

Appendix 2: Poppyscotland comments



In Scotland, welfare support for the Service community is carried out by Poppyscotland. The following comments represent Poppyscotland's comments on the UK Government Veterans Strategy.

The comments and observations below are a reflection of the views of Poppyscotland staff and those of participants attending our 4 focus groups. Two focus groups were hosted by our Welfare Centres in Inverness and Kilmarnock and 2 in Edinburgh; one based on participants and staff from our 'Employable' programme and one based on those who participate in our Grants Programme. These groups attracted over 30 veterans and were also attended by the Scottish Government's Defence Policy Unit Staff.

Comments, organised by themes are:

Delivery and Accountability

We support the aim of adopting a nation specific delivery framework underpinning a wider strategy, but note that to be successful, it will require clear lines of funding, resources and accountability. We would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the development of this framework.

The UK and Scottish Governments both have a clear role to play in support of our Armed Forces community. In order to provide the best support and make a difference for our beneficiaries, there has to be collaboration, co-ordination and where appropriate joint responsibility between and by both governments. We would urge both to work together to ensure that delivery is optimised across all portfolio areas. The establishment of the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board (of which the Scottish Veterans' Minister is a member) is beginning to make progress on this and we would like to see it further strengthened.

The Needs of Veterans and Families

In the majority of cases, it is recognised that the needs of veterans are similar to those of the rest of society. Veterans involved in the Ayrshire Focus Group felt that, in principle, veterans should not be treated any differently from civilians when accessing and receiving support. However, it was also universally agreed that where there was a clear disadvantage (Injury, disability, dislocation etc.) a higher priority ought to apply. However, whilst in some cases attention needs to be paid to the pathways available for veterans and their families to access relevant services, the service provision should simply be available equably.

Greater Understanding and Respect

Ayrshire and Inverness Focus Group participants supported initiatives such as the issue and use of the Veterans ID Card announced by the UK Government in September 2018, and other initiatives such as North Ayrshire Council's announcement that it would give priority to veterans on the housing needs list. Both groups also felt that there needed to be greater awareness and education to address misconceptions about the Armed Forces Community; in particular, to educate support professionals and the wider public about what life is like as a member of the Armed Forces Community.

Poppyscotland's Employ-Able Focus Group highlighted some negative experiences, including examples where there has been a lack of understanding of veterans and the specific issues they face. This included accessing employment support and social security benefits. For example, the translation of military to civilian skills and the consideration of some military service benefits when determining income. Again, addressing these barriers through cultural change and greater education were cited as potential remedies.

Another topic that arose at both Poppyscotland's Ayrshire and Inverness Focus Groups was reaching a better balance between supporting the living and remembering the fallen. Whilst Remembrance has its rightful place in society, it was felt that there could be greater prominence given to Armed Forces Day.

Statutory Support for Veterans

The Armed Forces Covenant provides the context for the nation, including statutory agencies and others to pledge their support for the Armed Forces community. The Scottish Veterans Commissioner has published various reports and recommendations to improve statutory support for veterans. In this context, we welcome the Scottish Government's publication 'Renewing Our Commitments' and subsequent Annual Reports to Parliament which look to address the issues raised. These publications list the range of support on offer to veterans in employment, housing, health, and transition.

Nevertheless, participants in Poppyscotland's Focus Groups in Ayrshire, Inverness and Edinburgh still felt that statutory support for veterans had to be further strengthened particularly in the areas of health, housing, and social security. Participants in the focus groups felt that the various reports and strategies were setting the right tone and ambitions, but were slow in achieving meaningful progress.

Participants also felt that both UK and Scottish Governments should continue engagement with veterans when identifying and providing statutory services. This is something which the military service sector could look to support. While the Careers Transitions Partnership (CTP) has made noticeable strides over the years, the UK Government could do more in fulfilling its responsibility towards the process and practicalities involved for transitioning veterans. This could include better teaching of life skills and a personalised, supportive environment throughout the transition process. Focus Groups in Ayrshire, Inverness and Edinburgh noted that life for veterans leaving today has much improved since those that left in the 1970's and 1980's. However, it was still felt that the Ministry of Defence was good at turning civilians into soldiers but not returning soldiers back into civilians again.

Data Gathering

The lack of full and useful data regarding veterans and our Armed Forces community has been a constant challenge. In this regard, support from UK and Scottish Governments, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the National Records Scotland (NRS) for RBL's 'Count Them In' campaign is most welcome.

From our engagement with statutory agencies, practitioners, and frontline staff in the NHS, education, social security, local government, and elsewhere, there is still much work to be done to record and report data concerning our Armed Forces community. As a recent example, discussion with the Royal Caledonian Education Trust (RCET) has highlighted gaps in data regarding service children and families. Without accurate data, statutory agencies, commercial operatives, and third sector organisations cannot effectively design services, support initiatives, set effective strategies or devise service delivery plans.

To further improve data, systems and processes need to be reviewed. These systems need not to just record and report data but also allow the data to be analysed and interpreted with other published data – some of which may belong to other agencies, sectors, and organisations. Although GDPR and Data Protection will be challenging, success would allow national and local governments to work with agencies and service delivery partners to put in place the most appropriate and necessary support for our Armed Forces Community.

Collaboration

The UK Government's consultation process asks if there are any good examples of collaboration and partnership working. It is undoubtedly the case that some of the most productive programmes are based on these 2 principles. As examples from our own experience:

- The Unforgotten Forces Consortium. A consortium of 15 military and civilian organisations providing holistic and complementary services to older veterans in need. The Unique Selling Point for this partnership is the partnership arrangement allowing smooth and frictionless inter referrals. It is also a model for using private sector skills and involvement to optimise service design.
- Employable. An employment programme for those who have mental health issues preventing a return to work. It is an example of using, modifying and adapting existing skill sets to create a veteran's programme. The Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) delivers our Service.
- ASAP. Similarly, we also work with Citizens Advice Scotland to deliver the Armed Services Advice Project (ASAP) which operates from bureaux across Scotland. Following this approach allows for the integration of veteran specific support with tailored support services for mental health and advice.
- Welfare Support Service. With support from the Royal British Legion, we are about to expand our welfare provision, introducing this new service which will have national reach, fully equipped to coordinate support to the most vulnerable of veterans who have multiple and complex needs. The service will allow greater coordination of support to our beneficiaries and complement the work of others, in particular SSAFA and the Armed Services Advice Project (ASAP).

Welfare Support

The UK Government's greatest impact in delivering support to veterans in Scotland is through social security. The focus group in Edinburgh (with service users of our Employ-Able service) focused on the themes of employment, finance and debt, part of which covered the persistent issues facing people (not just veterans) regarding universal credit. Participants particularly reported difficulties with delays to payments whilst transitioning to Universal Credit. Veterans in this situation asked for a greater focus to be placed on this part of the welfare / social security journey.

The types and quality of support provided by job centres was also raised in the group discussion. It was felt that job centres need to explain better what they can and cannot do and what they can and cannot offer. Travel expenses to and from interviews being an example. One veteran said that rather than miss an interview opportunity, he had walked 40 miles to attend an interview. Others cited examples where job centre advisors had not completed a client's paperwork correctly, leading to sanctions being imposed with severe consequences for the individual. In one case an individual had to resort to a loan which led

to debt and a bad credit rating which then further hampered efforts to secure employment. The theme of low income was also raised in the Employ-Able focus group. Income levels were considered too low and the application of benefits inconsistent. Their view was that UK Government needs to urgently look at the shortcoming of Universal Credit, the types and quality of service provided at job centres, and the basic incomes of veterans when finalising the strategy.

The Strategy should also consider and take account of the changing nature of our Armed Forces Community – the result of a changing demographic, reduced size and profile of our Armed Forces and societal changes. In this context, it should acknowledge and support the complementary role that commercial and third sector organisations play in supporting veterans, particularly those with complex needs. Successfully dealing with those in need and particularly the most vulnerable of our beneficiaries, requires a holistic approach – evidenced by ASAP analysis, which reveals that presenting issues are usually masking between 4 and 6 contributory or aggravating issues.