

Veterans in Sefton - Transition for Veterans: A Positive Pathways Case Study

This case study highlights the work of Veterans in Sefton, which received a grant of £35,000 from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust's Positive Pathways programme.

The charity, based in Bootle, Merseyside, supports veterans and their families in the local community with services and activities ranging from simple advice and social activities to counselling, housing and employment support.

Organisation name: Veterans in Sefton

Project name: Transition for Veterans

Location/area: Sefton, Merseyside

Grant amount: £35,000

Award date: January 2021

Grant duration: 1 year

Grant programme: Positive Pathways

Dave Smith had a successful military career of almost 25 years, and struggled to adjust to civilian life. He was diagnosed with PTSD and later, dissociative disorders: 'I didn't feel like I could go back to my family because I wasn't strong enough; I felt ashamed, and I was drinking too much', Dave now recalls. Eventually, he tried to take his own life.

During his time in hospital, a police officer visited Dave. The police officer recognised Dave as a former colleague in the Army; he also knew Dave's uncle. This stroke of good fortune brought Dave back to his family in Liverpool, and with his uncle's help, he began his journey of recovery and rebuilding his life.

However, Dave found it difficult to navigate and secure the support he needed from existing statutory services, particularly health services, and he faced an almost impossible challenge in getting accommodation. A breakthrough came when he managed to secure employment as a support worker with a local social care charity: 'I felt good by doing good'.

This position eventually led to an opportunity to start to put in place his ideas to support local veterans that were facing similar challenges to those he had experienced. 'The idea was to get them in for NAAFI breaks, coffee mornings, and get those experiencing mental health issues registered [with the social care charity].

We were then able to train them as volunteers, activity leaders, to use their skills developed in the armed forces to help others, and in their local community. I always thought, “what support did I need?” as a starting point.’

Dave had demonstrated that there was a need for this kind of augmented support in the area, and that the approach they were taking worked. So much so that the social care charity was able to get additional funding for the work, including covering the cost of a volunteer co-ordinator to provide the veterans with full-time support.

‘The co-ordinator [Steve Calderbank] was ex-Navy, and I later found out that he was a psychotherapeutic counsellor, and although he wasn’t able to provide clinical support directly to the veterans, he worked with them and they were given responsibilities that were therapeutic, that gave them a sense of purpose.’

By 2016, Dave and Steve realised that the services they provided to veterans, and the needs that these services helped to address, had grown to such an extent that a separate organisation was needed, and Veterans in Sefton (ViS) was established. They had been able to demonstrate their value in supporting the local armed forces community, and had also been able to mobilise and co-ordinate a wide range of support from various people and agencies, including the local council and CVS, the local MP, health services and the largest housing association in the area. Dave recognises and acknowledges the enormous support they have received along the way through a shared and collaborative approach. What they have achieved so far would not have been possible without the help of many other people, including the veterans themselves.

ViS now delivers a wide range of services for veterans, serving personnel and their families, which includes: mentoring and befriending services; health and wellbeing advice and activities; housing support; financial advice; employment support; volunteering opportunities; early intervention psychological support; social events and activities that promote social inclusion and reduce isolation and anxiety. The organisation is now the only approved provider of services to veterans in the Sefton area by the local council and other statutory agencies.

In 2020/21, ViS delivered 289 fully supported activities with over 360 individuals taking part. Volunteers, including veterans providing peer support, gave 3,500 hours of their time to support these activities, which included: peer support groups; gardening; walking; cycling; yoga; cookery skills; and residential activities in Wales. A comprehensive and joined up approach to pathways of care for veterans is central to everything they do. ‘We look for veterans that are hard to find [...] the guys that can’t do it themselves, the ones that are in a bad way.’

A grant of £35,000 in 2021 from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust’s Positive Pathways programme provided crucial support to ViS and its beneficiaries, at the most challenging time for many of them, through their Transition for Veterans project.

Positive Pathways grants were awarded for activity-based projects developed by and for veterans that focus on improving veterans’ mental health and wellbeing by getting out and active, and the grant complemented core funding that ViS receives from the

National Lottery Community Fund. 'Without additional funding from the Covenant Fund, we would simply be a signposting service', said Dave; 'now we broker, we provide a range of services, activities and holistic support'.

The Positive Pathways grant has enabled ViS to employ a dedicated full time Project Manager that has allowed the project to reach and engage with many more veterans than before, and to offer them an improved and enhanced experience.

Phil Sorrell is a former Royal Marine, who served for more than 24 years in a range of environments around the world. As Project Manager, Phil provides direct support and training to volunteers as well as co-ordinating activities such as mountain club excursions and adventurous training. He leads on projects that support and improve veterans' employability prospects, including vocational training and pathways to employment, dovetailing into statutory provision. This work provides veterans with a foundation of improved mental health and wellbeing, facilitating the opportunities for working age veterans to utilise their military skills, alongside learning new ones, providing a sustainable future where their work contributes to strengthening the communities around them.

During the lifespan of the grant, 12 months from January to December 2021, there were 385 new referrals made to the project, averaging more than one per day, and an increase on the previous year. As a proportion of the grant, this is the equivalent of less than £100 per veteran, although the true cost of supporting them is much higher. ViS estimates that a further 200 people benefited indirectly from the funding, which includes family members. There were 18 veteran volunteers who actively engaged in the project.

Opportunities to collaborate and provide warm referrals with other local organisations and agencies was notably strengthened through the project manager role funded by the Trust.

'We set up a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Veterans UK – the first time they have set up an SLA in this way with a small local charity. This allows us and Veterans UK to openly discuss a veteran's issues and allows a seamless two-way referral process that supports all the required data protection and information governance policies and procedures. We also set up similar SLAs with Merseyside Police, Sefton probation services and the NHS, which includes GPs via our contacts with the CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group).

The SLAs have been invaluable to us for the referral process to work [...] We gave a number of presentations with all of our partners [in the network] so they had a full understanding of what we do – they don't just give [veterans] our details and hope they contact us. The partner organisation refers them to ViS directly, then we provide ongoing updates on their progress to the partner after we have made contact.'

Referrals to the Transition for Veterans project came from a wide range of organisations and agencies, including the Royal British Legion, Veterans UK, NHS, Liverpool Veterans HQ, NOVA Employment, One Vision Housing and the police and

probation services, as well as from family and friends, social media and walk in self-referrals.

Dave identifies some of the key achievements realised through the project:

‘The project complemented the core wellbeing and care services already successfully provided by ViS. The funding from Positive Pathways has enabled a regular, structured and progressive approach to our activities, allowing a cohesive programme which has supported [veterans’] personal development. It has encouraged continued commitment through volunteering, which also helps to sustain a constant level of provision [to others] and enables upskilling and opens up new pathways to employment [for the veterans].’

The positive impact that the project has had on veterans and their families is clear to Dave:

‘The project has been very successful – the wider impacts are more than we hoped for. Many of our veterans are engaging in activities not only with ViS but with other organisations, their friends, many newly made friends, for them, their partners, carers and families.’

There are many individual examples of how the project has had a positive impact on its beneficiaries and been critical in helping to turn their lives around. One service user at a ViS NAAFI break said, ‘see all these people here, half of them wouldn’t be around if this place wasn’t here. It saves people’s lives’. Another user said, ‘I’ve been coming here a while now, they’ve really helped me out. I’m seeing my family again, my grandkids’. Another stressed the importance of local services: ‘you can’t get through to the big charities, they’re too remote. This is in the local community, helping people in this area’.

ViS offers more specific details on one user in particular, a 40-year-old veteran (SL) with multiple and complex needs that the project supported in February 2021:

‘SL was referred to us via Veterans HQ Liverpool. He had been sofa surfing and sleeping rough for several weeks – he had been in accommodation at Speke House but left due to “incidents and issues”. After completing a full needs assessment at ViS, he presented with issues around dependency, mental health and financial problems, as well as his housing needs.

We actioned a General Needs Personal Plan to support him with his housing and financial issues via our wrap around services relationships with One Vision Housing and Veterans UK.

Our Wellbeing Manager actioned a Personal Plan to support his mental health and dependency issues. These two plans ran in tandem as part of our overall holistic support approach.

The full findings of his assessments revealed alcohol dependency, a pending court case that was inducing stress, anger management issues, PTSD, medium-risk suicidal ideation, and loss of trust in the NHS and other state support systems.

The person-centred plan that we drew up focused on a number of initial priorities: an alcohol detox programme; building trust, rapport and engagement while working to reduce suicide risk; encouraging re-engagement with local health services; exploring PTSD issues; providing anger management support; and establishing a platform for him to take ownership of his own recovery. Apart from the detox programme, all other elements of recovery treatments were provided by ViS with support from Veterans in Mind, who provided higher intensity trauma therapy to help address other underlying issues.

At subsequent appointments with ViS, SL's anger management had improved considerably, he was engaging with his GP and attending our socialisation activities. His demeanour and physical appearance had improved and dependency on alcohol had drastically reduced, and he was positive about his future. His PHQ9 (Patient Health Questionnaire) score had shifted from 24 [indicating severe depression] to 10 [moderate depression] during the early stages of his treatment, and we continue to support his recovery.'

ViS also reports that the Clock View mental health facility in Liverpool, which is part of the wider network of service providers that supports them, estimated that if the treatment and support given to SL had been delivered by mainstream NHS practitioners it would have cost at least £34,000 – almost the same as the Positive Pathways grant which funded the Transition for Veterans project for a whole year.

Through Positive Pathways funding, ViS demonstrate the need and additional value of having a dedicated project manager to run the Transition for Veterans project. So much so that Sefton Council has increased funding by a further £25,000 per year: 'we wouldn't be in this situation if it wasn't for the funding from the Covenant Fund, to make the position [of project manager] grow so much that the council want to invest more, from different departments', said Dave. ViS are also in talks about a proposal for even greater financial support from the council and other agencies thanks to their proven success and impact, and their value for money.

There are other estimates for how much money ViS saves statutory services: 'we reckon that we save around £350,000 to £400,000 per year, just to the NHS. The CCG think it's a bit more than that'. The University of Liverpool has been brought onboard to look at the numbers in more detail, but it is safe to say that investment in Veterans in Sefton through the Positive Pathways programme has provided a good return on both the financial and social investments made, provided excellent value for money, and enabled many veterans to access vital support that they were unlikely to seek or find elsewhere.