

# Tackling Armed Forces Loneliness

**Evaluation of the  
Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust's  
Tackling Loneliness Programme**



# Foreword

In early 2020, the Trust ran a consultation to discover how important it was to reduce social isolation and improve integration and engagement with provision within the armed forces community. Our consultation highlighted loneliness as a major factor of social isolation. It can affect people of all ages and from all backgrounds. 9 in every 10 respondents told us that we should focus on social isolation in our future grant making.

The Tackling Loneliness programme was designed to address this challenge by targeting specific groups within the armed forces community who are traditionally harder to reach. Fixed, two-year grants of £70,000 were available for projects meeting at least one of the following key themes:

- Building stronger social networks and friendships.
- Improving access to local activities and provision.
- Building emotional resilience to overcome the causes of loneliness.
- Empowering armed forces communities to become more independent.

**The programme was oversubscribed, but we were able to award £4M to 60 projects across the UK, for projects that** encouraged armed forces communities to get involved with local activities, perhaps for the first time, strengthen their support networks and build their confidence to access opportunities available to them. We were keen that people taking part in projects funded by the Tackling Loneliness programme should feel empowered and encouraged to 'take a leap' or try something new. We wanted them to feel part of a community – whether a local community or a community of interests – and to be able to use any funded project as a stepping-stone or helping hand to something bigger. We also funded mentor organisations to work with our grantees; offering help and assistance.

With such a diverse portfolio of projects, the exploration that the evaluators have undertaken to give contextual analysis to how the projects have delivered their work; and the implications within these for addressing loneliness within the armed forces community is most helpful; and we particularly note the work of the evaluators in creating the model that explores the reach and effect of the most successful grants. This focus on identifying 'what works' has highlighted some strong areas of good practice that will be of interest to other organisations seeking to work with the armed forces community where loneliness is a factor.

Good practice was identified through having creative approaches to service delivery, mechanisms for outreach and engagement with referral partners and collaboration. Projects that were found to be particularly effective were able to tailor their support to meet beneficiary needs in multifaceted ways, and in particular, gave focus to the impact of transitions; both in leaving the armed forces, and also in providing transitional support to veterans experiencing a change in their circumstances.

This evaluation shows that addressing loneliness is complex. We are delighted by the reach that these projects have had; and the corresponding impact for beneficiaries; but note the challenges that this report has identified. Some people from armed forces communities are most likely to benefit from finding help within mainstream services, whereas other armed forces people with more complex needs may find that needs are best met in armed forces-specific settings due to the complexity of these needs or a stronger desire to have services that reflect their armed forces identity. More might be done upstream to prepare for civilian-life loneliness. There is also a need to reduce stigma regarding loneliness with the armed forces community. We are pleased that this programme will have a continuing legacy through the Tackling Loneliness toolkit containing best practice from projects that will be made available through our Knowledge Network; along with the Impact Gallery; which gives snapshots into the complexity of delivery for projects working with vulnerable client groups.

**Anna Wright, CEO of the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust**

# Executive Summary

The UK Government's world first loneliness strategy focused on the need to better understand what works to tackle loneliness. Reflecting on this, our three organisations were commissioned to evaluate this significant programme. We have benefited from data on the projects from AFCFT, spoken with mentor organisations who supported the delivery of the grantees and drawn on the wider literature about loneliness and armed forces communities.

Most valuable were deep dives with 20 of the projects and their beneficiaries so we could really see the world from their perspective and the challenges and successes of their work. We also ran a series of popular monthly sessions to share learning and research about tackling loneliness for armed forces communities. As well as being useful in its own right, these sessions helped grantees and the evaluation team to get to know each other better and build trust. We are deeply grateful to grantees for their time, openness and hard work.

## **Loneliness and armed forces communities**

Some aspects of being in the armed forces community make people more likely to be lonely. Loneliness is often caused by change. Moving is a big part of the armed forces life that can take people away from their networks and make it harder to maintain relationships.

Depression and anxiety disorders, alcohol misuse and post traumatic stress disorder are more common in armed forces communities. LGBT+ communities, women and UK Commonwealth soldiers, particularly Gurkhas, have faced different forms of discrimination. All of these issues can be profoundly isolating experiences.

The strong sense of identity in the armed forces can both protect against loneliness and make it more likely. When people leave the forces, they can find the different culture and approach of civilian life hard to get used to. On the other hand, it can be a real bond for others who have been in the services that can still resonate decades after people have left. This can provide people with strong networks after their service. On top of this, being in the armed forces gives people increased access to support from both charities and the public sector.

## **Reaching out**

Tackling loneliness is best done through services that help bring people together around shared interests rather than loneliness itself. No one goes to a 'loneliness club'. Services often need to help people get out of the downward spiral where being lonely can cause them to withdraw from social life. This means that services need to be proactive and imaginative in how they find and reach people.

We found multiple examples of services reaching out, supporting people and creating engaging activities that are meaningful and interesting. Armed forces specialist organisations were generally focused on specific issues that people face as they return to civilian life or by using the sense of identity that people have in the armed forces as a way to create connection. This runs from groups that focus on interest in the heritage of the armed focus to intensive support

for people facing problems with addiction, mental illness and unemployment. Organisations that are generally focused on civilians found ways of adapting their services or creating specific routes into them for the armed forces community.

Both types of organisations worked best when they had clarity about who they were targeting and were creative in their outreach and service delivery. Developing trusting relationships with local partners was often the best way of ensuring those who most needed services could find what was on offer. Mental health crisis teams might refer someone to an intensive case management programme. In turn, when someone's life is more stable they may then be put in touch with a more informal interest group.

### **Improving social connections**

The services that made the biggest difference in people's loneliness had a number of common characteristics. They were knowledgeable about how loneliness feels, when it can strike and what can make it better.

Alongside this was a deep appreciation and knowledge of military culture - armed forces communities were closely involved in running services. They also had ways of measuring need and collecting evidence about how to improve and adapt their work. Services were most likely to collect formal data where this was part of their approach to supporting people rather than for research or evaluation purposes. Most used quite informal approaches reflecting a wider theme of loneliness that we need to help services find the measures that will work best for them.

### **Next steps**

Our evaluation has found that there are a wide range of services that can help tackle loneliness in armed forces communities. They can build on the strengths and solidarity that people have while addressing the specific challenges that can come from military service. Further investment in programmes and learning about what works best can help people find and develop the relationships that are at the core of a rich and fulfilling life.

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# 1. Objectives and Methods of this Evaluation Process

## Background

The Trust's Tackling Loneliness programme was designed to address loneliness by targeting specific groups that services have found traditionally harder to reach, such as bereaved families, LGBTQ+ communities, BAME networks, female veterans, veterans in the criminal justice system, Carers, Families and Wounded in Service veterans amongst others.

The scale of this investment created a unique opportunity to learn more about addressing loneliness in armed forces communities. Loneliness is a relatively young issue in terms of focused research. In the last few years, there have been significant advances in our understanding of the drivers and consequences of loneliness, within specific groups. Nevertheless, there is a great deal that we do not yet know, particularly in terms of practical services that can have a measurable impact on people's feelings of loneliness<sup>1</sup>.

## Our approach to evaluation

Given the state of the evidence base around how to tackle loneliness, our overall approach has been appreciative and rooted in trying to look for what seems to be working. We admire and appreciate the effort that goes into all interventions to tackle loneliness and so we have approached this as listeners rather than critics.

It is essential to bear in mind when familiarising yourself with this evaluation. The wide range of projects with different users does not suit a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, but rather to observe and evaluate each project in their own right. We have been keen to learn about how projects actively find people who are in the greatest need and have found real creativity and innovation alongside some tried and tested approaches.

Both the projects and this evaluation began during the later stages of the Coronavirus pandemic. We've seen striking examples of service providers adjusting their programmes to best reach their audiences. We have had a series of phone calls, deep-dive interviews. This communication has informed the creation of the Impact Gallery, a tool for the Trust, grant holders and the evaluation team to refer to, showing what projects are doing and what they are learning in a 'live' setting. We have also run well supported "Food for Thought " monthly networking events that have given projects an opportunity to engage with learning and research about loneliness in armed forces communities as well as the chance to network with our team of evaluators and the AFCFT. We have also engaged with the grant manager and

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<sup>1</sup> QUALTER, P. et al. Tackling loneliness evidence review: main report. DCMS. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-loneliness-evidence-review/tackling-loneliness-evidence-review-full-report#overview>

Impact manager for this programme at the Trust on a fortnightly basis, and the mentors overseeing the projects on a monthly basis.

We are well acquainted with many of the projects through this constant dialogue and are very grateful for the time they have given us to aid our research and particularly for the role they play to prevent and alleviate loneliness in this community.

## About us

To take advantage of this opportunity for learning, three organisations with complementary expertise proposed that we work together. We were delighted to be selected by the Trust to do this work. We are:

**Neighbourly Lab:** Data-driven research and evaluation firm focused on social-isolation and connectedness. We develop and apply evidence of what works for voluntary organisations, local-government and other organisations invested in community-wellbeing.

**Campaign to End Loneliness:** Experts in the field of loneliness and connection - the Campaign develops and shares research, evidence and knowledge to tackle loneliness and bring communities together across the UK.

**The King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), King's College London:** The leading civilian UK centre of excellence for military health research. Its research has provided much-needed evidence on the health and well-being of serving and ex-serving personnel and their families.

## 2. The Problem of Loneliness

In this section, we will explore what loneliness is, its impact and how it is experienced across the armed forces population.

In this section we:

- Define loneliness and understand its health effects.
- Outline the prevalence of loneliness in the armed forces community compared to the general population.
- Outline the risk factors for loneliness for armed forces individuals.
- Outline the protective factors for loneliness for armed forces individuals.

### 2.1 What is loneliness?

Loneliness is “a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have and those that we want”<sup>2</sup>.

More recently loneliness has been described as a significant global public health concern<sup>3</sup> by the UK Government, the World Health Organisation and the US Surgeon General. Loneliness is associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes<sup>4</sup> and increased mortality risk<sup>5</sup>. When loneliness becomes chronic or severe – when someone is lonely over a longer period of time – they will experience difficulties developing satisfying social relationships. This has a serious effect on their quality of life, health and wellbeing<sup>6 7</sup>. For example, research has found that those experiencing chronic loneliness have a six times increased risk of depression<sup>8</sup> and 1.8 times increased mortality risk compared to those who were not lonely<sup>9</sup>.

As well as these health effects, loneliness affects how we think about our social relationships. People use words like anxiety, fear, shame and helplessness to describe how loneliness makes them feel. These powerful emotions can influence how people behave. It can make people wary of social situations or perceive interactions with others more negatively. These feelings can then lead to a downward spiral where people feel deeply lonely but find it hard to reach out. It is this ‘Catch 22’ of loneliness that is why people often need support to get out of loneliness.

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<sup>2</sup> PERLMAN, D. & PEPLAU, L. A. 1981. Toward a social psychology of loneliness. *Personal relationships*, 3, 31-56.

<sup>3</sup> JESTE, D. V., LEE, E. E. & CACIOPPO, S. 2020. Battling the modern behavioral epidemic of loneliness: suggestions for research and interventions. *JAMA psychiatry*, 77, 553-554.

<sup>4</sup> BEUTEL, M. E., KLEIN, E. M., BRÄHLER, E., REINER, I., JÜNGER, C., MICHAL, M., WILTINK, J., WILD, P. S., MÜNZEL, T. & LACKNER, K. J. 2017. Loneliness in the general population: prevalence, determinants and relations to mental health. *BMC psychiatry*, 17, 1-7.

<sup>5</sup> HOLT-LUNSTAD, J., SMITH, T. B., BAKER, M., HARRIS, T. & STEPHENSON, D. 2015. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 10, 227-237.

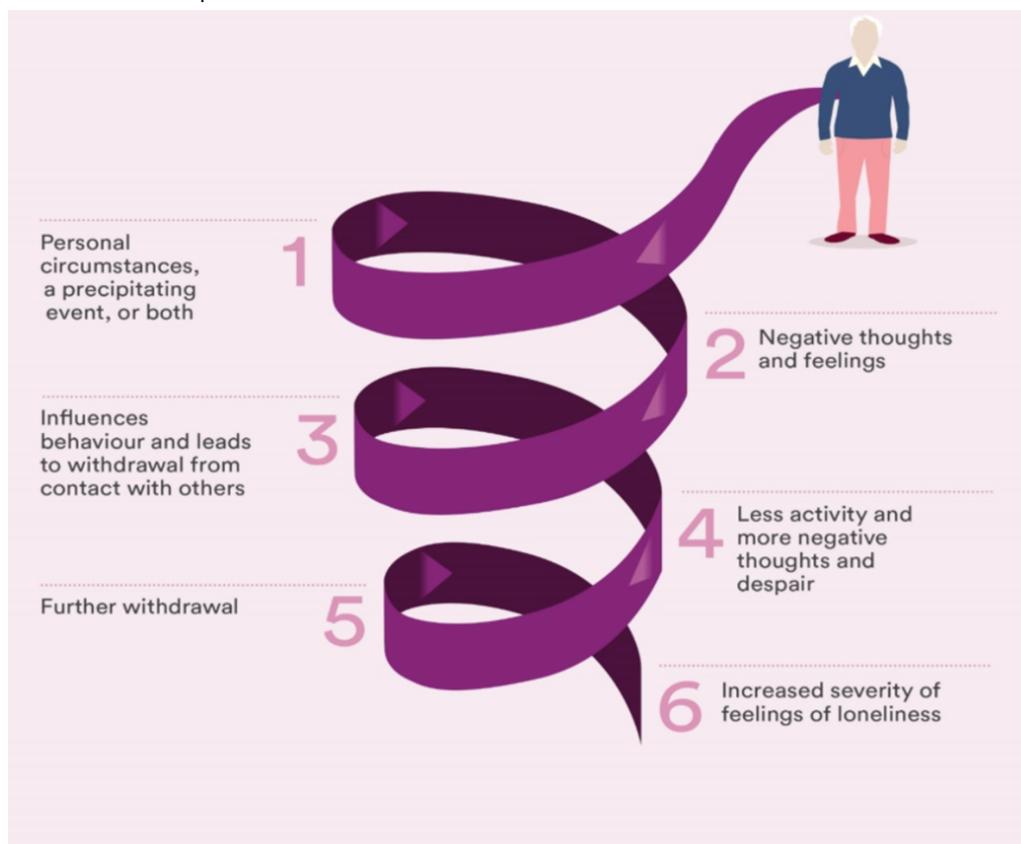
<sup>6</sup> SHIOVITZ-EZRA, S. & AYALON, L. 2010. Situational versus chronic loneliness as risk factors for all-cause mortality. *International psychogeriatrics*, 22, 455-462.

<sup>7</sup> GROARKE, J. M., BERRY, E., GRAHAM-WISENER, L., MCKENNA-PLUMLEY, P. E., MCGLINCHEY, E. & ARMOUR, C. 2020. Loneliness in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional results from the COVID-19 Psychological Wellbeing Study. *PloS one*, 15, e0239698.

<sup>8</sup> MARTÍN-MARÍA, N., CABALLERO, F. F., LARA, E., DOMÉNECH-ABELLA, J., HARO, J. M., OLAYA, B., AYUSO-MATEOS, J. L. & MIRET, M. 2021. Effects of transient and chronic loneliness on major depression in older adults: a longitudinal study. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 36, 76-85.

<sup>9</sup> SHIOVITZ-EZRA, S. et al. 2010. Situational versus chronic loneliness as risk factors for all-cause mortality.

Figure 1: 'Downward Spiral of Loneliness'<sup>10</sup>



A systematic review and meta-analysis of data from 113 countries assessing the prevalence of loneliness globally has demonstrated how loneliness is experienced by a substantial proportion of people. However, risk factors, such as age, have different impacts in various contexts. That means it is important to understand the context of loneliness within countries and within groups<sup>11</sup>.

## 2.2 What does loneliness look like in the armed forces community?

*"Loneliness/social isolation – must be like living under an invisible cape that keeps the lonely from being detected."*

**(Survey respondent, veteran)<sup>12</sup>**

<sup>10</sup> Campaign To End Loneliness. 2020. The Psychology of Loneliness.

<sup>11</sup> SURKALIM, D. L., LUO, M., ERES, R., GEBEL, K., VAN BUSKIRK, J., BAUMAN, A. & DING, D. 2022. The prevalence of loneliness across 113 countries: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *bmj*, 376.

<sup>12</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community. Available: <https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/things-to-do/campaigns-policy-and-research/campaigns/loneliness-and-social-isolation>.

It should be emphasised that the majority of the ex-service (veteran) community do not experience loneliness and most transition well to civilian life after service in the armed forces. Previous research by the Royal British Legion (RBL) found that loneliness can affect those in the armed forces community of all ages<sup>13</sup>. The RBL found that 25% of their sample reported feeling lonely or socially isolated 'always' or 'often'. In a more recent study assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the veteran community, 27% of veterans reported feeling lonely<sup>14</sup>. International research also finds older United States (US) military veterans reported experiencing loneliness sometimes (37.2%) or often (19.7%)<sup>15</sup>. The study also found a dose-response effect where those that reported higher levels of loneliness experienced more severe mental and physical health problems as well as increased suicidal ideation.

There are few studies comparing the prevalence of loneliness in the military and general population groups<sup>16</sup>. Sharp et al. (2021)<sup>17</sup> found that during the first phase of the pandemic, the UK veterans group reported similar or lower levels of loneliness compared to the UK population (27% v 27% (UKHLS Study<sup>18</sup>) v 39% (COVID-19 Social Study<sup>19</sup>). This may be due to protective factors against loneliness such as the majority of the sample having a partner. However, the armed forces community may have specific risk factors or sub-group characteristics that may increase the risk of loneliness in certain groups which may require specific targeting for support and interventions.

We are able to compare the prevalence of armed forces loneliness to the general population by looking at the associative factors and drivers of loneliness for the general population; this is derived from a study that looked at loneliness in a London context, but these findings can be applied nationally when thinking about the associative factors of loneliness.<sup>20</sup>

This study outlined five associative factors for loneliness which can make the general population more at risk of loneliness. The following table displays these general population risk factors and shows the correlation between loneliness in the civilian and armed forces world:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> SHARP, M.-L., SERFIOTI, D., JONES, M., BURDETT, H., PERNET, D., HULL, L., MURPHY, D., WESSELY, S. & FEAR, N. T. 2021. UK veterans' mental health and well-being before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal cohort study. *BMJ open*, 11, e049815.

<sup>15</sup> STRAUS, E., NORMAN, S. B., TRIPP, J. C., TSAI, J., SIPPEL, L. M., JESTE, D. V., SOUTHWICK, S. M. & PIETRZAK, R. H. 2022. Behavioral epidemic of loneliness in older US military veterans: results from the 2019-2020 national health and resilience in veterans study. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 30, 297-310.

<sup>16</sup> WILSON, G., HILL, M. & KIERNAN, M. D. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation of military veterans: systematic narrative review. *Occupational medicine*, 68, 600-609.

<sup>17</sup> SHARP, M.-L., et al. 2021. UK veterans' mental health and well-being before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal cohort study. *BMJ open*, 11, e049815.

<sup>18</sup> GROARKE, J. M., et al. 2020. Loneliness in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional results from the COVID-19 Psychological Wellbeing Study. *PloS one*, 15, e0239698.

<sup>19</sup> BU, F., STEPTOE, A. & FANCOURT, D. 2020. Who is lonely in lockdown? Cross-cohort analyses of predictors of loneliness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Public Health*, 186, 31-34.

<sup>20</sup> GLA. 2022. Reconceptualising Loneliness in London. Available at: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Reconceptualising-Loneliness-Final-for-Pub-29Mar22.pdf>

General population risk factor	Correlation to armed forces experience
 <b>Going through life-changes or being new in a place</b>	<b>Positive correlation</b> , likely to experience transition from service which can fracture social networks.
 <b>Being acutely poor</b>	<b>No correlation.</b>
 <b>Being Single; Living Alone</b>	<b>Negative correlation</b> , higher prevalence of armed forces individuals married or in partnerships.  Watch factor for armed forces personnel <b>who are single or live alone.</b>
 <b>Experiencing Prejudice or “feeling different”</b>	<b>Positive correlation</b> , some sense of feeling different to the civilian population and more barriers to help seeking behaviour though military identity.
 <b>Being disabled or deaf</b>	<b>Positive correlation</b> , increased risk of mental health and physical health problems.

This table shows that armed forces loneliness has three positive correlations towards loneliness which are similar to general population loneliness which include, **going through life changes or being new in a place, experiencing prejudice or “feeling different” and being disabled or deaf**. There is a negative correlation between the risk factors of **being single or living alone** as this cohort has a higher percentage of those married or partners, but services should be mindful to target those that are single and live alone as they could be susceptible to loneliness. These risk factors can be considered strategic determinants for how loneliness provision can be directed towards who is likely to be most at risk.

## 2.3 Armed forces related risk factors regarding loneliness

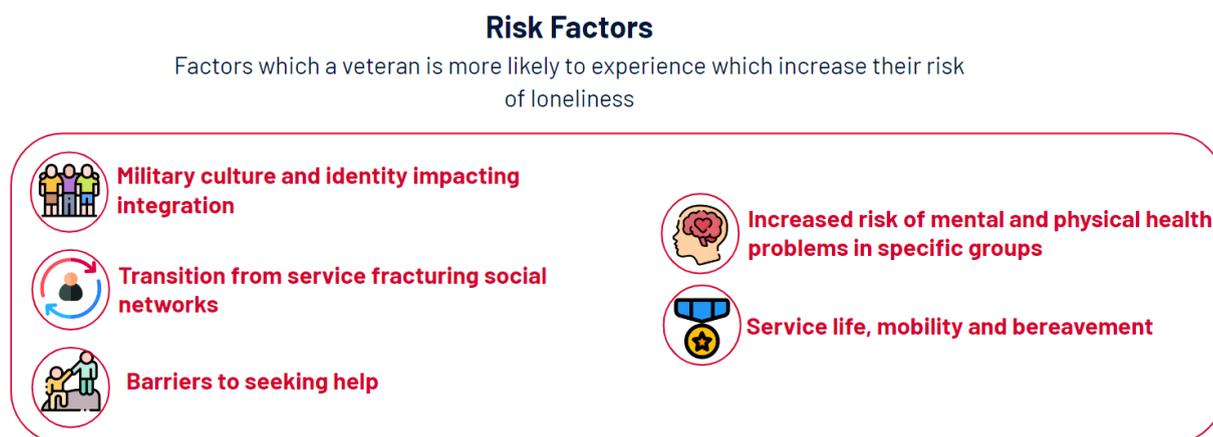
*“I was never alone, I was never isolated without anyone, but I could feel lonely in a crowded room. I could have felt absolutely lonely because at the time there was no one that got me, nobody who understood me and therefore nobody I could talk to about what, you know, things that were playing on my mind...”*

*(Participant 11)<sup>21</sup>*

<sup>21</sup> GUTHRIE-GOWER S, WILSON-MENZFELD G. 2022. Ex-military personnel's experiences of loneliness and social isolation from discharge, through transition, to the present day. PLoS ONE 17(6). 1-17.

In the below diagram, we outline the five risk factors that a veteran is more likely to experience than general population civilians that can make them more susceptible to loneliness. The risk factors in this diagram also take into account the literature which corresponds with these assertions.

Figure 2: Armed forces risk factors



## 1. Military culture and identity impacting integration

*"Being ex-Service we are on a different wavelength to civilians and I have found it difficult to fully reintegrate into society. All my employment has been with companies where there have been ex-Service people to mix with."*

**(Survey respondent, Veteran)<sup>22</sup>**

Military culture and identity create many positive outcomes and meaning for service personnel in creating close social bonds, strong teams, a mission focus and a culture of service to others<sup>23</sup>. Sociological literature also frames the military as a social institution that is 'total' and 'greedy'; making high demands on those that are part of it, and affecting the nature of many social relationships<sup>24 25</sup>.

The result of the all consuming nature of the armed forces is that they can struggle with integrating into civilian life and creating new social networks in civilian life which can impact

<sup>22</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community.

<sup>23</sup> DANDEKER, C. 2021. On 'the need to be different': recent trends in military culture. *The British Army, manpower and society into the twenty-first century*, 173-187.

<sup>24</sup> SEGAL, M. W. 1986. The military and the family as greedy institutions. *Armed forces & society*, 13, 9-38.

<sup>25</sup> DANDEKER, C., WESSELY, S., IVERSEN, A. & ROSS, J. 2003. Improving the delivery of cross departmental support and services for veterans: A joint report of the Department of War Studies and the Institute of Psychiatry, Kings College London.

loneliness. Hatch et al. (2013)<sup>26</sup> showed in a large study of UK service and ex-service personnel, that ex-Service personnel reported less social participation outside work and general disengagement with military social contacts, in comparison to service personnel. They also found that ex-service personnel were more likely to report Common Mental Health Disorders (CMD) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms compared to service personnel. These symptoms were concurrently associated with participation in fewer social activities and maintaining a smaller social network.

## 2. Transition from service fracturing social network

*"...it's an enormous wrench leaving that family that is the army that is the regiment, the company, the squadron whatever it might be. They're dumped in the big wide world and it's a pretty soulless place really."*

**(Participant 07)<sup>27</sup>**

Transitions in life are big risk factors for feeling lonely, for example moving to a new area, going to university or retiring from work<sup>28 29</sup>. An important transition service personnel experience with their families is that of transition to civilian life after leaving service. The RBL study found that 65% of veterans reported that exiting the armed forces caused them to feel lonely and/or socially isolated<sup>30</sup>. Dandeker et al. (2003), highlighted how on leaving service, the loss of social embeddedness and group cohesion is hard to cope with. This hampers transition and reintegration into civilian life<sup>31</sup>. This transition may be even more difficult for service personnel and families to deal with when the transition has been unexpected or unwanted because of injury or illness.

Smith and True (2014)<sup>32</sup> discuss the concept of 'warring identities' that veterans experience on leaving the armed forces. From their qualitative research, they discuss how veterans can experience an identity conflict on leaving service, which creates mental stress in those who find it difficult to reconcile their soldier and their civilian identities. They describe how veterans often use a coping strategy of withdrawing themselves socially to reassert a sense of control over their transition to civilian life. This limits their opportunities for social support. Additionally, some veterans have reported feeling alienated from civilians, who they feel may

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<sup>26</sup> HATCH, S. L., HARVEY, S. B., DANDEKER, C., BURDETT, H., GREENBERG, N., FEAR, N. T. & WESSELY, S. 2013. Life in and after the Armed Forces: social networks and mental health in the UK military. *Sociology of health & illness*, 35, 1045-1064.

<sup>27</sup> GUTHRIE-GOWER S, WILSON-MENZFELD G. 2022. Ex-military personnel's experiences of loneliness and social isolation from discharge, through transition, to the present day. *PLoS ONE* 17(6). 1-17.

<sup>28</sup> VASILEIOU, K., BARNETT, J., BARRETO, M., VINES, J., ATKINSON, M., LONG, K., BAKEWELL, L., LAWSON, S. & WILSON, M. 2019. Coping with loneliness at University: A qualitative interview study with students in the UK. *Mental Health & Prevention*, 13, 21-30.

<sup>29</sup> SEGEL-KARPAS, D., AYALON, L. & LACHMAN, M. E. 2018. Loneliness and depressive symptoms: The moderating role of the transition into retirement. *Aging & Mental Health*, 22, 135-140.

<sup>30</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community.

<sup>31</sup> DANDEKER, C., et al. 2003. Improving the delivery of cross departmental support and services for veterans

<sup>32</sup> SMITH, R. T. & TRUE, G. 2014. Warring identities: Identity conflict and the mental distress of American veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Society and mental Health*, 4, 147-161.

not understand service life, or may feel negatively stereotyped, and can feel frustrated at the way civilian life and employment are different to service life<sup>33 34</sup>.

### 3. Service life, mobility and bereavement

*"Each separation is like a bereavement. Lots of things change...they have to come back into the family and make all those connections again."*

**(Army Welfare Officer)<sup>35</sup>**

Serving in the armed forces means that service personnel and their families experience many relocations. 42% of responders to the UK tri-service families continuous attitudes survey in 2021 reported they had relocated twice in the last five years for service reasons<sup>36</sup>. Each relocation is disruptive for relationships and particularly for those of spouses/partners and children, who may need to find new employment and enrol in new schools respectively. Half of the respondents to the RBL survey reported feeling lonely due to relocations<sup>37</sup>. UK armed forces families' research found relocations to be a key factor in military spouses isolation and disconnection in relationships<sup>38</sup>.

Armed forces families experience many periods of separation, whether that is because of service personnel deployments or time spent training elsewhere in the UK or abroad. There are practices known as 'weekending', where the serving member will work elsewhere in the week, returning home only for the weekend to their family. Both the serving member and their families can feel lonely due to these separations. The absence of the military partner is found to have a negative effect on the health and wellbeing of armed forces families<sup>39 40</sup>, with military children reporting this 'lack of contact' to be the worst aspect of their father's job in the military<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> AHERN, J., WORTHEN, M., MASTERS, J., LIPPMAN, S. A., OZER, E. J. & MOOS, R. 2015. The challenges of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans' transition from military to civilian life and approaches to reconnection. *PloS one*, 10, e0128599.

<sup>34</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> UK Tri-Service Families Continuous Attitudes Survey 2021 - accessed: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1004856/Tri-Service\\_Families\\_s\\_Continuous\\_Attitude\\_Survey\\_2021\\_Main\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1004856/Tri-Service_Families_s_Continuous_Attitude_Survey_2021_Main_Report.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community.

<sup>38</sup> GRIBBLE, R. 2017. *What's it like to have a partner in the UK Armed Forces? Influences on the mental health and well-being of women.* Doctoral dissertation, King's College London.

<sup>39</sup> GRIBBLE, R. J. & FEAR, N. T. 2019. The effect of non-operational family separations on family functioning and well-being among Royal Navy/Royal Marines families.

<sup>40</sup> STEIN, J. Y. 2017. The veteran's loneliness: emergence, facets and implications for intervention. *Psychology of Loneliness: New Research*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 1-36.

<sup>41</sup> JAIN, V., STEVELINK, S. & FEAR, N. T. 2017. What are the best and worst things about having a father in UK Armed Forces? Analysis of free text responses. *BMJ Military Health*, 163, 115-118.

Finally, the experience of service-related bereavement can impact military spouses and children profoundly. They experience multiple losses beyond losing their loved one - they may also lose accommodation, military identity and the military community. These compounded losses can have severe impacts on bereaved individuals loneliness, isolation and a sense of disenfranchisement<sup>42</sup>.

#### 4. Increased risk of mental and physical health conditions

*"In my own case the sudden loss of camaraderie after medical discharge was difficult to cope with."*

**(Survey respondent, veteran)<sup>43</sup>**

Whilst the majority of individuals are well in the armed forces community, there are specific groups that may be more at risk of mental and physical health conditions and it is particularly individuals with these conditions that can feel loneliness more acutely<sup>44 45</sup>. CMDs are the most prevalent in the armed forces at 22%, alcohol misuse 10% and PTSD at 6%, which are higher than equivalent general population levels<sup>46</sup>. PTSD and CMD rise to 17% and 30% respectively in those who have left service and were combat arms (those in roles in direct tactical ground combat, such as the infantry). Those discharged from the UK armed forces for medical reasons, were most likely to be discharged for musculoskeletal problems<sup>47</sup> and may experience this and other sensory conditions at higher levels than the UK general population<sup>48</sup>. In the RBL survey, 40% of the sample reported feeling lonely due to their injury, illness or disability<sup>49</sup>.

Research has identified that military caregivers such as spouses of injured or ill service personnel or veterans may experience significant distress and experience difficulties in integration to civilian communities due to their care-giving responsibilities<sup>50</sup>. Children of military fathers with PTSD may also experience behavioural and emotional difficulties. Hence specific groups within the armed forces may be at higher risk of loneliness by way of mental and physical health conditions.

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<sup>42</sup> COZZA, S. J., HARRINGTON-LAMORIE, J. & FISHER, J. E. 2019. US military service deaths: Bereavement in surviving families. *Life of military families, national guardsmen and reservists, and veterans*, 411-425.

<sup>43</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community.

<sup>44</sup> WILSON, G., HILL, M. & KIERNAN, M. D. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation of military veterans: systematic narrative review. *Occupational medicine*, 68, 600-609.

<sup>45</sup> WANG, J., MANN, F., LLOYD-EVANS, B., MA, R. & JOHNSON, S. 2018. Associations between loneliness and perceived social support and outcomes of mental health problems: a systematic review. *BMC psychiatry*, 18, 1-16.

<sup>46</sup> STEVELINK, S. A., JONES, M., HULL, L., PERNET, D., MACCRIMMON, S., GOODWIN, L., MACMANUS, D., MURPHY, D., JONES, N. & GREENBERG, N. 2018. Mental health outcomes at the end of the British involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts: a cohort study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 213, 690-697.

<sup>47</sup> WILLIAMSON, V., DIEHLE, J., DUNN, R., JONES, N. & GREENBERG, N. 2019. The impact of military service on health and well-being. *Occupational Medicine*, 69, 64-70

<sup>48</sup> Royal British Legion. 2014. A UK household survey of the ex-service community.

<sup>49</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community.

<sup>50</sup> THANDI, G., ORAM, S., VEREY, A., GREENBERG, N. & FEAR, N. 2017. Informal caregiving and intimate relationships: the experiences of spouses of UK military personnel. *BMJ Military Health*, 163, 266-272.

## 5. Barriers to seeking help

*"In the Army loneliness is seen as a personal weakness. I had an old school para as my Staff Sergeant. His idea of sorting you out was to do some more press ups."*

**(Recent leaver, Army)<sup>51</sup>**

Armed forces members may experience barriers to seeking help for their mental health due to many different factors which may also influence their help-seeking in relation to loneliness. These barriers can include the preference to 'solve the problem alone' or attitudes of self-reliance, poor recognition of the need for treatment, the stigma of asking for help, feeling others deserve help more, or not knowing where to get support<sup>52 53</sup>.

### Additional Risk Factors

Armed forces individuals are also more likely to experience some additional risk factors which although prevalent may not be as far reaching as the core risk factors.

#### 1. Demographic risk factors

The armed forces community may also experience loneliness for similar reasons to the general population. Some of these risk factors may include age, with both younger and older generations experiencing loneliness, women, LGBTQ+ and ethnic minorities<sup>54 55</sup>. However, there may be additional factors impacting the armed forces with regards to historical hurt and marginalisation experienced by LGBTQ+ communities who served in the armed forces who were not allowed to serve openly until 2000, with many discharged before this point as a direct result of their sexual orientation<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Royal British Legion. 2018. Loneliness and social isolation in the armed forces community.

<sup>52</sup> RAFFERTY, L. A., WESSELY, S., STEVELINK, S. A. & GREENBERG, N. 2019. The journey to professional mental health support: a qualitative exploration of the barriers and facilitators impacting military veterans' engagement with mental health treatment. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 10, 1700613.

<sup>53</sup> SHARP, M.-L., FEAR, N. T., RONA, R. J., WESSELY, S., GREENBERG, N., JONES, N. & GOODWIN, L. 2015. Stigma as a barrier to seeking health care among military personnel with mental health problems. *Epidemiologic reviews*, 37, 144-162.

<sup>54</sup> VICTOR, C. R. & YANG, K. 2012. The prevalence of loneliness among adults: a case study of the United Kingdom. *The Journal of psychology*, 146, 85-104.

<sup>55</sup> ELMER, E. M., VAN TILBURG, T. & FOKKEMA, T. 2022. Minority Stress and Loneliness in a Global Sample of Sexual Minority Adults: The Roles of Social Anxiety, Social Inhibition, and Community Involvement. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 1-30.

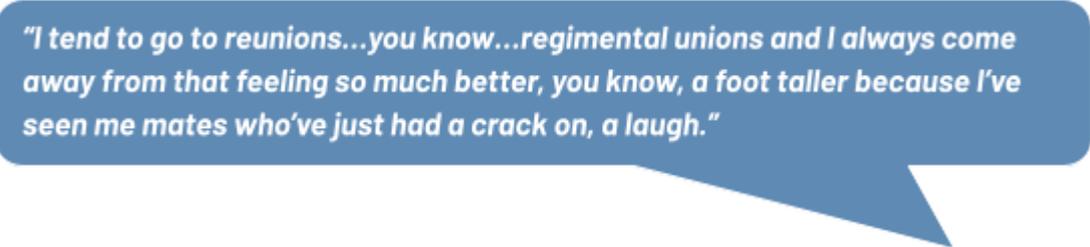
<sup>56</sup> MARK, K. M., MCNAMARA, K. A., GRIBBLE, R., RHEAD, R., SHARP, M.-L., STEVELINK, S. A., SCHWARTZ, A., CASTRO, C. & FEAR, N. T. 2019. The health and well-being of LGBTQ serving and ex-serving personnel: a narrative review. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 31, 75-94.

Women who have served in the armed forces may experience risks of loneliness due to factors that cause marginalisation during or after leaving service. These factors can include experiences of bullying/harassment or sexual assault in service<sup>57</sup>, or issues such as the provision of health and social care support that is often framed or directed towards the needs of male veterans rather than women<sup>58</sup>. Other issues may impact minority groups with regard to loneliness such as the experiences of UK Commonwealth soldiers and particularly Ghurka communities who were given settlement rights in the UK in 2009 but may face challenges of integration into broader UK communities or feel a loss of cultural capital with resettlement.

## 2. Covid-19 Risk Factors

The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted individuals' loneliness with younger adults, women, those on low income, those economically inactive and those with mental health problems as being the most at risk of experiencing loneliness<sup>59</sup>. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the veteran community most likely to report loneliness were those who were living alone, health and social care key workers, those with children, those with caring responsibilities and those experiencing difficulties with family or social relationships<sup>60</sup>.

### 2.4 Armed forces protective factors against loneliness



*"I tend to go to reunions...you know...regimental unions and I always come away from that feeling so much better, you know, a foot taller because I've seen me mates who've just had a crack on, a laugh."*

**(Participant 01)<sup>61</sup>**

Though members of the armed forces can be susceptible to loneliness which we have conveyed through the risk factors, this cohort does have a unique range of protective factors that can protect them against loneliness or lessen their experiences of loneliness. There are three of these protective factors which we display below:

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<sup>57</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee. 2021. Protecting those who protect us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life.

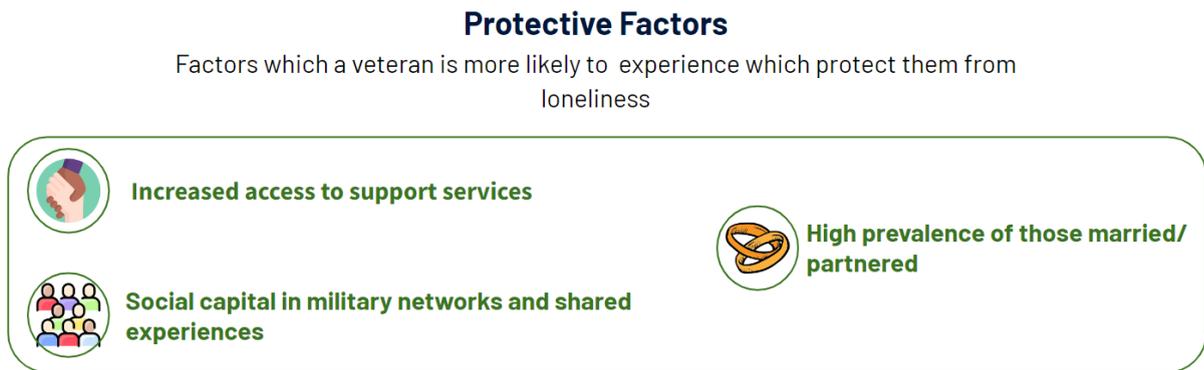
<sup>58</sup> GODIER-MCBARD, L. R., GILLIN, N. & FOSSEY, M. J. 2022. 'Treat everyone like they're a man': Stakeholder perspectives on the provision of health and social care support for female veterans in the UK. *Health & Social Care in the Community*.

<sup>59</sup> GROARKE, J. M., et al. 2020. Loneliness in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cross-sectional results from the COVID-19 Psychological Wellbeing Study. *PLoS one*, 15, e0239698.

<sup>60</sup> SHARP, M.-L., et al. 2021. UK veterans' mental health and well-being before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal cohort study. *BMJ open*, 11, e049815.

<sup>61</sup> GUTHRIE-GOWER S, WILSON-MENZFELD G. 2022. Ex-military personnel's experiences of loneliness and social isolation from discharge, through transition, to the present day. *PLoS ONE* 17(6). 1-17.

Figure 3: Armed forces protective factors regarding loneliness



### 1. Increased access to support services

There are many positive factors that may protect the armed forces community from loneliness or facilitate networks of support and access to services. UK veterans have many schemes, services, and membership opportunities available to them compared to the general population through the armed forces charitable sector that in 2020 comprised of 1843 charities with 33% of these charities being association branches where membership is often tied to regiments<sup>62</sup>.

### 2. Social capital in military networks and military experiences

There is huge potential in these shared networks, where veterans can join knowing that some shared experiences of military life and service will be common. There is also good provision and access to support services. For example, the Veterans Gateway has been instituted to triage the armed forces community to different charities and schemes<sup>63</sup>. Finally, there are veteran specific pathways to mental health treatment through veteran specific NHS pathways, for example, Op Courage in England<sup>64</sup>. Hence compared to the general population, this supportive network, with like minded people and with many resources having been put into helping the armed forces community navigate this support, there may be many advantages in tackling loneliness in this community. The main challenges faced may be where there are hard-to-reach groups who do not feel this affiliation to the armed forces or have been alienated by their service experiences.

### 3. High prevalence of those married or with partners

Research has found that UK military personnel were more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced compared with the general population of England and Wales. The higher proportion

<sup>62</sup> COLE, S., ROBSON, A., DOHERTY, R. 2020. Sector Insight: Armed Forces Charities. Directory of Social Change.

<sup>63</sup> Please see: <https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk>

<sup>64</sup> Please see: <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/armed-forces-community/mental-health/veterans-reservists/>

of marriage in the military was most notable in the 18 to 29 years group<sup>65</sup>. Being married is found to be protective against loneliness in UK research<sup>66</sup> and hence this demographic factor may be protective in UK veteran groups.

## 2.5 Reflection

The armed forces community has specific needs and experiences that may place them at a greater risk of loneliness. However, the veteran community also possesses excellent social capital and networks which may provide robust structures for loneliness support interventions to thrive. Our evaluation of loneliness projects will test the reality of experiences of organisations in engaging the lonely armed forces community and present both the success and challenges of these projects.

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<sup>65</sup> KEELING, M., WESSELY, S. & FEAR, N. T. 2017. Marital status distribution of the UK military: Does it differ from the general population? *Military Behavioral Health*, 5, 26-34.

<sup>66</sup> VICTOR, C. R. & YANG, K. 2012. The prevalence of loneliness among adults: a case study of the United Kingdom. *The Journal of psychology*, 146, 85-104.

### 3. What works to tackle loneliness amongst the armed forces community

In this section, we present our learning on what works to tackle loneliness in the armed forces community. This perspective comes from our privileged position of being able to “see under the bonnet” of these 60 projects as well as our wider expertise in understanding how to tackle loneliness. Of course, any broad perspective like this needs to be prefaced with the big caveat that loneliness is a complicated issue and while research has dramatically moved forward over the last decade, there is still a lot we do not know.

Loneliness is experienced subjectively, uniquely and is tangled up with other needs and emotions. Interventions to prevent or alleviate loneliness can never be “one size fits all” and always and necessarily include intangible relational factors of care, love, courage and perseverance.

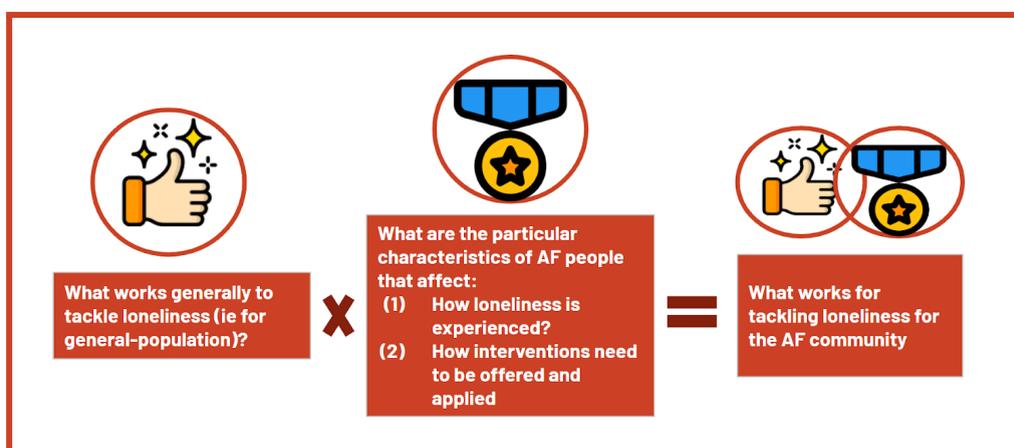
In this section we:

- Recap on what’s particular about armed forces communities when it comes to loneliness.
- Distinguish between two broad groups based on their need for support.
- What each cohort requires to alleviate loneliness.
- The ‘ideal ecosystem for help’ to tackle loneliness for the armed forces community.

#### 3.1 What’s particular about armed forces people when it comes to loneliness

In getting to this viewpoint on what works for tackling loneliness in this community, let’s use the following logic:

Figure 4: What works for tackling loneliness in the armed forces community



The factors that make the two questions in the middle of the diagram were addressed in chapter 2.

## Differing support needs

Of course loneliness is experienced differently by people. There are roughly 10 million people in the armed forces community<sup>67</sup> each with different lives and experiences and outlooks. Potentially at any time about half of these people could be feeling occasional loneliness, and about 10% of them will be experiencing chronic loneliness. Given the size and variety of this group of people, and the ways in which loneliness shows up in all our lives, there are obviously many ways of looking at how loneliness manifests and what we need to help us in alleviating it.

The way we've chosen to look at armed forces loneliness is to break down the group into two sections - based on the extent to which their needs are best met in mainstream settings or armed forces-specific settings.

1. Armed forces people who are most likely to benefit from finding help in mainstream services
2. Armed forces people with more complex needs, and whose needs are best met in armed forces-specific settings due to having more complex needs, or a stronger desire to have services that reflect their armed forces identity.

There are probably more people in the first group than the second. Below are two short vignettes of two different stories and situations - these are hypothetical people based on our work.

Figure 5: Two distinguishable cohorts vignettes



<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Defence. 2019. The Armed Forces Covenant.

It's important to separate these two cohorts and treat them differently. The table below shows why this is so integral.

Service	Value of this service
Civilian services that work well for armed forces communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gives the opportunity to build wider social-capital that can enable friendships and economic-mobility.</li> <li>● Harder to assume other roles and identities alongside being a veteran (e.g. parent, professional, neighbour etc).</li> <li>● A wider range of options in any given area.</li> </ul>
armed forces people who can't/won't access mainstream services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Severe and complex needs are met because they require specialist help.</li> <li>● People seek help because of mistrust of mainstream services or perhaps because of a strong preference for armed forces-specific settings.</li> <li>● Fewer concerns about being misunderstood or feeling that they are not surrounded by like minded people.</li> </ul>

## 3.2 What works to help the majority of armed forces people

### **Support to access civilian services**

The useful services for this cohort are those that bridge the civilian and armed forces world. Some of this support is emotional and psychological which encourages armed forces communities to see the capacity and opportunities available to them and their family to thrive in civilian life.

This support can be offered through:

- Adaption - The altering of mainstream support services to suit the specific needs of armed forces communities so that they can feel more easily understood and eased into the service.
- Side doors and "On-Ramps" - Providing a different entrance for veterans to access mainstream services like NHS OpCourage. This builds confidence and support for veterans to feel like their support is specialised to them.
- A capacity building or skills-training programme to foster a growth mindset and build the capacity of beneficiaries to adapt to transitions.

During our evaluation, we saw outstanding examples of creativity and ingenuity here in the programmes that AFCFT funded to offer this support.

**Kent Coast Volunteering: Have provided a community centre for Gurkha Veterans. To encourage beneficiaries to access the service and to open up, they have employed someone who is from a Gurkha veteran family so they really understand the needs and experiences of the beneficiaries.**



(Project beneficiaries taking part in bingo)

**Sharks Community Trust: Invite their veteran beneficiaries to match day engagements, to provide them with a fun and exciting day out so that they can meet other non-veteran beneficiaries.**



(Beneficiaries and project lead together)

## **Maintain and widen access to armed forces support networks**

Services that deliberately maintain and widen access to the array of armed forces services and that are available to armed forces people as-and-when they want or need to access those services. This is a network of organisations where you can be assured of a welcome by like-minded people who share your values and experiences and humour. The closest equivalents outside the armed forces are membership organisations like Rotary or Lions, or shared-past organisations like university-alumni networks.

It is important that these organisations offer a wide welcome to everybody from the armed forces community. Reflecting the priorities of this programme, they should especially ensure that support reaches outside of the traditional veteran type and extends to more marginalised and minority groups within the armed forces community. This includes women, minority ethnic and LGBT+ veterans. We saw some fantastic work being done by projects on this grant

including The LGBT Foundation, CAN International and Dig In, but there's much more to achieve here to ensure that these projects can be an environment for everyone to enjoy.

## **Do more upstream to prepare for civilian-life loneliness**

We also heard a demand for more innovation in how armed forces people are prepared for life post-service. There could or should be more services for currently-serving personnel. In order to get serving personnel prepared and positively-excited about life outside the military. This could be done through more exposure and desensitisation of life outside of the military, or deliberate efforts to widen serving personnell's social-capital ahead of transition. We also think this comes from a strength and asset based approach in which serving personnel are made aware of how their brilliant skills in the military can transfer to their civilian life.

## **Normalising and destigmatising loneliness**

Efforts to convey a new narrative about loneliness for the armed forces community. This comes through normalising and de-stigmatising loneliness and mental health ahead of leaving service. It is about making individuals know that loneliness is a commonly occurring problem and one which they could experience (obviously to varying degrees). Through this approach, serving personnel can feel more comfortable accessing support and are prepared for the inevitable transition out of the military and the emotions that may come along with that.

## **3.3 Specialist services for the armed forces community**

Specialist services can address both complex and specific needs as well as creating opportunities for connection in a specifically military environment that people value. Specialist services are strikingly good. The limiting factor for them is reach and access. These limiting factors occur because of an inherent difficulty, that the people most in need of help are likely to be those who are hardest to reach or most resistant to accepting help. The focus for these organisations and for the ecosystems in which they operate is to ensure that nobody's needs go unmet.

There are many great service-providers already who provide support for this cohort and who cater to the limiting factors that they might encounter. Below are two examples:

**Venture Trust: They provide a three stage wilderness programme in a veteran only environment to support veterans that are going through complex needs.**



(Venture Trust expedition photo)

**The Tackling Loneliness programme addresses social isolation by targeting specific groups within the armed forces community who are traditionally harder to reach. We are doing this via We Are Invictus, a free online community platform that connects Wounded, Injured and Sick service personnel and veterans. The platform provides peer to peer support and opportunities to recover through sports, esports, and adventurous challenges.**



(We Are Invictus Beneficiary photo)

## Examples of innovation and best-practice in reach

### Through more collaboration:

Through collaborating, organisations can become more joined-up in their referrals meaning that people get the right support from the right organisation. We heard examples of how organisations receive referrals from others in their ecosystem and also how they can connect people to others. This is a much better approach than competing with one another to support the greatest number of beneficiaries.

Organisations should join networks to foster collaboration and joint-learning. This can be facilitated by forward-thinking funders like the AFCFT who are essential to this joined up approach to delivery. There is more that funders can do for example by encouraging collaboration as projects apply for funding so they combine their complementary strengths to deliver services. If the armed forces community is more joined up then their combined strength has a greater capacity to support more veterans who are in need.

## Through innovation in the design principles of loneliness services:

We have developed a **design principles toolkit** which outlines the mechanisms that projects can put into place to support lonely veterans who would benefit from support in an armed forces specific environment.

The two distinct approaches by which projects can put these recommendations in place are through:

1. Reach - this is a project's ability to target and be clear on the beneficiaries they wanted to support. Projects have the ability to maximise their reach and make services easy to access.
2. Service design - this is the way in which a project is developed and run to support veterans who are experiencing isolation and helps them to alleviate it.

Briefly, the recommendations in this toolkit for **reach** are:

### What works **to reach** lonely people in the AF community

From our research the **three key mechanisms** we have identified which when implemented can ensure maximum reach to lonely members of the Armed Forces Community are:

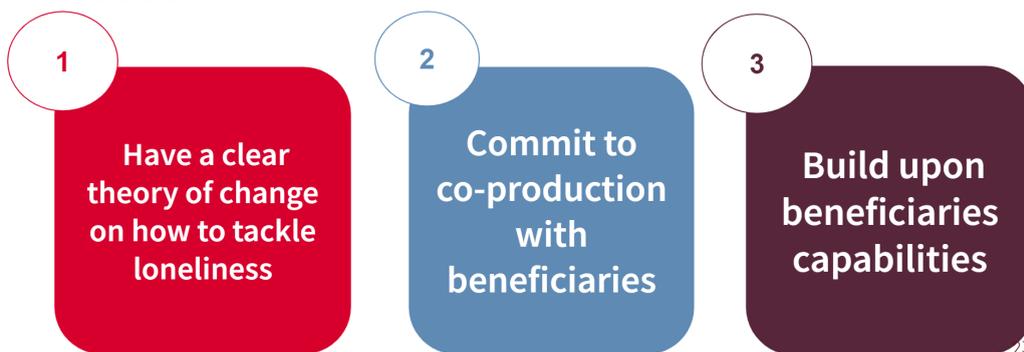


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Briefly the recommendations in this toolkit for **service design** are:

### What works in **service design** to support lonely people in the AF community

From our research the **three key mechanisms** we have identified which when implemented can ensure that projects are most effective when seeking to tackle AF loneliness are:



If these mechanisms are implemented projects can have the maximum opportunity to discover what works for them to tackle loneliness within armed forces communities. We acknowledge that not all of these recommendations can be implemented nor can they suit every project. We also acknowledge that as loneliness is a subjective feeling it is not experienced in the same way by everyone so projects have to be mindful of the varying degrees of loneliness within veteran populations.

## 3.4 The ideal ecosystem for help to tackle loneliness for the armed forces community

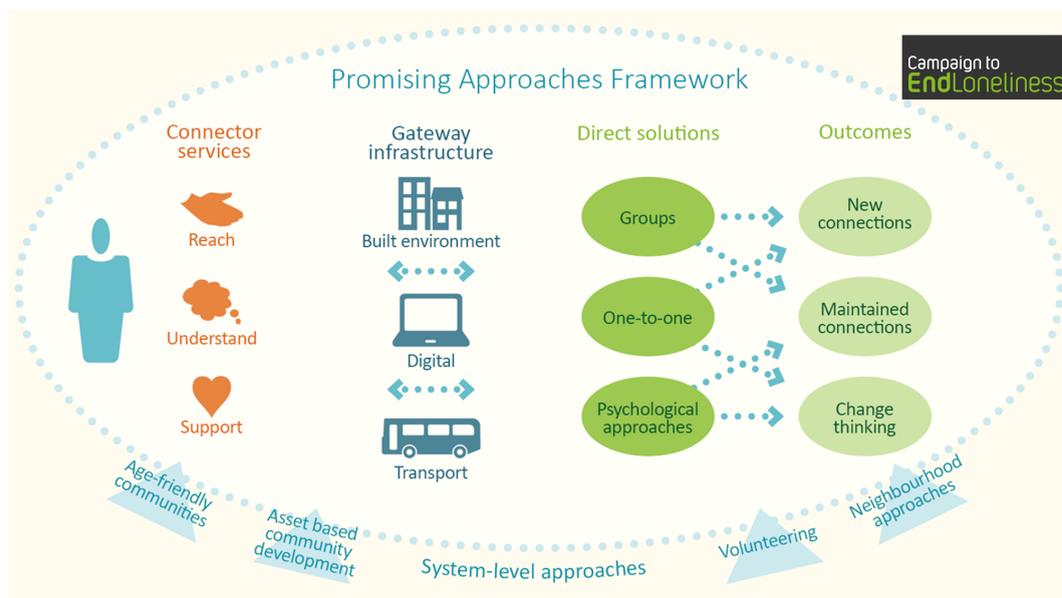
The Campaign to End Loneliness has set out a framework for how to tackle loneliness from the point of view of someone who is lonely - or at high risk. They first need to be reached by services and there is then a process of understanding their needs and supporting them to do what they need to do to tackle their loneliness.

There are then more whole-population issues or approaches that can either support people to connect - or get in the way if they are not provided in the right way. Digital access, transport and a built environment with places to provide connection and belonging are all part of this. Finally, there are direct solutions such as social groups, one-to-one support such as befriending and dedicated psychological support.

Most of the grantees provided direct solutions, particularly in groups. Organisations providing intense one to one support were often a kind of mix of individual support while taking a very

psychologically informed approach. Armed forces focused services do not need to be providing all of these elements - particularly the gateway infrastructure. However, these are an important part of the solution and we found grantees connecting to these services so that people could get what they need. Similarly, we saw grantees partnering with others organisations in the community to find their beneficiaries, which is a vital link in the chain.

Figure 6: Promising Approaches Framework



### 3.5 Reflection

Defining ‘what works’ to help tackle loneliness within the armed forces community is inherently complex, especially as loneliness is a subjective feeling that is felt differently from person to person. Through our evaluation, we have seen many brilliant examples of ways to tackle loneliness which has led us to suggest ‘what works’ to tackle loneliness within this community both within an armed forces specific setting and a more mainstream support setting.

## 4. Overview of the 60 Projects

The projects on this grant were diverse in terms of their project approach, location and level of support that they were offering. This diversity enabled them to reach a broad spectrum of the veteran population all with varying needs of support. It is clear that there is no one size fits all approach for tackling loneliness amongst the veteran population and so offering a range of support is integral.

In this section we:

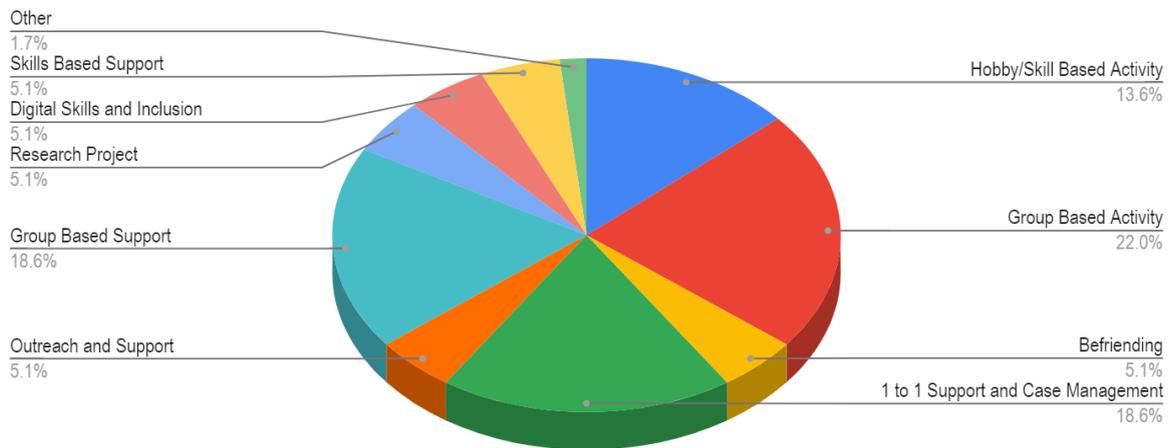
- Present a breakdown of the split between project types to identify concentration and gaps.
- Present a breakdown of the regional split between projects to identify concentration and gaps in terms of region by region support.
- Provide a general and high level overview of all 60 grants grouped up by project type.

### 4.1 Breakdown of project types across the 60

Below is a visual summary of the project activity types on offer. From these pie charts, we see that group based activities and group based support were the most common project type, and they offered a brilliant opportunity for veterans to come together and build that sense of camaraderie to support one another out of loneliness. For more specialised support against tackling severe loneliness, there were also opportunities for befriending, 1 to 1 support/case management and skills based support (which supports life management). What was less common, but particularly valuable to those who needed it was digital skills and inclusion, and research projects, which sought to use evidence to provide support to those who may have trouble accessing support or to gain knowledge on how to tackle loneliness.

This pie chart shows the real range of support on offer which catered to the needs of those on both ends of the loneliness spectrum; those that were experiencing severe and chronic loneliness, and those that were perhaps not particularly lonely but missed the military environment and wanted to experience that camaraderie again.

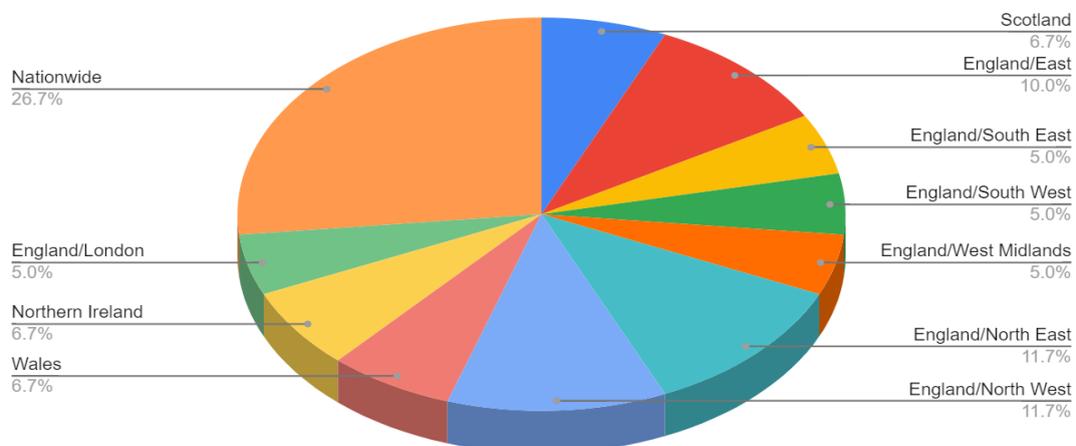
Figure 7: Breakdown of project types across the 60



## 4.2 Breakdown of project regions across the 60

The projects were spread across all four nations of the United Kingdom. Project areas were most often located nationwide meaning they were widely accessible for veterans to access both virtually and in person. There was also a wide range of choices across the nation in more local areas so veterans could access support closer to them and meet with fellow beneficiaries who live nearby. Although the majority of these projects were located in a specified area, support was often offered in a hybrid format so that more veterans could access support, which was especially beneficial for those who were severely lonely and preferred to access support at home.

Figure 8: Breakdown of projects by region across the 60



## 4.3 High level description of the 60 projects

We have broken down the projects into ten different project approach types. As well as breaking the project types down by region. In giving such an overview this allows us to see what areas or sector types received more or less support, showing the gaps which could be filled for future funding which we will lay out in section five.

### Project Types:



Hobby/Skill Based Activity - Skill based hobbies that anyone interested can do, and that can often create a tangible output.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Blind Veterans UK	National Creative Project	UK Wide	Bringing together veterans suffering from sight loss through creative projects delivered to their homes. Creative projects include woodwork, artwork, gardening and creative writing.
Brooke House	Reaching Out	Northern Ireland	Model making lessons mixed with chill and chat sessions for veterans in Northern Ireland
Curzon Ashton	Plot to Plate	England/North West	A series of 10 week horticulture courses for veterans based out of a quiet and private garden centre plot; with the final aim of the veterans eating what they grow.
Dig In	Bloomin Marvellous	England/North West	A project held on council land for veterans to come together to learn about gardening and woodworking. Project is aimed at all veterans with a specific aim to reach out to LGB+ veterans and build an inclusive environment.
Veterans Living History Museum CIC	We Are In This Together	England/North West	Bringing twelve civilians and veterans together to build a motorbike to drive over to Normandy to replicate the journey of the last dispatch rider during the D Day landings.
Waterloo Uncovered	Battling Loneliness: From Combat to	UK Wide	An online academic course for veterans to learn about archaeology alongside a mixture of civilians and veterans. Upon

	Calm		completion of the course students receive an accreditation from the University of Utrecht and have connected with others who are interested in archaeology.
DMWS North Devon	Stronger Together - Leave Loneliness Behind	England/South West	A craft project and social group for veterans and family members living in rural parts of North Devon.
The VC Gallery	Naafi Break and Beyond	Wales	Weekly informal Naafi breaks for veterans where they can get involved in whatever they want including, art, poetry, photography classes, or sitting around having a coffee.



Group Based Activity - An activity that beneficiaries can do together that relates to an activity that is social.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Nottingham Forest Community Trust	Forest Forces Tackling Loneliness Together	England/East	Delivering group activities like sports, arts and environmental projects under the umbrella of the Nottingham Forest brand for all veterans living in Nottingham.
Derbyshire Alcohol Advice Service	DAAS - Stand To Connect	England/East	Reaching out to veterans that are experiencing alcohol dependencies and aren't engaged in other support services. Veterans are invited to join the Connect Platform which gets veterans involved in group activities.
Hull FC	Part of the Team	England/North East	Delivering an array of social activities for veterans at their Hull FC facilities. Main activities include weekly coffee mornings but this expands to wheelchair rugby, walking football and match day engagements.
Shark's Community Trust	Connect	England/North West	Offering a diverse weekly timetable of group activities including veterans coffee hubs, gardening and match day engagement under the umbrella of the Sale Sharks brand.

Carterton Family Centre	Tea Time Club	England/South East	A weekly afterschool tea time club for single parents and deployed families. Hosting activities and fun events for the children as well as a hot dinner for all.
RAF Wittering - Airplay Youth Support	Something For Everyone	England/East	Providing fun activities for serving personnel and families on the RAF base.
Age UK Solihull	Linking Veterans Together	England/West Midlands	Reaching out to veterans to join the Age UK network and join in on veteran and non-veterans specific activities taking place at the centre.
Age UK Wakefield District	Connecting Forces	England/North East	Building their network to get more veteran referrals into Age UK and bring them into Age UK services like breakfast clubs and drop in centres.
The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association	SSAFA Community Connection Champions	UK Wide	Delivering services and activities for isolated serving personnel across 8 different military bases through community champions.
CAN International	Addressing Social Isolation Among Elderly Gurkha Veterans	England/London	Supporting Gurkha veterans in Brent and Harrow by bringing them together through weekly afternoon tea meetings and directing them to the right additional services for them.
Age UK Enfield	Veterans in Enfield and Waltham Forest	England/London	Bringing older veterans together to connect at breakfast groups, weekly drop ins and other activities.
Battling On Community Interest Company	Stand Easy	England/South West	Bringing veterans together to take part in outdoor activities, coffee mornings, craft activities and volunteering to build emotional resilience and create friendships.
Special Boat Service Association	The FROGS Club - National Roll Out	UK Wide	Providing equipment and sessional costs for physical and social activities. Aimed at helping special boat service injured personnel and veterans to maintain and improve physical and mental health.



Befriending - Matching a volunteer with a beneficiary. The organisations set up the pairing and the pair take it from there.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Age Concern Colchester	Generating Friendship - Bridging the Gap	England/East	Linking up volunteers with a military background to older veterans to form a befriending relationship.
LGBT Foundation	Rainbow Oppos	UK Wide	Offering a befriending service for LGBT veterans and serving personnel to be linked up with trained volunteer befrienders.
Home Start	By Your Side	England/East	Matching military families who may be isolated to volunteer befrienders, also working closely with RAF Marham to provide in person support to families on base.



1 to 1 Support and Case Management - Very customised and bespoke delivery. Delivery team finds out what each beneficiary needs and builds a relationship with them and then finds them the right support.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Bridgend Carers	Bridgend Carers Armed Forces Project	Wales	Providing monthly telephone check ins to veterans who are carers or are cared for. Support consists of asking them how they are doing, what they can do to help and whether they can refer them in to other services.
Scarborough & Ryedale Carers Resources	Caring Together With Active Confidence	England/North East	Providing individual support to veterans who are carers or are cared for. The programme is designed to help them build the confidence, skills and knowledge to live their lives.

Veterans Outreach Support	No Veteran Gets Left Behind	England/South East	Delivering home visits via a Welfare Officer to veterans who are severely isolated or are housebound in and around Portsmouth.
DMWS Northern Ireland	Stronger Together - Leaving Loneliness Behind	Northern Ireland	Connecting hard to reach veterans and serving personnel in Northern Ireland to the right support services for them.
Walking With The Wounded	Digital and Telephone Outreach Scotland	Scotland	Providing digital and telephone care support focusing on employment and mental health for rurally isolated veterans in the Highlands and Islands.
Walking With The Wounded	Family Care Coordinator North West	England/North West	On the ground support for veterans in Manchester and Lancashire. Care coordinators work with veterans to help them with the cause of their loneliness and to refer them into the right services to tackle their issues.
Walking With The Wounded	Family Care Coordinator North East	England/North East	On the ground support for veterans in the North East care coordinators work with veterans to help them with the cause of their loneliness and to refer them into the right services to tackle their issues.
DMWS Herefordshire	Stronger Together - Leave Loneliness Behind	England/West Midlands	Working with the Herefordshire Veterans Support Centre to reach out to hard to reach veterans in the area and identify the right support services for them.
Adferiad Recovery	Navigating Out Of Isolation	Wales	Reaching out to lonely and isolated veterans through navigators who offer support and signposting to the right services for veterans based within North and Mid Wales.
Help For Heroes	Wounded Veterans Community Recovery Hubs	Wales	Building and extending case management to areas in North and Mid Wales who have limited support. The project is a hybrid of community activation/outreach and case management.
The Veterans Hub Weymouth and Portland	The Veterans Hub Outreach Programme	England/South West	Providing a welfare officer to support the isolated, elderly and women who have served living within the community who find it difficult to access services and struggle with social isolation, especially during the current situation surrounding the Covid-19 Pandemic and associated restrictions.



Outreach and Support - Support aligning with one of the aims of the grant, to deliberately seek for wider outreach. This involves going to find new people who haven't come to them and offering support for them.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Age UK West Cumbria	Back From Beyond	England/North West	Using an exhibition vehicle as a mobile meeting space to reach out to rurally isolated veterans in the community and to refer them into other Age UK services that are applicable.
Out of the Shadows NI Limiter	Sunny Spells and Scattered Showers	Northern Ireland	Promoting mental health messaging to veterans in Northern Ireland. They are taking an old military ambulance and stationing it at military events providing tea and coffee and giving veterans an insight into their support.
Rotherham Military Community Veterans Centre	Hidden Faces Project	England/North East	Extending veteran support services across Rotherham and South Yorkshire, using a van with organisational branding and having it out on the streets 5 days a week to raise awareness of the support on offer.



Group Based Support - Services that allow beneficiaries going through similar situations to support and learn from one another.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Age Scotland	Comradeship Circles	Scotland	Weekly one hour group phone calls for veterans to chat with one another and support each other.
Matthew Project	Armed Forces Reach Out Programme	England/East	Weekly in person groups get together for veterans with complex needs or those that miss the military environment to get together, form relationships and share banter.
Age UK Wolverhampton	Camaraderie in the Community	England/West Midlands	Supporting older veterans with social veteran meet up groups and other activities like befriending, days out and walks.
RAF Association	Connections For Life	UK Wide	Weekly telephone group calls for ex-RAF veterans designed to help them form connections and reduce isolation.
Deafness Support Network	Veterans Sensory Aid!	England/North West	Running workshops for veterans and family members with sensory impairments, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to deal with their impairment as well as building their social networks.
Invictus Games Foundation	We Are Invictus	UK Wide	An app to bring together veterans who were wounded in service. Providing them with a network of people to share experiences and connecting them to opportunities to get involved in.
The Royal British Legion	Legion Links	UK Wide	Setting up 20 support groups across the UK to support veterans who are carers or are cared for. Allowing them to connect with one another and receive the right support to cope with their situation.
Kent Coast Volunteering	Folkestone Nepalese Community Centre	England/South East	A community centre for Gurkha veterans and their families providing an array of activities ranging from exercise classes, english language support to technology skills support.

Scotty's Little Soldiers	Stronger Together	UK Wide	Creating a virtual community with downloadable resources and information for bereaved service children as well as in person support for both families and children to come together and connect.
The University of Winchester	Connecting Young Service Children	UK Wide	An online platform for service children to chat and connect with one another, share and access resources and attend events.
Ripple Pond	Caring Peers - Connecting Peers	UK Wide	Offer group based support and sometimes 1 on 1s to carers of veterans.



Research Project – Research to better understand how to reach beneficiaries or identify gaps in service based upon evidence.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Fighting With Pride	Developing a Network to Reduce Isolation in the LGBT+ Veterans Community	UK Wide	Establishing a network of support for veterans from the LGBT+ community by using a research and evidence led approach to find ways of engaging veterans who feel socially isolated and helping them to overcome those barriers.
Military Wives Choir	Women Combating Isolation Through Singing	UK Wide	A research project designed to highlight who they are and are not reaching within this community. Utilising the research to break down barriers that prevent people from engaging.
Northumbria University Newcastle	Reducing loneliness in veterans who have been treated for PTSD	England/North East	A Research project to design and develop a holistic and evidence based intervention for veterans with a PTSD diagnosis who are experiencing continued loneliness and social isolation.



Digital Skills and Inclusion - Service providing digital equipment and digital confidence to beneficiaries.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Royal Naval Association	Project Semaphore	UK Wide	Providing Ipads to digitally excluded veterans, Ipads are fully loaded with the apps and resources that veterans need from practical to social support.
RNRMC	Reaching Out - By Your Side	UK Wide	Providing Navy veterans with Sparko TV, a TV device that connects them to numerous activities including programmes, bingo, recipes and allows them to call family, friends or old navy shipmates.
Veterans In Crisis	Project Connect	England/North East	Supplying veterans with preloaded tablets to access the resources and support that they need. Volunteer coordinators help those that have limited digital skills to make the most of the tablets.



Skills Based Support - Training or upskilling to help veterans to adapt to civilian life.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Thistle Health and Wellbeing	Thistle Veterans Support: Building Connections	Scotland	Delivering a 10 week lifestyle management course to veterans who need support managing stress, pacing and transition in a solution focused way
The Warrior Programme	Building Community and Confidence	UK Wide	A 3 day delivery programme designed to empower veterans to reach their goals and build mental strength in their transition from the military.
Venture Trust	Positive Futures	Scotland	A three phase personal development programme for struggling veterans who have disengaged from other forms of support.



Other - Project delivers support that does not fit into the main categories outlined, but provides excellent support to veterans incarcerated.

Organisation	Project Title	Location	Project Aim
Prison Radio Association	At Ease	England/London	A radio show hosted by an ex incarcerated veteran for incarcerated veterans designed to convey a message of support and give them the ability to move forward.

## 4.4 Reflection

This grant offered a broad range of opportunities for veterans ranging from those who were experiencing loneliness across the spectrum from brief/periodic experiences to chronic experiences.

## 5. Strengths and Challenges of the Overall Programme

In this section, we will focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the overall programmes that we have observed from our evaluation and engagement with all of the grantholders on this project and some of their beneficiaries. We will highlight areas in which we saw excellence and instances where we saw opportunities to improve current implementation. This feedback is presented in a constructive and appreciative way to highlight the learnings from the evaluation and the brilliant projects that we encountered throughout its process. We also note that this was an exceptional year (2021-22) with the constraints and challenges that Covid-19 placed which took away much of the grantholders ability to operate effectively.

Our evaluation includes all 60 of the projects on this grant but this section spotlights largely on 20 of the organisations. Part of our methodology included deep dive engagements with these 20 so this section reflects what we learnt. We are most grateful for the time all of the staff and volunteers gave to our learning.

In this section we:

- Highlight the aims of this grant and how that corresponds to the cohorts served
- Highlight the instances and case studies of grantholders achieving excellence in reach
- Highlight the instance and case studies of grantholders achieving excellence in reducing the effects of loneliness on beneficiaries

### 5.1 Distribution of Cohorts Served: Concentration and Gaps

#### **Concentration**

This grant has two aims, to support veterans experiencing **loneliness and isolation** and target groups within the **armed forces community who are traditionally harder to reach**.

We saw some brilliant examples of grantholders fulfilling the aims of their grant. Some were extremely focused on helping those struggling with social isolation and loneliness. For example, through the intense case management support offered by DMWS, Walking with the Wounded, Adferiad or Thistle Health and Wellbeing. Some projects offered less intense support which had an equally powerful effect on alleviating loneliness like the Matthew Project, Brooke House or Blind Veterans UK. We also saw



Brooke House Photograph

some projects supporting veterans who are often marginalised in the veteran community; such as Kent Coast Volunteering or CAN International who support Gurkha veterans, or Fighting with Pride who supported LGBT+ veterans who were affected by the ban on serving in the armed forces.

## **Gaps**

Projects did face some challenges in achieving their aims, largely due to the barriers caused by Covid-19. Some grantees also acknowledged that they were unable to reach some harder to reach communities because of limits on time, resources and capability. A lack of motivation to reach the intended cohort was also prevalent among a few organisations especially if the project had fulfilled its quota of beneficiaries.

In terms of reach within the veteran community, we saw that projects often catered more to white middle aged men. Grantholders acknowledged that this cohort was generally easier to reach due to their greater numbers. The over indexing of this veteran cohort meant that there could be a lack of focus on who was not being reached. This is not to argue that those in this cohort were not in need of support, as many were experiencing severe isolation or more complex needs, but numerically they were overserved in comparison to others.

The biggest gap in provision was early service leavers, this cohort was difficult to reach and they were typically never mentioned. We also saw limited support being given to female veterans or serving personnel and if they were it was in the family context and often seen as an addition rather than vital. There was also little focus on ethnic minority veterans, there were two projects focused on Gurkha veterans (Kent Coast Volunteering and CAN International) and each was greatly successful in reaching and supporting this cohort, but few other projects made mention of seeking to support minority ethnic communities specifically.

Though we did see gaps, most projects were particularly motivated to reach outside of their typical demographic. Given these gaps, we suggest that in the future focus should shift to trying to support the veteran cohorts that we saw as underserved and who might be more difficult to reach and therefore may need a different approach.

## **5.2 Performance of the Grantees**

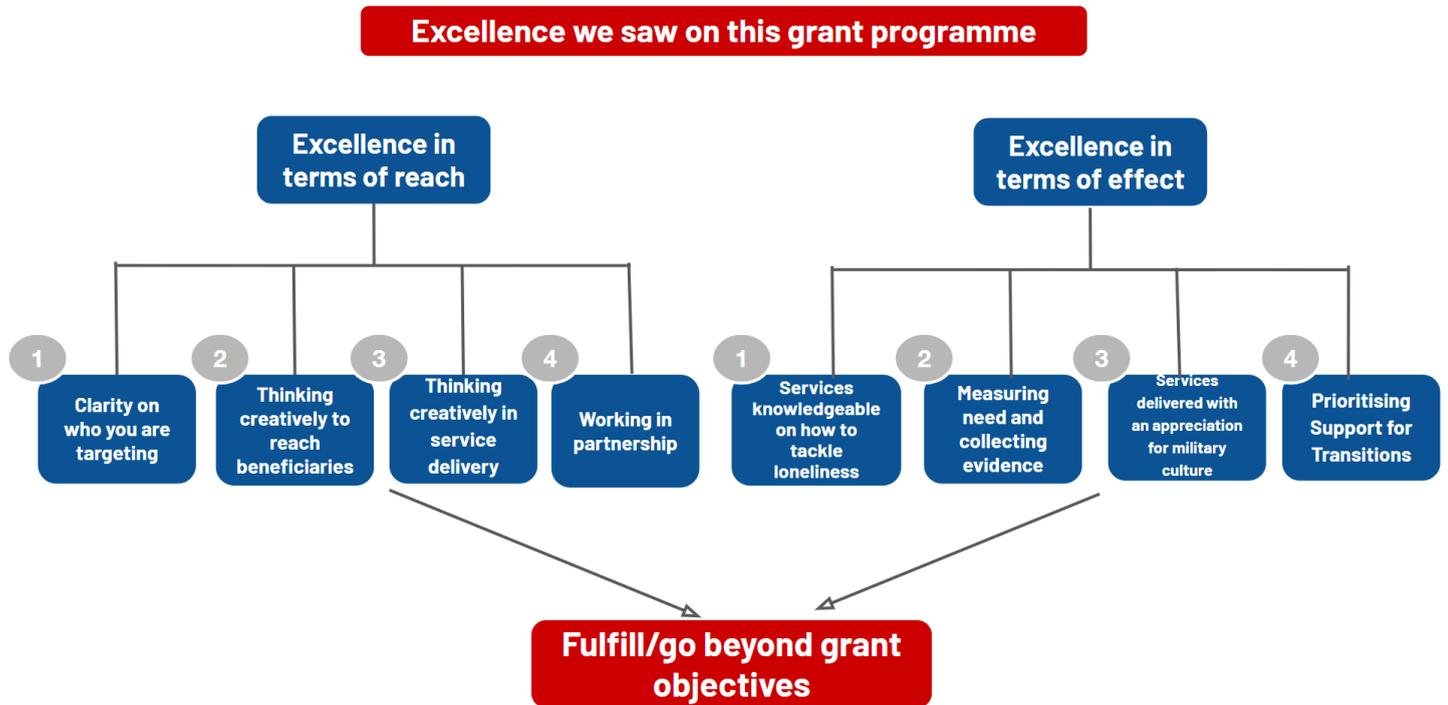
During this evaluation, we saw consistent examples of grantholders delivering excellent services for their beneficiaries and showing motivation to tackle loneliness. We harnessed these instances of excellence alongside their knowledge and delivery to develop our Design Principles toolkit.

In terms of excellence we have identified two mechanisms by which projects achieved that:

- a. Reach: Targeting and reaching the right people (the people in the most need of support).

- b. Effect: Services have a direct and positive impact on beneficiaries' levels of loneliness/social isolation.

Figure 9: Instances of how we saw success in terms of reach and effect on this grant



## 5.2.a Reach

Reach refers to a project's ability to target and be clear on the beneficiaries they wanted to support; and a project's ability to maximise its reach and make services easy to access. Reach can be further broken down into four themes that we saw working well:



## Clarity on who they were targeting

When grantholders had a clear idea of who it was that they were seeking to support they were far more successful and strategic in reaching their target cohort.

### Through targeted and bespoke outreach:

Organisations were able to achieve this clarity through their targeted outreach in communications and the design of appropriate services to suit their cohort. A brilliant example of clear targeting is Fighting with Pride. From the outset, their project name and organisation title made it clear what beneficiaries they were seeking to target. They were also successful in their outreach, by going out to the press (featuring in hundreds of media publications), advertising in LGBT focused publications and having members of staff with experience of being an LGBT+ veteran.



Fighting With Pride Photograph

*"Our outreach strategies are specific to the LGBT+ veteran community due to the chosen communication channels but it is also vitally important for those that we are helping that we have lived experience of the ban and can relate to what our beneficiaries have experienced"*

(Fighting with Pride Project Lead)

Through such a clear strategy, Fighting with Pride was overwhelmingly successful in creating an inclusive space for LGBT+ veterans by presenting a clear message of who it was that they were trying to reach.

### Through clear direction to referral partners:

Walking with the Wounded (WWTW) knew who they needed to reach and they were clear in advertising that to their referral partners, like NHS Op-Courage. WWTW conveyed that they had intensive support on offer, and they shared that with referral partners so they were directed to beneficiaries with the appropriate needs.

*"Most of the people that our care coordinators work with are referred in from organisations that we have partnerships with and these partnerships enable us to reach the right people"*

(WWTW North West Project Lead)

When we saw projects that were clear on who it was that they wanted to support they were able to direct their efforts towards maximising their reach most successfully. Furthermore, unlike other projects who were happy to focus only on reaching their quota, they were focused on ensuring that they had the right people in their service to provide tailored support.

## **Thinking creatively to reach beneficiaries**

One of the brilliant things we saw was organisations stepping outside of traditional forms of outreach and developing a more creative strategy.

### Outreach in non-veteran spaces:

One such outreach strategy was organisations going directly to the places that veterans would go to, to connect with them in their daily lives. Both Adferiad and Rotherham Military Community Veterans Centre (MCVC) tried this by standing in supermarkets and Post Office foyers and introducing their service to customers. This is particularly valuable for veterans who do not have the confidence to access support or those who do not have the networks to know what sort of support might be out there.



Adferiad Photograph

Another form of creative outreach was done by Veterans in Crisis who formed relationships with local businesses like off-licences, so that the staff in these establishments could let Veterans in Crisis staff know whether there was a veteran in need of their support.

*"We are focusing on this less formal type of outreach so that we can support those veterans who desperately need support but are not registered with mainstream services yet. When they are referred into us we can then find them the right support"*

(Veterans In Crisis Project Lead)

Though this is a non-formal type of outreach, it maximises an organisation's reach to veterans who might not be known by statutory services and who have perhaps slipped under the radar.

### Outreach through word of mouth:

We heard that many organisations had success through word of mouth and from the testimonies of previous beneficiaries, these are entirely valuable mechanisms to reach more people, particularly as we know that veterans tend to trust other veterans. This also reduces the strain on organisations capacity to do outreach if they outsource it slightly to a word of mouth strategy.

We heard of the power of word of mouth through beneficiaries of Sale Sharks Community Trust:

*"Many of the beneficiaries on this project came here through word of mouth, in the veteran community you tend to listen when another veteran tells you that a project is good"*

(Sale Shark Community Trust Project Lead)

One caveat is that overreliance on word of mouth can risk an organisation's reach being too narrow and not providing width in terms of the reach to other veterans in need of signposting.

Organisations that look 'outside of the box' in their outreach avoid the pitfall of only reaching veterans who are already in the system and have received support/been superserved. We do acknowledge that being creative in terms of outreach is particularly valuable but that some projects were unable to do so due to lack of money, people power and capacity, or due to the difficult constraints that Covid-19 posed, so many projects were restricted in their ambitions to reach more people in need.

## Thinking creatively in service delivery

Organisations that thought of different formats through which to deliver their services were particularly strong (particularly in light of the constraints placed upon them due to Covid).

### Delivery through a hybrid or online service delivery model:

Many organisations moved towards a hybrid or solely online service. Having this flexibility was valuable in terms of maximising reach, as online support enabled veterans to access support from their safe space at home; and veterans from a broader geographical area were able to attend and connect with each other.

Thistle Health and Wellbeing held a 10 week life skills course, and due to the pandemic services moved online. In conversation with two of their beneficiaries and with the project leads, they noted that this change has made beneficiaries more comfortable to engage. As they can participate at home and choose how involved they want to be, which is especially valuable for beneficiaries to build up their confidence to take part. They were also able to maximise reach across Scotland through an online model.



*"One of the reasons I enjoyed this project so much was because I did it in an environment which was so relaxed and secure - which is my home"*

(Thistle Health and Wellbeing Beneficiary)

### Delivery in outside spaces:

Some organisations also thought creatively about where their service could take place. With some projects taking place outside. Some services were already being delivered outside like the Curzon Ashton Foundation, Dig In, the Venture Trust and occasionally Brooke House which offered the therapeutic benefits of the outside. Adferiad took the opportunity in the midst of Covid-19 to think of how to engage with more beneficiaries, they found that delivering their 1 to 1 service outside was more effective.

*"Being outside is important - it can feel like a more clinical environment indoors and post-Covid we have found that it works much better outdoors. The lack of eye to eye contact also helps."*

(Adferiad Outreach Officer)

Thinking creatively in terms of service delivery was often a necessity due to Covid, but a by-product of being flexible was that many projects found an approach that provided a better on-ramp for veterans experiencing severe isolation, thereby improving their reach.

## Working in partnership

During our evaluation, most of the projects noted how partnership working was an essential part of their process. They also acknowledged that the armed forces sector is shifting from a place of working in silos to shifting towards working in collaboration.

### Partnership working to support those with acute/complex needs:

Organisations like WWTW and DMWS were particularly successful at utilising partnerships/networking to reach more beneficiaries, especially those with acute needs. Through their connections with the NHS and various other organisations, they were able to support the beneficiaries that were most suited to their organisational expertise. These partnerships were incredibly valuable in terms of maximising a project's reach. Organisations should be cautious not to become overly reliant on mainstream referral services, particularly as veterans in these referral routes are already in the system, so such reliance can miss those that have slipped under the radar.



WWTW North East Project Photo

Most projects were also aware that one project cannot provide all the solutions/support that a beneficiary might need, so the key thing is to be well connected with other organisations providing different services.

*"As an organisation we never want to replicate what is already out there and we think it is important that we signpost people to other projects, to link people into service that better suit them and to work with other organisations to combine our skills"*

(Help For Heroes Project Lead)

### Partnership working for non-veteran organisations:

Partnership working was valuable for non-veteran organisations. Non-veteran organisations typically had a hook to reach more non-traditional veteran types that were missed by some armed forces organisations. When these organisations worked in partnership with armed forces organisations their reach was greatly maximised. We saw this through the partnership with Curzon Ashton (football club) and the Defence Garden Scheme to create the Plot to Plate project. They have worked together to combine their expertise and appeal to a different audience that they perhaps would not have alone.



Plot to Plate Photograph

*"Working in partnership has been a brilliant opportunity to learn from another organisation, especially as a non-veteran organisation and to combine the weight of two organisations to see what we can achieve"*

(Plot to Plate Project Lead)

The potential for partnership working in this sector is vast both in maximising referral opportunities and combining the weight of various organisations to identify more non-traditional veteran types and reach a wider range of people.

## 5.2.b Effect

To explain what we mean by effect, this was a project's ability to have a direct and positive impact on a beneficiary's level of loneliness through their involvement in a service. It also refers to a project knowing why and how their project can help to support lonely/isolated veterans. Here we shall break excellence in effect into the four themes that we saw working really well, whilst outlining some caveats that we saw which hindered the reach of some programmes:

- 1 **Services knowledgeable on how to tackle loneliness**
- 2 **Measuring need and collecting evidence**
- 3 **Services delivered with an appreciation for military culture**
- 4 **Prioritising Support for Transitions**

## Services knowledgeable on how to tackle loneliness

In this evaluation, projects that had a clear understanding of loneliness and knew how their beneficiaries experienced it, were better equipped to alleviate loneliness.

### Being specific on how a project tackles loneliness:

Among the grantholders, there was a huge mixture in how much projects focused on the definition of loneliness and more specifically whether they focused on 'severe' or 'chronic loneliness'. Many organisations saw it through the common sense presumption that veterans were in some way socially isolated or they conflated loneliness with other things like substance abuse or mental health problems.

Projects that did not define loneliness or understand its mechanisms in their beneficiary population subsequently did not have specific tools embedded in their service design to address loneliness in any 'theory of change,' and therefore may have been less successful in addressing it. Additionally, at a more concerning level, some grantees implied that recruiting any beneficiary was a positive outcome because anyone could suffer from loneliness at some point in their lives. Hence overall, projects that were less specific in their understanding of loneliness most likely would be less specific in how they practically tackled this.



Folkestone Nepalese Centre Photograph

Nevertheless, we did see numerous instances of projects that knew exactly what they meant by loneliness and how their services could tackle it. For instance, Prison Radio Association

delivers a radio show for incarcerated veterans and at their core, they have a 'theory of change' on how to tackle loneliness.

*Our project is about solutions focused journalism, which involves leading with something positive to empower listeners. The show drip-feeds to our listeners that, over time, they can be empowered to seek support and find the confidence to approach services to help tackle their loneliness" (Prison Radio Association Project Lead)"*

(Prison Radio Association Project Lead)

Moreover, we saw clear evidence of what it means to tackle loneliness in case management services like the support from DMWS, Adferiad and WWTW. These organisations were supporting veterans with more acute loneliness and these organisations had the skill set and the capacity to identify loneliness and tackle the root cause of it.

### Services knowing whether they were preventing or alleviating loneliness:

We sometimes found that grantees were not clear on whether their services were set up in order to prevent loneliness or alleviate loneliness (or both). From an intervention point of view, deciphering where support services aim to intervene on this spectrum has a direct impact on when and how, and at what level organisations target services (individual, family, community, systemic). We must also acknowledge that all projects observed that loneliness is inherently complex and it can be hard to decipher what may be the cause of someone's loneliness, hence we also support organisations engaging in more research to really understand loneliness in the populations they wish to impact positively.

## **Measuring needs and collecting evidence**

In the process of engaging with grantholders we found that those that measured beneficiary needs and collected evidence of the impact that their projects were having, were incredibly well placed to help tackle loneliness.

### Measuring beneficiary needs:

Organisations like WWTW, DMWS, Venture Trust, Waterloo Uncovered and the Warrior Programme collected beneficiary data from the start. To be specific these measurements were most often either an Impact Star or WEMWBS. These measurements allowed organisations to have a clear understanding of what support their beneficiaries needed right at the beginning so that services were more targeted. They allowed the organisations to have a clear direction and

focus that was based upon real evidence rather than assumptions on what a person's needs were or relying on general observations of a beneficiary.

*"When we first start working with a beneficiary we do a life satisfaction spider chart as part of their assessment to discover what they initially need and then we revisit that to track their progress and make any necessary changes"*

(WWTW North East Project Lead)

What we did encounter was a general fear or hesitancy to collect data, either because they wanted to protect beneficiary privacy and a mindfulness to not stigmatise their beneficiaries. There were also more practical constraints like a general lack of time/overburden, or a lack of motivation to collect data.

### Measuring beneficiary experience on the project:

When grantholders collected feedback on the experiences and the needs of beneficiaries throughout service delivery they were better placed to explain their impact and make changes to better support beneficiaries.

Scotty's Little Soldiers, captured beneficiary feedback in the midst of service delivery, they asked their beneficiaries how their services could be improved and received important feedback which was then fed into their service design.



Scotty's Little Soldiers logo

*"We recently did a consultation with children/parents to discover what might be preventing people from accessing the service. We received brilliant feedback on this which has allowed us to amend the services to better suit the needs of our beneficiaries"*

(Scotty's Little Soldiers Project Lead)

## **Services delivered with an appreciation for military culture**

Projects were successful when they were designed and delivered by organisations or people that had an appreciation of military culture and language. Sometimes this took the form of

services delivered for and by veterans, however, there were also successful projects that were delivered by civilians or included mixed beneficiary groups of civilians and veterans.

### Service delivery having military cultural competency:

Overall we believe offering choices to veterans in whether the project environment is overtly military or not is key to engaging different types of veterans. Nevertheless, ensuring cultural competency of those delivering services with regards to understanding veterans and military culture was important to engage veterans and sustain their involvement. Projects seemed to be more impactful when services were delivered by veterans who had lived experience of what beneficiaries might be going through. There was a sense that homophily and being with people 'like me' did have a significant impact on a veteran's overall experience of a service.



Brooke House Photograph

Being in an all veteran environment was so important for group support projects like the Matthew Project, the RAF Association and Brooke House, as this sort of environment allowed people to open up more and find that point of shared connection easily. Within these groups, veterans also had varying levels of need, but as veterans, they were all willing to support one another regardless of their experience with loneliness.

*"When I turn up to one of our group meetings I know we are going to share some banter together through the slang and language that we all understand. I also know that if someone is feeling a bit down that day we'll all help them out because we know what that person could be going through"*

(Matthew Project Beneficiary)

When services were delivered by and for veterans it could help those to reconnect with a military identity that they might have lost or have been fractured when they left service. Fighting with Pride offered a service delivered by and for veterans with an experience with the LGBT military ban.

*"It is really comforting to find yourself in a place of inclusivity and acceptance of who you are; just to be in a space where you can bond with other people who have served is amazing and it is something that I have really missed."*

(Fighting with Pride beneficiary)

### Services delivered in a mixed civilian and veteran group:

Services such as Waterloo Uncovered provided mixed civilian and veteran groups. Here we observed that the innovative mixing of different veteran and student groups enabled them to learn from each other and have experiences outside of their usual groups. This in turn helped veterans' sense of integration and could challenge beliefs that they would not be understood by civilians.

We also saw this with Dig In's horticulture service which though its delivery was aimed at veterans, they had volunteers who were students at UCLAN, they found that a great dialogue opened up between the volunteers and beneficiaries.



Dig In Photograph

*"What really surprised was at different times in the project students were also being helped with their loneliness"*

(Dig In Project Lead)

There must be space for veterans to choose the environment they wish to experience services within, whether highly military or not as both were observed as successful when organisations had good cultural competence in understanding veterans military service and 'speaking their language'. It is vitally important that these environments are open to all veterans to access as they were powerful in reducing loneliness and creating a community environment.

## **Prioritising Support for Transitions**

For many veterans, the transition from being in the military to becoming a civilian can be a sharp adjustment. Many are prepared for the transition due to the protective factors that some veterans possess, and the new opportunities that transition provides. For those veterans that have struggled with transitions, projects that gave them the ability



CAN International Photograph

to adapt to the changes that they were facing were impactful in alleviating loneliness.

### Transitional support through the learning of skills and life management:

There were a number of skills based projects that supported those that have had a difficult transition from the military. They offered life and skills management courses which gave beneficiaries the tools to move forward whilst also providing them with a constant helping hand throughout this process. In helping these veterans through their transition they were able to reconnect them with their past in the military and remind them how to utilise the skills that they acquired during that time to flourish in their civilian life. For instance, Venture Trust's project provides a three stage course to equip veterans with the capabilities to reflect and develop coping strategies to take forward into their civilian lives.

*"Everyone that embarks upon our wilderness journey is working towards a long term plan that we develop together of where they want to be in their lives and we give them the tools to actualise those goals"*

(Venture Trust Outreach Coordinator)

### Transitional support for changes in circumstances:

Some other projects provided support as a result of other transitions, whether that be financial, emotional or with their physical health. A brilliant example is Prison Radio Association which supports incarcerated veterans through a radio show that is designed to empower veterans and show them that there is a path for them after prison and to reconnect them with their veteran past.

*"Many of the veterans struggle to adapt to their change of circumstance and they often shun their veteran background due to being in prison, but this show is about empowering veterans, encouraging them to access veteran specific support and making them feel pride in their service"*

(Prison Radio Association Project Lead)

Projects like DSN and Blind Veterans UK were able to support veterans experiencing sensory loss, giving them the opportunity to meet others going through similar experiences or a new skill set like woodworking, gardening, art (Blind Veterans UK) and British Sign Language lessons (DSN). These new skills provided beneficiaries with the capabilities to adapt to the changes in their life.



Blind Veterans UK Photograph

## 5.3 Reflection

During our evaluation, we encountered numerous instances of grantholders doing amazing things to support their beneficiaries and to expand their reach across the sector.

The strengths and gaps that we observed here can serve as a stimulus for how projects can be delivered to have an impact on veteran loneliness, especially in terms of **reach and effect**. Our findings within this chapter fuelled our points for reflections layed out within the next chapter.

## 6. Looking Ahead: Points for Reflection for funders

Below we offer some points of learnings that we have reflected on over the course of this grant. These learnings are not specific to just the AFCFT but also other funders. Below we look at how grants can be adapted for the future, to best support grantholders and most importantly the needs of beneficiaries.

### **Offer flexibility in how to achieve grant objectives**

This grant was clear that projects should seek to alleviate loneliness and support harder to reach veteran cohorts, but it offered grantholders flexibility in how to do so. This gave grantholders a level of autonomy when it came to service delivery and it baked in a relationship of trust between the funder and grantholder. Flexibility and trust in funding is something that should become good practice in grantmaking.

- Funders should offer flexibility so that grantholders are not restricted and can use their knowledge to deliver the right support.
- Funders should, however, be mindful that grants still have a set of expectations on what their services need to aim to achieve, so flexibility is not unrestricted.

### **Review funding amount and structure of the grant**

This grant offered a fixed amount of £70,000 to grantholders over 2 years, which for most grants was adequate. However, funders should reflect on whether their grants could achieve more if the funding amount was increased and grantholders were given more time to achieve their aims.

During this evaluation, we observed that services that are trying to do something completely different found it difficult to achieve their objectives. Projects faced constraints due to the funding amount and time allocated which limited the impact that they could have. Projects that were successful at alleviating loneliness and reaching their target cohort were often already embedded in the community and had pre-existing infrastructure. A review of the funding amount and structure of the grant is, therefore, more imperative for those seeking to do something new.

- Funders should be mindful to manage their expectations of the impact a new project can have. Grantees should also have moderate expectations of their impact as it may take several years to come to fruition.
- Funders should also think about tapered funding, which is an option for this grant. This means grantholders can continue to maximise the impact that their projects can have and better embed themselves into their community.

A review of funding amount and structure can lead to projects being better able to achieve their goals.

## **Be clear on beneficiary needs before service delivery begins**

For some projects who are attempting to reach an entirely new beneficiary cohort; if they have not done research or in-depth needs analysis they can have a lack of clarity on how best to approach and deliver services for their target cohort. We observed that the AFCFT gave flexibility in the set up stages for projects seeking a new cohort, offering them the leeway to take their time before service delivery began to do the adequate research.

- When projects are reaching out to a new cohort, research and discovery phases should be encouraged to enable them to deliver the most impactful practical support.
- For those projects who are deeply knowledgeable about their beneficiary cohort and the geographical area that they are operating in, this is not a necessity and can be done at the application stage.

## **Co-produce and consult on evidence measurements with grantholders**

Measurement and evaluation can be a challenge for grant holders to understand and prioritise. This grant had a built-in M&E platform, "The Impact Hub", which was available to all grantholders. The Impact Hub was used by many grantholders and often highly valued, though some still struggled and needed more support.

Grantholders were given regular support by the Impact & Technical Solutions Manager at the AFCFT who was on hand to deliver 1 to 1 support on the requirements for M&E and how best to conduct it. The "Impact Hub" also evolved during our engagement in this evaluation. Through consultation with ourselves and grantholders, the ONS loneliness dataset was added to the "Impact Hub". Grantholders were then able to convey in a standardised format the direct impact that their projects were having on loneliness, specifically.

- To accelerate the uptake of the M&E, grant holders could be involved in the co-production and consultation of evidence measurements. To ensure that they are comfortable with conducting the evidence measurements and that it suits their beneficiaries.
- Co-production is something that should always be prioritised both to promote a positive dialogue between funders and grant holders, but also to use the different expertise that grantholders have.

## **Bake in time for the Grantholder-Mentor relationship**

Being a grantholder on a fund is not only an opportunity to deliver a project for your beneficiaries but also a chance to learn from the expertise of others. This grant built this in through the grantholder and mentor structure. With mentors offering up their time and expertise to help grantholders build and deliver the best projects possible. Most Mentors offered and delivered 1 to 1 sessions and group meet ups, which enabled connection building and troubleshooting.

- To maximise this type of relationship on a grant, funders should act as a guiding hand to foster these connections and communicate the parameters of a grantholder-mentor relationship.
- Funders could also add compulsory elements to this relationship, like a minimum amount of time that grantholders and mentors should interact with one another.

## **Facilitate a community of best practice**

This grant offered the unique opportunity for 60 organisations all dedicated to supporting veterans suffering from loneliness in and around the country to meet and learn from one another.

During this grant with the backing and facilitation of the AFCFT, we set up monthly 'Food for Thought' webinars. These webinars were open to everyone in this grant community to come together for an hour to learn from an external speaker and to network in a non-hierarchical way. As these sessions have continued the mentors now host the sessions and give opportunities for grantholders to present allowing them to celebrate their achievements.

- Funders should commit to the development of a community of practice amongst their grantees to broker connections and develop an added layer of support for grantholders.
- Funders should commit to giving grantholders a platform to share their knowledge by allowing them to present their work at networking events.

## **6.1 Reflection**

These reflections reassert how funders can put better support and structures in place to allow their grantholders to achieve their best work, but to also feel that they are part of a community that can self-sustain beyond the funding round. These learnings are not just relevant to the AFCFT or other armed forces funders, but to all funders who want to ensure that they direct their support to best meet the needs of beneficiaries and of the causes that they wish to support.



Plot to Plate photograph