This was noted as proportionately higher than the percentage of population in other home nations.