

Honouring the Armed Forces Covenant? Veterans' experiences in the UK social security system

'Social Security in the UK' Paper Session

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Overview

- Part 1: Why veterans? Addressing a gap in the knowledge
- Part 2: Introducing the *Sanctions, Support and Service Leavers* project
- Part 3: Are we honouring the Covenant? Interim findings

Part 1: Why veterans? Addressing a gap in the knowledge

The Armed Forces Covenant (2011)

- A 'statement of the moral obligation which exists between the nation, the Government and the Armed Forces in return for the sacrifices they make'
- No member of 'The Armed Forces Community' (defined as current and former Service personnel and reservists and their families, including families of deceased Service men and women) should face disadvantage when accessing public or commercial services, with 'special consideration' deemed appropriate in some cases

DWP commitments to the Covenant

- Armed Forces Champions in each DWP District (double provision in some Districts)
- Armed Forces 'leads' within Job Centre Plus
- Early access to the Work Programme (now Work & Health Programme)
- Use of Service Medical Board evidence (rather than mainstream WCA) in claims for benefits
- Exemption from three month residency requirements
- Easing of voluntary unemployment conditionality for spouses
- Armed Forces Independence Payment (AFIP) as an alternative to PIP

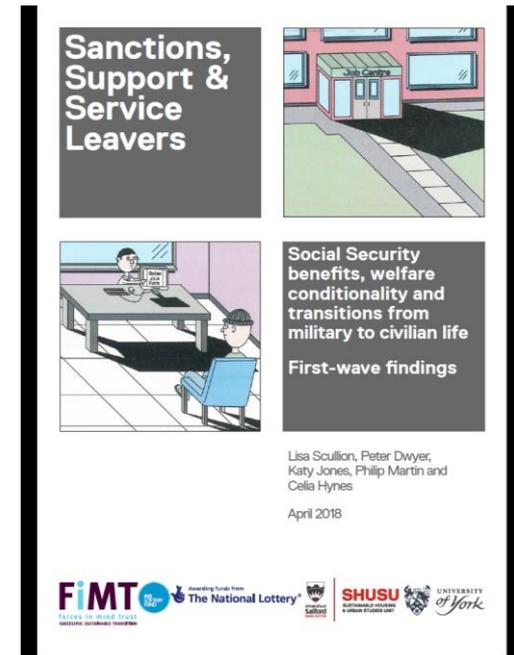
Addressing a knowledge gap

- Growing body of research recognising the issues that can occur in the transition from military life:
 - Mental and physical health (Browne et al, 2007; Buckman et al, 2012; Carolan, 2016; Hynes and Thomas, 2016)
 - Homelessness (Gunner and Knott, 1997; Johnsen, Jones and Rugg, 2008)
 - Drug and alcohol use (Centre for Social Justice, 2014)
 - Financial hardship (Herritty, Hudson and Letts, 2011)
 - Interactions with the criminal justice system (Fossey et al, 2017)
- Existing specialist employment support (e.g. Career Transition Partnership, Armed Forces charities, etc.) enabling positive outcomes but very little known of people's experiences of mainstream employment support
- No research to date has explored the experiences of veterans within our social security system or how Covenant commitments are experienced 'on the ground'

Part 2: Introducing the *Sanctions, Support & Service Leavers* project

Our project

- **Two year project (2017-2019) funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT)** - providing first substantive UK research to focus specifically on veterans experiences in the social security system – linked to the ESRC *Welfare Conditionality* project
- **What have we done so far?**
 - Semi-structured interviews with 19 policy/practice stakeholders
 - Baseline interviews with a sample of 68 veterans claiming Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) and Universal Credit (UC)
 - Interviews with individuals but also included some spouses (6)
 - Fieldwork locations across North West, North East, Yorkshire and London
 - 3 feedback workshops - to gain feedback on interim findings
 - Working with students in School of Arts & Media to explore producing graphic novel as part of project dissemination strategy



Our sample

- 66 male, 2 female
- Age:
 - 20–29: 6
 - 30–39: 18
 - 40–49: 17
 - 50–59: 15
 - 60–69: 7
- Area of Armed Forces:
 - 58 Army
 - 5 RAF
 - 2 Navy (Royal Marines)
 - 2 Army Reservists
 - 1 Army and Navy
- Length of time in Armed Forces:
 - Less than 4 years: 13
 - Between 4 and 10 years: 33
 - Over 10 years: 22
- Length of time since leaving Armed Forces
 - Less than 2 years ago: 6
 - 2-5 years ago: 4
 - 5-10 years ago: 7
 - Over 10 years ago: 51

Benefit type	Number
Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)	40
ESA (Support Group, SG)	26
ESA (Work Related Activity Group, WRAG)	6
ESA (respondent unsure whether SG or WRAG)	3
ESA (initial assessment phase)	3
ESA (appealing assessment outcome/suspension of benefit)	2
Universal Credit (UC)	20
UC (required to look for work)	9
UC (limited capability for work)	9
UC (in initial claim period)	2
Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)	3
Other	5
Recently moved from benefits into paid work	2
Recently moved from JSA to Pension Credit	1
Recently moved from JSA to full time study	1
Respondent unsure of which benefit they were claiming	1
Total	68

Backgrounds

- Accounts of ‘vulnerabilities’ prior to Service common – for some joining up was a ‘way out’. Some returned to the same environments that they had left years earlier - issues which had been ‘parked’ during Service, sometimes resumed
- 32 respondents had experienced a relationship breakdown – often attributed to difficulties adjusting to civilian life and/or mental health issues
- 30 currently living in supported accommodation with homelessness featuring at some point during transition
- 59 (out of the 68 participants) indicated that they had a mental health condition - comorbidity was evident for some participants
- 37 had a physical health condition
- 51 attributed health issues to time in Service

Post-Service employment experiences

- While most respondents had obtained employment fairly quickly after leaving Armed Forces, many found it difficult to **maintain** jobs - the majority identified personal issues (particularly physical / mental health) as the main reasons they struggled to sustain a job

I've been in and out of jobs throughout the last ten-odd years or so, and that, apparently, is quite common with my condition of, you know, starting a job, cracking on with it and then two to three months later, bang... It's part of the whole PTSD because things become overwhelming... You sort of try to remove yourself away from it because it's quite embarrassing and I'm quite ashamed and think what other people are thinking about me, and I found it very difficult and become more anxious about it, about returning to work, because of negative impressions that co-employees or employers would have about me (UC claimant)

- Some were anxious about coping with the demands of a workplace in the future

I'd like to do something, I really want to do something, but it's finding something that I'm physically able to do – anything that's got to be done to a deadline is going to be a nightmare. I'm not great with paperwork; I'm trying to learn how to use a computer, but unfortunately my language is terrible, I've always worked outside, and if somebody's aggressive to me... then I'm really volatile, you know? (ESA WRAG claimant)

Part 3: Are we honouring the Covenant? Interim findings

Navigating the benefits system

- Many veterans described the complexity of navigating the system, with confusion and misunderstanding typical experiences

I don't understand the whole system. I do not understand it, and this is where I think the biggest [problem] is. You'll sit there and [Jobcentre Plus] – and I love this statement ... 'Right, yes, I'd like to claim unemployment, please'. 'Why?' 'Well, because I'm unemployed.' 'Yes, and?' 'And I'll say, 'I've worked all my life. I was in the Army.' 'Yes, what are you going to claim for then?' 'Well, I don't know. I've never claimed it.' 'Well, you've got to tell me one or the other.' 'What about this one? I don't know the names of them.' 'One's income-based or something and another one's something else, and I'll say, 'Well, I don't know...' 'Well, you've got to tell me one or I'll have to put the phone down and we can't have this interview' (ESA claimant)



Experiences of Work Capability Assessments

- Questions raised about: (1) the skills of the assessors - lack of understanding of mental health issues relating to Service in Armed Forces (2) inconsistent use of Service Medical/other relevant medical information; and (3) perceived focus on physical capabilities:

I sent all the information regards my medical condition, and they said, 'What evidence have you sent in?' So I said, 'Well, it's about ten pages long, from Combat Stress, signed and all the rest of it'... I said to them, 'Do you understand the mental health condition I've got?' They said, 'Yes, we looked at it, but we can't understand how that's affecting your daily life', and I thought, but surely, if you're assessing me on a medical, on mental health issues, you should understand the different mental health conditions. 'So, for example', I said, 'on my bad days I do need prompting to have a wash. I do need prompting to feed myself, because sometimes I just sit there and fester and do absolutely nothing', I said, 'and sometimes, if I'm cooking something and I've got the cooker on', I said, 'if I have a flashback, that flashback could last ten minutes, 15 minutes, and when I come round it could be on fire'. 'Yes, but we don't understand how your mental [health] affects you' (ESA claimant)

I got reassessed by a doctor this time, not an assessor. The doctor basically turned round and said, 'You shouldn't be in the Work Related Activity Group. You need to be in the Support Group. You're in no fit state to take part in what they ask you to do'... She [the Dr] took one look at my evidence, and she said to me ... 'Looking at your War Pension assessment', which she had in front of her, and she's looking at the assessment which was initially done after 13 weeks. She's looking at this information, she says, 'There's no way you should have been put into the Work Related Activity Group with your physical and mental health problems' (ESA claimant).

Experiences of support

- Disparity between perception of what support would be offered and the reality of claiming benefits

I'll never forget it...the first day I went in to see about signing on, I says, 'Right, I've just come out of the Army, I want to work, what can you do for us?' 'Fill this in'. I was like, 'Oh right, aye, I've got this, I've got this, I've got this'. 'Well, you can't use that.' My driving, my HGV driving, 'You can't use that'... Apparently I had no experience... I've transported ammunition across war zones and now I haven't got experience [for] transporting chicken! (Universal Credit claimant)

Experiences of veteran-specific support

- Significant variation in the response to disclosure of Service in the Armed Forces - some areas appeared to have JCP staff who worked with/understood the needs of veterans

She [Work Coach] [is] actually very sympathetic to military causes and stuff, and she gets a lot of the guys with PTSD, and I think that's a step forward. That's what I think a lot of the Jobcentres should do... Once she started getting people from the Army hostel, she actually gives – as I say, she empathises. She'll go the extra mile to explain stuff (Universal Credit claimant)

- Other areas did not ...

With him [advisor] I didn't [feel comfortable], because of certain things he was saying. I says, 'Look, I'm not willing to say what I've got PTSD for' ... and he said, 'Well, can I ask when it was?' and I said '1988', and he turned round and he says, 'Well, I think you should be over it by now'... no one's got a right to make a comment like that on it, and people like that shouldn't be working for the likes of Jobcentre Plus (Recently moved from Jobseekers' Allowance into paid work)

The best Armed Forces Champions do a fantastic job, really fantastic job... but on the other side of that is [those with] absolutely no interest whatsoever (Representative of a third sector organisation)



Are we honouring the Covenant?

No member of 'The Armed Forces Community' (defined as current and former Service personnel and reservists and their families, including families of deceased Service men and women) should face disadvantage when accessing public or commercial services, with 'special consideration' deemed appropriate in some cases

It is evident that many veterans are currently experiencing 'disadvantage':

- Difficulties accessing/navigating benefits: Information and guidance on benefits system not routine part of transition information/support
- People incorrectly assessed as 'fit for work': evidence of inconsistent use of Service Medical and other relevant medical information
- Unable to access appropriate support: significant variation in the nature and quality of the support provided upon disclosure of Service in the Armed Forces

Thank you

If you have any questions about the project please contact:

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