



Scottish Veterans
Commissioner

Community and Relationships: Anything but Uniform



January 2024

FOREWORD

We owe a debt of gratitude to those who have served in our armed forces and who may have made sacrifices to protect our nation in times of greatest need, during peace or war.

While most veterans benefit from their time in Service and have a successful return to civilian life, those who experience a negative impact should be acknowledged and supported. This support isn't just for the veterans themselves; it extends to the families and communities intertwined with their lives. It's about nurturing a sense of belonging, providing stability, and acknowledging the ripple effects of military Service on those closest to them.

My vision is for a Scotland where the contributions and sacrifices made by veterans and their families are recognised and appreciated, and where all veterans feel valued by society.

In my role as Scottish Veterans Commissioner, I work to advocate for our veterans and their families, working collaboratively across boundaries, to influence policy and service delivery and make life better for the ex-Service community who live in Scotland.

Engagement sits at the core of my work. Since my appointment I have met with and listened carefully to the experiences of individual veterans and their families to try and better understand how things feel for them, to consider their changing needs, and to inform the recommendations I make.

In doing so I wanted to listen to all veterans, especially to those members of our veteran community whose voices are not heard so often; women, family members including children, non-UK veterans, the bereaved and LGBT+ veterans.

I have heard from many professional bodies, charities, service providers, volunteers, and other organisations who work to support veterans and their families, learning about their successes and challenges, seeing examples of good practice, and trying to find out what needs to change to improve the lives of the veteran community.

While there has undoubtedly been progress in statutory provision for veterans, some parts of the community have not been so well supported. This includes LGBT+ veterans and women veterans who have had very negative experiences while serving. These experiences have continued to affect them in their civilian lives and in their approach to accessing support when needed. I listened to the experiences of family members and the bereaved who have not always been included in the development of services and support.

I am hugely grateful to everyone who has taken the time to engage with me as I have gone about my work. It is a privilege to hold this role, and I continue to be inspired and appreciative of our veteran community and everyone who plays a part in it.

One thing that has been very clear throughout my engagement is the diverse range of skills, talents, needs, experiences, and situations of those I have met. It has reminded me that all veterans are unique individuals: we may have worn a uniform, but we are anything but uniform.

SUSIE HAMILTON

Scottish Veterans Commissioner



INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

The purpose of this report is to reflect the experiences of the wider veteran community, seek to understand how well served all veterans and their families are by existing services, capture observations and findings, and make outcome focussed recommendations to the Scottish Government and its partners to support continuous improvement for veterans and their families.

Vision and Strategic Priorities

Vision:

- ◆ A Scotland where the contributions and sacrifices made by veterans and their families are recognised and appreciated and where all veterans feel valued by society.

Strategic Priorities:

- ◆ Our veterans and their families are empowered to make informed choices to secure positive futures.
- ◆ The diversity of our veteran community is clearly recognised and valued, with support and services accessible to all.
- ◆ Policy makers and service providers will be responsive to need, collaborative in approach and aligned in their efforts to maximise impact.
- ◆ Our communities and employers better understand, value and support veterans as they integrate, contribute and build fulfilling lives.

The strategic context is informed by four key strands.

The Armed Forces Covenant¹ which says that those who serve in the armed forces, veterans, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services, and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, such as the injured and the bereaved. The Armed Forces Act 2021² saw the Armed Forces Covenant strengthened in law. This places a legal obligation on specified public bodies, including health boards and local authorities, to consider the principles of the Covenant when delivering relevant functions.

Renewing our Commitments³ sets out the Scottish Government ambition 'to make Scotland the most attractive destination for Service leavers and their families, offering high living standards, great job prospects and a society that respects and values their contribution'.

The joint UK ten-year **A Strategy for Our Veterans⁴** which aims, by 2028, to see that 'every veteran feels even more valued, supported, and empowered and never disadvantaged as a result of their Service.'

¹ Home - Armed Forces Covenant

² Armed Forces Act 2021 - Parliamentary Bills - UK Parliament

³ Renewing Our Commitments - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

⁴ Strategy for our veterans - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The Scottish Government refreshed Action Plan⁵ published in August 2022, sets out a range of activity intended to respond to the changing needs of veterans and their families and make a positive impact on their lives. That action plan sets out a commitment to: 'Work with underrepresented groups within the veteran's community in Scotland, to ensure their experiences and needs are more widely understood and supported.'

This report, therefore, has a particular focus on the needs and challenges faced by women veterans, families of veterans, non-UK veterans, the bereaved, and LGBT+ veterans as it is essential to ensure their experiences, needs and circumstances are not overlooked.

A key theme across these strategy documents is that veterans – and by extension their families – should be able to build healthy relationships and integrate into their communities. It is recognised that, for a range of reasons, leaving the armed forces and establishing new relationships within civilian communities can be challenging.

While it is important to understand that everyone is different - in their needs, experiences, circumstances and expectations – everyone should have access to high quality information and support if and when they need it. This may be before, during or after the transition period (however that is defined) and needs may change over time.

The UK and Scottish Veteran Strategies have a range of cross cutting factors that sit at the heart of collective efforts to support veterans and their families, and which are essential to success in developing and delivering high quality services and support. These are:

- ◆ Collaboration
- ◆ Coordination
- ◆ Data
- ◆ Perception
- ◆ Recognition

This report draws on a range of policy reports, evidence, and research publications. Some are specifically referenced while others have provided helpful context and background to the key themes and issues explored.

The report has, however, been informed by listening directly to the experiences of veterans, their families, and the communities and organisations that represent and support them. Hearing first-hand about those experiences – where things work well and where they do not – has been immensely powerful in gaining a sense of the areas where further work is required to improve the support available.

Fifteen focus groups entitled 'Hearing the Veterans Voice' were held during 2023. These discussions were either on-line or in person, framed around a specific theme or topic. Other, less formal discussions also took place with individual members of the veteran community. This totalled 22 meetings in all, with over 160 participants.

"Veteran families can look like anything nowadays. All are part of the veteran community and should be recognised as such".



LGBT+ Veterans



Women veterans

"The public image of veterans needs to change, people need to know women are veterans too."



Veterans in the justice system

22



Bereaved



Non UK Veterans

Veterans Voice Forums



Military wives choirs



Children and young people

160

Attendees



Breakfast clubs

"My husband retreated into himself when he lost a limb and wouldn't talk to me, but it was clear he felt he wasn't really a man anymore."



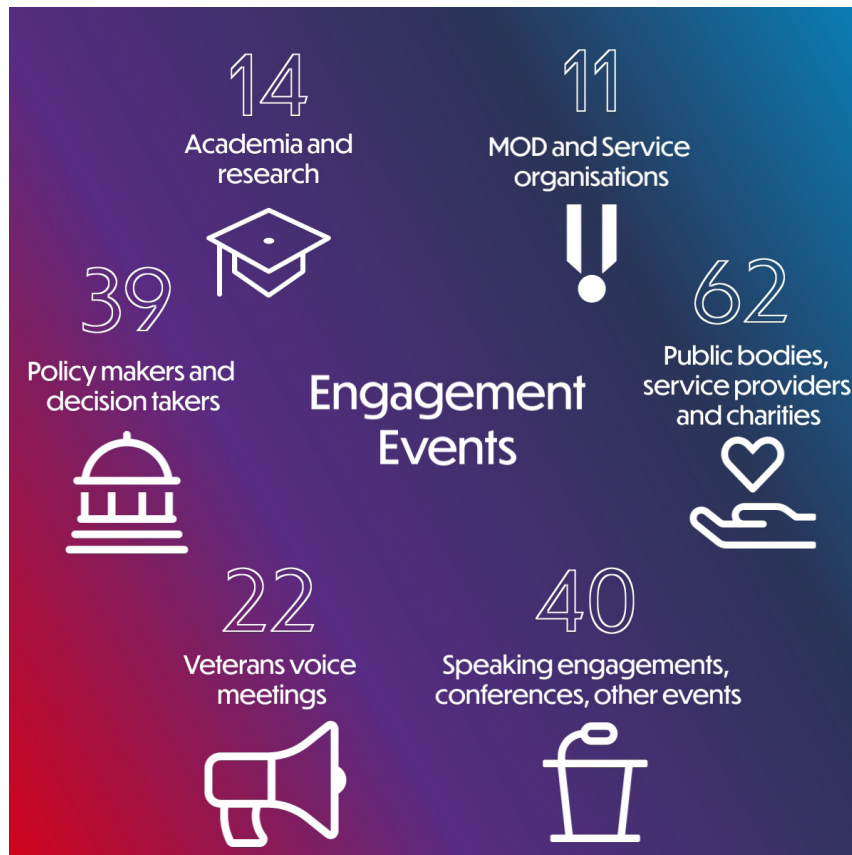
Veterans with health needs



Veterans in sport

"Sport is a great vehicle for change and the craic is great!"

Wider engagement activity has taken place throughout 2023 and has also helped inform the recommendations in this report. This has included: attending conferences, speaking engagements and a variety of different events across Scotland and the rest of the UK; meetings with various stakeholders, charities, and armed forces representatives; and discussions with individuals and groups of academics, researchers, volunteers, policy makers and service providers.



Engagement Events:

- ◆ Academia and Research – 14
- ◆ Policy makers and decision takers – 39
- ◆ MOD and Service organisations - 11
- ◆ Public bodies, service providers and charities – 62
- ◆ Veterans Voice engagements - 22
- ◆ Attending conferences, speaking engagements, other events – 40

Acknowledgements

My most sincere thanks go to everyone who has taken the time to share their individual experiences, their research findings, or their professional expertise over the past 12 months. Particularly huge thanks go to Sophia, Virginia and Kent for sharing their stories for this report. I would also like to recognise the valuable support from organisations that facilitated focus groups including: Fighting With Pride, Ria Jackson at the V Word, Blesma The Limbless Veterans, Forces Children Scotland, The RAF Widows Association, Lanarkshire Community Hub, Association of Wrens, Edinburgh & District Branch, Simon Brodie from Orkney Veterans Breakfast Club, Combat Stress Edinburgh, Inverness Military Wives Choir, Allen Gibson from Active Stirling and the Governor and staff of HMP Shotts.

VETERAN AND FAMILY EMPOWERMENT

'One person joins but the whole family serves'

Evidence from Organisations and Published Sources

Our armed forces simply could not operate without the support and sacrifices made by spouses, partners, and children during a Service person's career. Yet, on transition from the military, much of the support available is focussed on the individual Service leaver and family members can feel excluded. This is also the case with bereaved partners, who can feel particularly isolated and forgotten.

Partners and Spouses

Partners and spouses of members of the armed forces often experience very disrupted career patterns as they move around with their family. If they choose to remain stable in one location, employment options can also be limited due to being effectively a lone parent during the week. Deployment can exacerbate this with families being adversely affected by the absence of the Service person. The significance of this has changed over time: while in the past it was normal to have one main breadwinner, in today's economic climate two working partners is usually a necessity. Military spouses and partners may have atypical CVs but offer a vast range of skills for those employers who can see past the frequent changes of job or gaps in employment history.

Veterans' partners may have qualifications and registration gained in other parts of the UK (such as in teaching, healthcare, and social care) and there should be seamless transition to make the most of this valuable workforce and avoid disadvantage to families due to Service. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

A good example, however, is the NHS Scotland careers website ⁶ which provides recruitment support and guidance for the wider armed forces community including Service leavers, spouses, partners, and children. The website gives guidance on how to translate qualifications and experience gained during a military career (or in other parts of the UK) into what is recognised by the NHS in Scotland.

Children and Young People

Children and young people from Service families are generally confident, resilient, and adaptable and they have considerable experience of change and of fitting in to new social groups. However, they may struggle during transition from a military to a veteran family and feel excluded from the process. They may also find it challenging if moving away from home, school, and friends to a new unfamiliar area where there may be limited understanding from teachers and others about military families. Some may need specialist support but access to that may depend on geographic location.

Forces Children Scotland (FCS)⁷ work with and support children and young people from armed forces and veteran families in areas such as mental health and wellbeing, and education and learning. They provide experiences which help young people develop new skills, build confidence, and make new friends with others from similar backgrounds.

⁶ Recruitment support for the armed forces community | NHSScot

⁷ Children & Young People - Forces Children Scotland

In 2023 FCS launched the Ruby Boots project to support children whose parents are transitioning from the armed forces and their Tornado campaign which explains the effect that transition has on children and young people.

In addition to their work with Forces Children Scotland and Carers Trust, the Children's Society have been awarded a grant from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT) to develop further participation, skills development and training, bringing together stakeholders and making links in the sector to support young carers within the armed forces community.

Across the UK, Help for Heroes have recently commissioned Kooth⁸ to provide accessible and inclusive mental health services for children and young people in the veteran community.

The Bereaved

The military bereaved population includes armed forces and veteran spouses and partners, their children, and other close family members. Some of them may be bereaved at a relatively early age while others, including of course veterans themselves, may be bereaved much later in life. While there is support available for family members from both the MOD⁹ and many charities, including Cruse Bereavement Support¹⁰, SSAFA, Poppyscotland and the Veterans Welfare Service, there may be those who are bereaved who do not know where to turn. Some can find supportive comradeship in belonging to organisations such as the War Widows Association and individual Service Widow's Associations. However, not every bereaved person will join an association and will not have access therefore to the support and information such organisations can offer.

For older widows and widowers Age Scotland¹¹ produces an informative practical guide. While not specifically aimed at veterans, it covers coping with a bereavement, dealing with grief and the importance of looking after oneself. Research by the Northern Hub for Veterans and Military Families at Northumbria University¹² has found that while immediate support is forthcoming for those who are bereaved due to an in-Service death, this can quickly wane, leaving the bereaved family feeling isolated and cut off from the military community they have known. The study aimed to provide an evidence base to drive change and increase awareness and recognition of the role families play and ensure that bereaved spouses are not forgotten.

Scotty's Little Soldiers¹³ provide a comprehensive bereavement support service for military children and young people who have experienced the death of a parent who served in the UK armed forces. They support children and young people across the UK through four family programmes; Smiles, Support, Strides and Springboard. These programmes include fun and engagement activities, emotional health and wellbeing support, education and development needs and support for young adults aged 18-25.

Personal Testimony to the Commissioner

Across the range of Veterans Voice groups, I heard that while many veterans in need do access high quality and effective support from public services and other organisations, many do not. This will be for a range of reasons, including not knowing about it, feeling it is not for them or being unwilling to seek help.

Partners and Spouses

I met with several partners and spouses, including partners of injured veterans who are supported by the charity Blesma, members of the Military Wives Choirs, non-UK spouses, members of a woman's business network and others. I heard how proud they were to be military spouses and how proud they were of their serving or veteran partner.

⁸ Home - Kooth in association with Help for Heroes

⁹ Purple Pack bereavement guide for families of service personnel - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

¹⁰ Bereavement in the military - Cruse Bereavement Support

¹¹ HWB 14 bereavement 2022-DEC.indd (ageuk.org.uk)

¹² Military-Widows-Social-Isolation-and-Loneliness-Final-Report.pdf (pcdn.co)

¹³ Charity for Bereaved Military Children | Scotty's Little Soldiers (scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk)

There was however frustration expressed that partners are not always included in services, and that support is aimed only at the ex-Service person. This was particularly true of transition and mental health support.

Getting involved in a specific activity can help veterans and their spouses or partners to engage with their local community and may help with mental health and wellbeing needs such as loneliness and depression. Veterans Sport Stirling and the Military Wives Choirs are two notable examples of community engagement that I learned more about, and many veterans I have spoken to talked about a wide range of activities they feel supports their wellbeing.

Families talked about organisations that specifically include partners, such as Help for Heroes, Blesma and local organisations. These can provide a lifeline for partners who are potentially working, caring for their veteran, and caring for children which leaves very little space left for themselves.

Children and Young People

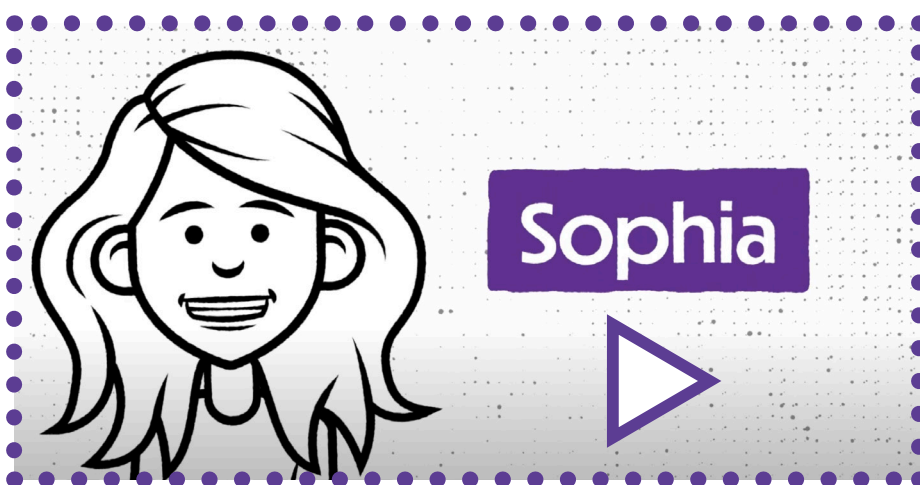
I met with young people from veteran families who are being supported by the charity Forces Children Scotland.

We discussed the effects of their parent's transition from the armed forces, and I heard that transition could lead to a sense of loss, for example loss of identity, loss of friends and the loss of being part of a community. They said that losing connections to the 'military family' was one of the hardest aspects to deal with, when being part of that family brings with it an immense feeling of pride and of belonging.

I heard about the challenges that they faced, such as disruption to family life and education, and by not being well understood by the statutory services they access. They specifically mentioned that some schoolteachers have a poor understanding of what it means to be a veteran and often had a stereotyped view of veterans as older men or injured male soldiers.

We discussed how children and young people from Service families may have had to cope with bereavement or have caring responsibilities for a parent because of Service injury or illness.

I was told that it can be hard to move to a new area and a new community that has no instinctive understanding of what Service life is like. The young people told me that there was a lack of awareness of information and support. I heard about the importance of social connections and friendships. They felt it really helped to have someone to speak to who understands them, as they have been in the same situation and have shared in the unique camaraderie of military life.



Listen to 15-year-old Sophia share her experiences of growing up in a forces and now veteran family.

What can be improved

Employers in Scotland need to be alive to the benefits of employing spouses and partners of military personnel and veterans. Registration bodies should make processes more straightforward in accepting qualifications and registration from other parts of the UK.

Employers should be aware that spouses and partners of Service leavers and veterans may have specific needs such as the requirement for flexibility. In seeking to better support these needs Scotland can only benefit from the skills this potential workforce brings.

Support should be available for military partners setting up businesses in Scotland. While not for everyone, setting up in business is an effective way to overcome the disadvantage of being a Service, then veteran, partner. Self-employment has several advantages for the military family and the Scottish economy: it can be more flexible; can be portable; supports the local economy; supports effective transition by providing one stable income and can encourage veteran families to stay in Scotland when a business becomes established.

The voices of veterans' children should be included in policy development at all levels and the needs of children and young people from armed forces and veteran families should be better understood by education, health and social care providers.

Unhelpful stereotypes must be challenged, and positive examples of veterans and their families should be promoted by government and others.

The bereaved, despite being specifically mentioned in the Armed Forces Covenant as meriting special consideration, are often omitted from policy and practice. It should be recognised that they are also part of the armed forces and veteran community and have sacrificed much in the Service of this country.



UNDERSTANDING, RECOGNISING, VALUING AND SUPPORTING DIVERSITY

‘We may have all come on different ships but we’re in the same boat now’

Evidence from Organisations and Published Sources

The stated policies of the modern UK armed forces recognise and value diversity and encourage recruitment, retention and promotion that is representative of the nation and reflects the population they seek to defend. Those personnel will become the veterans of the future. That diversity is already reflected in Scotland across the veteran community, and it is critical to avoid making assumptions about who is a veteran.

Too many myths and misunderstandings persist about those who have served their country and helped to keep us safe. Our veterans reflect different genders, cultures, religions, backgrounds, sexual orientations and life experiences. That means that their needs – and the support and access to services that they and their families might call upon – will be individual to them and their circumstances. To deliver the best possible support, service providers must recognise and understand that diversity, and respond sensitively and appropriately. All veterans and their family members should feel understood and equally valued by society and empowered to reach their full potential.

Women Veterans

As in wider society, women veterans are not a homogenous group. Aside from gender, many factors such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, educational background and childhood experiences will have an effect. There must therefore be caution against reinforcing gender stereotypes. There has recently been a significant amount of published research into the health, wellbeing, societal attitudes and outcomes for women veterans which has helped inform this report.

Servicewomen are more likely to be medically discharged, leave the military early, and serve for shorter durations compared to their male counterparts.¹⁴

Three recent studies, funded by the Office for Veterans Affairs (OVA), have brought into sharp focus the challenges women veterans experienced in the past and can still experience today.

- ◆ Barriers to women veterans accessing services and support from service charities were analysed in research carried out at Robert Gordon University¹⁵ and published in October 2023. Much of this can be translated to public services.
- ◆ Anglia Ruskin University’s Centre for Military Womens Research (CMWR) report *Where are all the Women?*¹⁶ identified issues of recognition, identity, and representation of women veterans.
- ◆ Combat Stress, working with the Women’s Royal Army Corps Association, recruited 750 women veterans for a series of studies¹⁷. The studies identify bullying, sexual harassment

¹⁴ Annual Medical Discharges in the UK Regular Armed Forces (publishing.service.gov.uk)

¹⁵ Improving access to service charities for female veterans. (worktribe.com)

¹⁶ ARU-Female-Veteran-Experiences-of-Support-in-Civilian-Life-Report-Sept-2023_FINAL.pdf (centreformilitarywomensresearch.com)

¹⁷ Women Veterans Research | Combat Stress

Overall, these reports reinforce the need for more inclusive and gender-sensitive support for women veterans already evidenced from previous reports such as:

- ◆ We Also Served¹⁸
- ◆ Issues of Inappropriate Behavior¹⁹
- ◆ Trends in Scottish Veterans Health²⁰
- ◆ Longer-Term Employment Outcomes of Ex-Service Personnel²¹

NHS Sexual Assault Response Coordination Services (SARCS)²² in Scotland provide healthcare and Forensic Medical Examination (FME) services for people in the days following an assault. Self-referral enables someone aged 16 or over to access healthcare and request a FME without first having to make a report to the police. While every SARCS is committed to the provision of person-centered and trauma-informed care, Service personnel and veterans may not be aware of these services or think that they are intended for them.

The Female Veterans Transformation project²³ managed by the Women's Royal Army Corps Association and the Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo), is a new programme designed to deliver long-term, systemic change for future women veterans. The project has been awarded funding over a 3-year period to develop a Female Veterans Toolkit available to all charities, commercial and statutory organisations aimed at tackling key themes including physical and mental healthcare, financial advice, care provision, employment services and combating loneliness.

A Women Veterans' Strategy²⁴ is currently being developed by the OVA. The strategy will look at the specific needs and challenges faced by women veterans and celebrate their successes. Areas which will be considered in the strategy include mental health support, physical welfare and employment.

Veterans With Disabilities

The consequences of conflict can last a lifetime. As those who were injured physically and mentally in previous conflict, or in other Service-related incidents are getting older, their needs may be changing. Services and support are therefore still required for those veterans and their families who have given the most in defence of our country.

As well as the NHS and social care services, there are many charities across Scotland who do great work in supporting disabled veterans. Some of these are funded by central or local government and some from voluntary income. All are key in ensuring our disabled veterans and their families have access to effective care and support.

While support must be maintained for the most vulnerable, it should be recognised that there are many veterans with disabilities who continue to lead fulfilling lives and have successful second careers after leaving the military. It is important that society and employers see these veterans as valuable and capable individuals who have as much to contribute as their non-disabled peers.

Older Veterans

It is important to ensure we continue to support our older veterans, valuing the contribution they have made in Service and continue to make in their local communities. Doing this in a collaborative and joined-up way, as demonstrated through the Unforgotten Forces²⁵ consortium of armed forces and civilian charities, is a good example of how to deliver high quality and equitable support.

¹⁸ WeAlsoServed_Electronic.pdf

(centreformilitarywomensresearch.com)

¹⁹ Wigston Review into inappropriate behaviours - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

²⁰ <https://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/Trends-in-Scottish-Veterans-Health-Report-Digital-Copy-1.pdf>

²¹ Longer-Term-Employment-Outcomes_FINAL.pdf (pcdn.co)

²² Turn to SARCS – NHS inform

²³ Female Veterans Transformation Programme | WRAC Association

²⁴ New Women Veterans' Strategy to look at experiences of former female service personnel - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

²⁵ Unforgotten Forces (ageuk.org.uk)

Veterans can be affected by loneliness and isolation at any age, often brought on by the challenges associated with losing the sense of community and camaraderie that comes with Service life. This also applies to their families as they integrate back into civilian life and build new networks, relationships and friendships. Third sector organisations are very often most effective in combatting social isolation and loneliness. Volunteering can bring huge benefits to older veterans, as well as the valuable contribution it makes to the military and wider community.

The Scottish Government strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness, *Recovering our Connections 2023-2026*²⁶ sets out a specific action over the first twelve months to 'Engage with veterans' organisations and make use of available data and outcomes to better identify how we can support the Armed Forces community to strengthen social connections'. It will be important to see what emerges from this work in the months ahead as the first results from the 2022 UK Veteran's Survey²⁷ suggest that loneliness and isolation remains an issue for some members of the veteran community.

Non-UK Veterans

There are many different nationalities who have served in the UK armed forces over the years, they include those who serve in the Brigade of Gurkhas and those from Commonwealth countries. This is a group who are not always familiar with administrative processes and structures within the UK and, therefore, may not know what support they can access when they become veterans. Local authorities are very often unaware of non-UK veterans and their families' status, rights, and entitlements, and this can cause real difficulties, particularly regarding housing, healthcare and access to higher and further education.

The UK Government has now waived the fees to settle in the UK for those who have served 6 years or more or been discharged because of an illness or injury which is attributable to their Service. The high fees and complexity around applying for visas and leave to remain faced by the families of non-UK Service leavers continues to be a significant issue.

The Royal Navy, Army and RAF Family Federations provide qualified immigration advice to members of the UK armed forces and immediate family members who are eligible to apply for a visa to enter or remain in the UK under the armed forces rules. Crucially, they also provide ongoing immigration advice to veterans and their immediate family members.

A newly established organisation - Commonwealth and Families Veterans' Support Group - can also provide a range of support for non-UK veterans and their families.

Research about non-UK veterans has been scarce but the OVA has commissioned RAND Europe²⁸ to conduct research on the lived experiences of non-UK veterans. In addition, the UK Government's recent consultation, *Supporting Our Veterans*, included non-UK veterans and their families.

LGBT+ Veterans

Lord Etherton's LGBT Veterans Independent Review²⁹ published in summer 2023, examined the effect that the pre-2000 ban on homosexuality in the UK armed forces has had. The report highlighted the significant impact of the ban and treatment of LGBT+ Service personnel and on the long-term wellbeing of those involved.

Lord Etherton made a range of recommendations and suggestions.

While most of these relate to reserved responsibilities and are for the UK Government to consider, the report did contain two suggestions for Scotland. These were around diversity and inclusivity policies and training for healthcare and housing providers, to ensure that LGBT+ veterans do not face any repeat of the unacceptable treatment they suffered whilst in the armed forces. The Scottish Government has responded to confirm that it is committed to supporting LGBT+ veterans and is considering how to deliver on these suggestions.

²⁶ Social isolation and loneliness: Recovering our Connections 2023 to 2026 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

²⁷ Veterans' Survey 2022, demographic overview and coverage analysis, UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

²⁸ Understanding the lived experience of non-UK veterans | RAND

²⁹ LGBT Veterans Independent Review - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Personal Testimony to the Commissioner

Being part of an inclusive and welcoming community builds confidence and can motivate and empower people, including encouraging them to access help when it is needed. However, many individual veterans and groups within the veteran community feel excluded from the support landscape.

Women Veterans

I held several meetings and focus groups with over 70 women veterans where participants expressed pride in their Service and their personal achievements. Many had had diverse, fulfilling careers which had tested their physical and mental capacities. They developed skills that exceeded their expectations and formed uniquely valuable and enduring friendships with Service comrades. Military service provided extraordinary opportunities and experiences that they would never have been able to access in civilian life.

For some, however, their experience in the armed forces was far less positive and I heard accounts of discrimination, sexual harassment and incidences of sexual assault. Many of these incidents were not reported at the time or if reported were not taken seriously, which has had a significant impact on the wellbeing of the women involved.

As would be expected with a diverse group in terms of age and military experience, there were many contrasting views. However, the point was repeatedly made that many women veterans feel unseen in both the veteran community and wider society. There was frequent reference to veterans' services being for men and "not for them". The imagery and language used by some organisations and services are not inclusive, with women being literally 'invisible.' This creates a barrier to accessing services. There was also a lack of awareness among women veterans of the breadth of services and support available to them. Disappointingly some who had accessed services and support had experienced negative gender stereotyping and discriminatory behaviour.

Some of the women veterans found that transition activities were focussed on men in terms of types of careers promoted and the training available. There were calls for transition to be more tailored for women Service leavers. I also heard that some women found that employers did not have a good understanding of women veterans.

Veterans with Disabilities

I met with a group of veterans with physical disabilities who were being supported by the charity Blesma, as well as several individuals. I heard about the diversity of their situations, the challenges they faced and the wide range of support available. There were vastly different experiences, with some disabled veterans receiving good support from local authorities in terms of adaptations and from NHS Scotland in terms of treatment, and others expressing frustrations at delays or inadequate equipment and support.

Not all disabilities are physical, or even visible. I have listened to a range of groups and individuals who have stressed the importance of good mental health and wellbeing. Veterans can often find it difficult to reach out for mental health care and support, making it even more important for effective services to be available and accessible throughout Scotland.

I have met with veterans with disabilities who have very fulfilling second careers, sometimes supporting other veterans. Their inspirational success is testament to the quality of medical and social support that they have received and to their outstanding resilience and courage.

Older Veterans

I met with older veterans in various settings and heard how important remaining socially active is to their health and wellbeing. The military third sector is particularly effective at delivering social inclusion, whether via membership of ex-Service organisations, informal drop-ins such as breakfast clubs, or hubs where meaningful activity combines with comradeship and support. Examples of such hubs are the Lothian Veterans Centre, Community Veterans Support, ACVC Hub, Sight Scotland Veterans Hawkshead Centre and the Erskine Reid Macewen Activity Centre.

Non-UK Veterans

One of the largest groups of non-UK veterans living in Scotland is the Fijian community. Fijians have served in the UK military since 1961 and on leaving many families make Scotland their home. Spouses, despite often being highly qualified, may work in quite low paid jobs and are unaware of help available regarding employment, skills and learning opportunities.

Following attendance at the excellent 2023 Fiji Day celebration in Edinburgh with over 200 members of the Fijian armed forces and veteran community, I had the opportunity to meet some inspiring women. I heard that Fijian families are often “fearful and panicked about their transition” and are worried about housing, finding a job, costs of applying for visas and leave to remain, and educational prospects for their children. They told me all this causes a degree of stress and anxiety for not only the serving partner but the whole family.

They discussed feeling ill-advised during the resettlement process and would like there to be a better understanding of their unique position by resettlement staff. They talked about how public sector staff do not often understand their status or know what advice to give. They said that they do not always feel recognised either as a veteran or as part of the veteran community. However, despite this they said that Scotland was a welcoming place, that Fijian families want to stay here and that there are opportunities that would not be open to their children in Fiji.

I have heard similar concerns from families of veterans who joined the UK armed forces from other Commonwealth nations.

LGBT+ Veterans

My engagement with LGBT+ veterans, in groups facilitated by the charity Fighting with Pride and in individual meetings, revealed the depth of feelings of rejection and injustice felt by many veterans who had military careers cut short and who were the subject of conduct that is almost inconceivable today. For some, the harrowing treatment that they received led to long term mental ill health, drug and alcohol addiction and homelessness.

Caution should be exercised in perceiving LGBT+ veterans as a homogenous group: like all veterans they have a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences and needs. However, I heard recurring themes of not feeling well understood by service providers and of not feeling welcome or included in the wider veteran landscape.



Listen to RAF veteran Kent speaking about the lasting impact of serving under the homosexuality ban as a gay man.

What can be improved

Public services for veterans in Scotland must be inclusive for all veterans. Service design should take diverse characteristics into account with inclusive content, language and imagery, and staff who are aware that veterans may not conform to stereotypes.

Charities that receive public money to provide services for veterans should be able to evidence training, policy and practice that supports diversity and inclusion. It is important that language and imagery reflects the diversity of the veteran community and does not reinforce stereotypes.

Now that comprehensive research into women veterans' needs and barriers to accessing services has been published, the recommendations should be considered. In some cases, women veteran specific services may be appropriate. The Female Veterans Transformation Programme that launched in 2023 will provide a toolkit for public, private and third sector organisations to ensure that their services are inclusive for women veterans. Scottish public bodies and other organisations should engage with this project to ensure that the toolkit works effectively in Scotland and ultimately benefit from the sustained improvement it will promote.

Training should be developed for staff working within healthcare services and veteran support services to raise awareness of women's roles and contributions to military Service, including the impact of exposure to combat.

Civilian sexual assault services in Scotland must be aware that Service personnel and veterans may be among their users. Staff should be sufficiently informed about the specific experience of sexual violence in the military to enable them to provide an effective support service. NHS Scotland Sexual Assault Response Co-ordination Services (SARCS) should be more widely promoted to Service personnel and veterans, particularly in areas around main military bases in Scotland.

SARCS could consider learning from services already operating in other parts of the UK. For example, an NHS England pilot programme to improve uptake and awareness of sexual assault around the Catterick Garrison area.

As suggested by Lord Etherton, public bodies providing services for veterans should implement diversity and inclusion training that includes awareness of the impact of the LGBT+ ban and should have appropriate policies and practice in place.

Lord Etherton recommended that arrangements be enhanced for LGBT+ veterans to march at Pride events. In some parts of Scotland Pride marches conflict with Armed Forces Day events preventing LGBT+ veterans from attending both. Local authorities are encouraged to review this practice to enable LGBT+ veterans to be included in both events should they wish.

It is important for the UK Government to provide effective guidance and support for non-UK serving personnel throughout their Service and transition. This would include the provision of regular information on immigration policy, including the financial implications throughout the individual's career.

The Scottish Government should take steps to engage, connect with and support non-UK veterans and their families in dealing with their concerns around housing, employment, health, and children's education following transition.



RESPONSIVE TO NEED AND COLLABORATIVE IN APPROACH

‘Better understanding comes from better communication’

Evidence from Organisations and Published Sources

Public Bodies – coordination, sharing best practice, Covenant duties

Many local authorities in Scotland have developed policies and practice to support veterans and their families and ensure that they are meeting the Covenant duties of due regard in the areas of health, education and housing. Each local authority has an Armed Forces and Veterans Champion whose terms of reference have been updated to reflect the legal status of Covenant duties. NHS Boards in Scotland also each have an Armed Forces and Veterans Champion, appointed on the same basis.

Local authorities and NHS Boards do not yet have a verified figure for the number of veterans in their area, something that will change when more detailed census information is released this year.

Policies differ across the country and good practice is not always identified and shared. Awareness of the Covenant – which aims to prevent disadvantage for those who have served and their families - is inconsistent among both service providers and the veteran community. Even where policies exist, front line service providers do not always apply them consistently.

Financial Support

Campaigning work by Poppyscotland and Royal British Legion has highlighted disadvantage experienced by some disabled veterans. Veterans who have an illness or disability due to their Service which is recognised by compensation in the form of a War Pension (WP), or Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS) payments can experience inequity if they are also accessing state benefits.

Calculation of income can include or disregard income from WP or AFCS depending on which benefit is being accessed, for example those on Universal Credit will have their entire WP disregarded, while those on Pension Credit will only have £10 of their WP disregarded.

However, with other benefits such as Housing Benefit, Discretionary Housing Payments, and the Scottish Welfare Fund there is also inconsistent treatment of WP and AFCS payments across Scottish local authorities. This was evidenced by a Freedom of Information request made by Poppyscotland which revealed that only 10 Scottish local authorities fully disregard WP and AFCS when making benefit calculations.

Education

The Forces Children’s Education website ³⁰ provides a wealth of information and resources for teaching professionals, other stakeholders and families living in (or moving to) Scotland. Using key network groups, the Association of Directors of Education (ADES) National Education Officer, who facilitates and maintains the Forces Children’s Education website, is building up a picture of the current issues. The various networks in place across Scotland and within local authorities enable best practice to be shared, to improve the support for children and young people of armed forces and veteran families.

Groups such as the Armed Forces Families Lead Officer network (AFFLO), representing all 32 local authorities, can cascade information to all schools and Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings and to local authority departments, to raise issues or concerns and to promote good practice.

This is informed at local authority level by data through the Armed Forces Families Indicator which was added to the Data Management System for Early Years settings and schools in 2015. When children are enrolled in early learning and childcare settings and schools (Primary, Secondary and Special) or when their information is routinely updated, parents or carers have the option to notify if their children are from 'Regular', 'Reserve' or 'Veteran' families.

The ADES collects data annually on the armed forces children's population in Scotland. This is the sole source of authoritative information in Scotland and is used by a range of stakeholders.

Skills Development Scotland³¹ provides enhanced support in schools for young people from military families and the Scottish Funding Council³² supports access to Further and Higher Education for veterans and their families. Some local authorities with military bases, such as Highland and Moray Councils, have enhanced support for pupils from armed forces and veteran families.

Veterans and Volunteering

Veterans have a great deal to contribute to society and are often valuable supporters of military and civilian organisations. Scotland has a vibrant voluntary sector supported by Volunteer Scotland and voluntary sector infrastructure bodies. There is good evidence that volunteering is beneficial to volunteers. From goodwill to great impact: Maximising the benefits of volunteering³³, a recent report by the British Heart Foundation, expresses this. This may be particularly true for veterans who miss aspects of military life such as camaraderie and service which may not be present in their civilian lives.

Time Well Spent³⁴, a survey by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) on the volunteer experience, said "People volunteer to make a difference and because they are connected to the cause, group or organisation they choose to volunteer for." Thus, there is a win-win scenario in making efforts to engage veterans more in the voluntary sector: the sector will gain motivated, capable volunteers and veterans can reap the benefits of carrying out diverse and rewarding voluntary work.

Veterans form the backbone of volunteers for many ex-Service organisations and military charities, and they make a significant contribution to the overall voluntary sector in Scotland. As a charity funded by the Scottish Government, Volunteer Scotland could play a key role in ensuring that the wider benefits of volunteering and volunteer roles are promoted to veterans and their families. Their recent policy briefing paper³⁵ highlights a decline in volunteer participation, and this may be a gap that veterans would be well placed to fill.

While volunteering is not the focus of transition, consideration of finding voluntary work alongside a civilian career could assist Service leavers to find new community connections and retain some of their service-led identity while they return to civilian life.

Collaboration

Collaboration is increasingly employed amongst organisations supporting veterans, and the military third sector in Scotland is fortunate to have an effective coordinating body in Veterans Scotland which plays a vital role in promoting collaboration and cooperation.

There are good examples of constructive public sector collaboration. The Scottish Veterans Wellbeing Alliance, led by NHS Lothian, has brought together 20 partner organisations to pool resources and provide better, more responsive support. North and South Lanarkshire Councils join with partners in a Covenant Delivery Group; while other local authorities use the Firm Base model. Glasgow City Council has partnered with SSAFA to form the effective Glasgow's Helping Heroes initiative. However, not every part of Scotland has the same commitment and a more consistent approach to sharing best practice would reap benefits for both service providers and the veteran community.

³¹ Corporate - Skills Development Scotland

³² Veterans (sfc.ac.uk)

³³ volunteering-report-1805co.pdf (bhf.org.uk)

³⁴ Key findings from Time Well Spent 2023 | NCVO

³⁵ Volunteer Scotland Briefing Decline in Volunteering Jan 24

Personal Testimony to the Commissioner

Veterans and families have been clear that having to tell their story repeatedly or provide the same information on multiple occasions is frustrating and stressful for those seeking to access support or services. This is particularly challenging if the background is difficult to speak about or if the nature of the need is urgent.

The requirement for records, information, and services to be more joined up across geographic and organisational boundaries was often expressed.

Data Protection legislation is vital to protect everyone's personal information but concerns about privacy can prevent support reaching the most vulnerable people. Data protection laws were not written to ensure that lonely and isolated individuals remain lonely and isolated and there is usually a lawful way to retain a connection with an individual in need. An example of this is where bereaved spouses and partners can be cut off from support, however the RAF Widows Association has developed a lawful way to ensure that the bereaved can remain connected should they wish.

I also heard from veterans in receipt of War Pensions and from support providers such as Poppyscotland and the Armed Services Advice Project (ASAP) about the application of disregards when calculating means tested benefits which is inconsistent between local authorities in Scotland.

With respect to children, I heard of good examples of best practice in some local authorities, such as in Highland³⁵ and the work underway in Moray Council. However, I was told that this support could be patchy between and within local authority areas and it becomes particularly challenging for families where children have additional support needs.

In several meetings, the lack of childcare provision was raised with me. While this is an issue across Scotland, I was told the challenges are particularly acute in some areas. This means there are barriers for spouses and partners of serving personnel and for veterans in taking up second careers, with provision either not available at all or what is available and accessible, may still limit employment choices.



Listen to Fijian veteran Virginia speak about the challenges of her own transition to civilian life in Scotland, and being a working mother while her husband continues to serve in the Army.

What can be improved

All relevant public bodies should ask whether someone has served in the UK armed forces, which will help identify veterans when delivering services. This will enhance the richness of the data available and enable tailored support to be provided when and where it is needed.

Public authorities in Scotland need to know where veterans and veteran families are, with systems and process that support the capture and transfer of that information.

Better training for front-line public-sector staff regarding the armed forces Covenant and how it applies to veterans and their families is needed. An understanding of the needs of veterans and why these needs may differ from the civilian population is key to delivering the support and services they require. Most members of the veteran community want only fair treatment and not special treatment. There needs to be clarity about what this means for both providers and recipients.

Public authorities should be able to share best practice in the support of the veteran community. Notwithstanding the varying density of the veteran population in local authority areas and economic and geographic disparity, it should be possible to determine and share the most effective policies and practices.

Veterans on low incomes with chronic illness or disabilities are some of the most vulnerable in our community. Where their health has been injured in the Service of our country, they should be supported financially in a consistent way that does not depend on which part of Scotland they reside. When public bodies in Scotland are calculating means tested benefits, it is essential that there is clarity and consistency across agencies and local authorities in the application of disregard. For UK wide benefit schemes, the Scottish Government is urged to use what levers it can to remedy any inconsistency.



SCOTTISH VETERANS COMMISSIONER RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this work was to listen to the experiences of the wider veteran community, seek to understand how well served all veterans and their families are by existing services and capture observations and findings. Each section sets out suggestions of how things could be improved for veterans and their families based on the evidence and testimony gathered.

These suggestions will support the following outcome focussed recommendations I am making to the Scottish Government:

- ◆ The identity and contribution of under-represented groups within the veteran community are recognised. Diversity is recognised in language, imagery, policy and practice and barriers to access are eliminated. Gaps in provision for the specific needs of under-represented groups within the veteran community are addressed.
- ◆ A better understanding by service providers of the specific needs of women veterans is required, particularly in the areas of mental health and sexual trauma, to support them more effectively.
- ◆ Improved and expanded data capture, analysis and transfer supports and enhances policy development, quality of support and service delivery for the veteran community.
- ◆ Spouses, partners, children and the bereaved are explicitly included in policy and practice relating to the veteran community.
- ◆ Mechanisms are established to raise awareness, promote good practice, identify and resolve challenges, and provide assurance and consistency of delivery of veterans' services by public bodies in Scotland (in line with the principles of removing disadvantage due to Service and applying special consideration if appropriate).
- ◆ Inconsistency of financial support for the most vulnerable veterans in Scotland should be eradicated by Scottish public bodies.

My recommendations are made in line with my remit to 'provide leadership and challenge and drive momentum' towards realising the Scottish Government's ambition to improve support and access to services for veterans and their families.

These are long term outcomes and I recognise that achieving them will require collaboration with a range of delivery partners across public, private and third sectors. By working collectively, we can continue to make life better for veterans and their families living in Scotland.

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